

REPORT

OTTERS IN SW ANDALUCIA, SPAIN - AUGUST 1995

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Despite the severe drought in Spain, which is now in its fifth year, there were encouraging signs in August 1995 of a viable population of otters (*Lutra lutra*) in the system of the Rio Guardiaro. This river and its major tributaries, the Rio Hozgargantar and Rio Genal rise near Ronda, in the wildlife reserve, El Reserva Nacional de Cortes de la Frontera, and flow into the Mediterranean at the rapidly developing resort of Sotogrande. It was, as far as I could ascertain, the only river along the Costa del Sol between Punta de Tarifa and Malaga Airport to meet the sea. Such is the demand for water in this area of rapid population growth that all the other waters are totally consumed.

AMA, the Spanish conservation agency, does a good job in the reserva and the surrounding sierras, keeping a good watch over the Ibex herds, and stationing guards at individual Eyries of Golden Eagle. By their nature, otters, an equally important part of this region's biodiversity, are harder to protect. Yet despite two hydro-electricity schemes, and considerable extraction of water for orange groves, and even for cotton, (surely a ridiculously thirsty crop to subsidise in such a dry area), the River Guardiaro has a connected flow and a strong population of fish, with considerable evidence from spraints that otters were using it frequently. The regular incidence of powerful winter floods from the heavy rains up in the mountainous headwaters has prevented overexploitation of the flood plain, and consequently there is a heavy bankside vegetation, which encourages not only otters, but also such animals as Genet and Mongoose. I have visited this valley at different seasons for several years, and have always found plenty of spraints. There is undoubtedly a strong otter population on this river system.

I even found evidence which pointed strongly to there being a bitch and cub in a most unexpected place, the Valderrama Golf Course. At first sight this is a very artificial and over-managed area, but on the initiative of the President, Senor J. Ortiz-Patino, a considerable conservation initiative has been undertaken, and backed up by money and manpower. The use of sprays is controlled, and a sixth of the grounds are set aside as wildlife reserves. There are various ornamental streams and water hazards on the course, with a careful system of conserving and recycling the water, and into these ornamental fish have been introduced. The club is proud that this provides an opportunity for otters, which they have been using with increasing frequency since January 1994. In 1995 there has been almost continuous usage of these lakes and ponds, with padding of different sizes giving a strong indication that they have bred there.

This beautiful but busy place will be even busier in September 1997, when the club is to host the prestigious Ryder Cup golf tournament. As part of the preparations, wildlife information plaques are proposed, to draw the attention of the masses of

spectators to the conservation aspects of the Club's management. However I wonder whether the one about otters will be still relevant.

The comparative abundance of the water in this system of rivers is to be exploited. A 12 km tunnel has already been started, to take the water right out of the catchment, to Cadiz on the Atlantic coast; dams are also proposed on the Hozgargantar and Genal. Although there are reassurances that only surplus water at times of heavy flow will be taken off, the size of the tunnel indicates that more is sought, and that there is a danger that the total flow of this river will be reduced to a mere 5 cumecs for most of the year. Irrigation for agriculture alone will use up all of that. The vast cost, £70 million, will not permit these works to be underutilised; that this is European granted, and that no ecological survey has been undertaken in advance of work starting, which makes it illegal under European law, will not count for too much in a province with a rapidly growing population, an increasing dependence on tourism, and, according to a recent report, 50% of its sewage treatment works out of commission. Ironically, for the same cost they could build six desalination plants of the type that Gibraltar fuels with its refuse.

Thus, in one river system in SW Europe, are displayed the sort of problems which beset Otter conservation worldwide, with the additional instance of the golf course as an example of what can be achieved. Something to reflect about as you watch the golf match on television: how often will it be fish scales that they have to wipe off the ball? Or will this population have been destroyed in two years time, along with the river?