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EURASIAN OTTER (*Lutra lutra*) STILL PRESENT IN SYRIA

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Abstract: The author presents strong anecdotal evidence of presence of the Eurasian otter along the River Euphrates in Syria. Numbers, however, seem to have dropped considerably following irrigation schemes over the last 40 years.

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

[Foster-Turley & Santiapillai \(1990\)](#) mentioned that “the Eurasian otter occurs in adjacent rivers in Israel and Jordan, so it is probably present in Syria but no recent information is available”. Together with the River Oronte, which is highly industrialised, the River Euphrates is the main river in Syria. As the river flows through a desert area, if otters are present they may come from up- or downstream, i.e. the bordering countries. However, there appears to be no literature or precise data available on the status of the Eurasian otter *Lutra lutra* in Syria at the present time.

Otters are indeed present in the countries bordering Syria, particularly those along the River Euphrates. In Turkey (source of the Euphrates) otters were once widespread, however, the species is now considered endangered in the south, where the Euphrates enters Syria ([Eroglu, 1994](#)), principally due to habitat destruction, poor river management and illegal killing.

In Iraq, where the River Euphrates flows after having crossed Syria, Hatt (1959, cited in: [Conroy et al., 1998](#)) gave evidence of otters on the upper sections of the River Euphrates. He also reported many otters near the Hindiya Barrage (some 95km south of Baghdad on the River Tigris), concluding that it was probable that the species ranged through all the major streams of Iraq from the Persian Gulf to the Northern frontiers. Whilst on a professional trip to Syria, the author took the opportunity to interview local people along the River Euphrates regarding the possible presence of the Eurasian otter.

FINDINGS

In July 1998, following a question about “an animal living in the river” (the Arabic translator not knowing the precise arabic word for otter [*kalp elma* or *al kandes*]) the curator of the famous site of DOURA EUROPOS (50 km north-west of the Iraq border) immediately answered “yes, water dog”. He went on to describe the animal precisely (upper part reddish brown with white spots, under part white) and added that the otters could be spotted mainly at night but sometimes also during the day. They are sometimes caught in fishing nets and are occasionally shot as the pelt fetches a high price. However, he said they were not destroyed on a large scale and otters do not seem to be considered as vermin. The author later accompanied the curator to a small cliff where he had seen otters. Though no otter signs were seen and it was not possible to check the river banks, the surroundings did seem suitable for otters. Whilst one bank was cultivated the other was covered in wild vegetation, in the middle of the river were small islands and fish biomass seemed high.

Later that day, the author interviewed the owner of a restaurant at Deir el Zor (100 km upstream of Doura Europos), an industrialised region of oil wells. Both the owner and his brother stated that otters were common before the construction of the Tabaqua dam (Lake Assad) 200 km upstream. 40 years ago an otter “family” was frequently seen within metres of the restaurant. He stated that, as otters are now becoming rare, a pelt could now be sold for around 100 US\$.

CONCLUSIONS

As no physical evidence of otter presence was obtained, the information presented above should be considered anecdotal. However, when asked, local people were very clear in their description of the animal and quickly recognised a picture of the otter. It would seem that otters are still present along the River Euphrates, though population numbers have dropped considerably over the last 40 years. The principle cause of this drop would appear to be an irrigation scheme at Deir el Zor (45 000 ha) and river management during and following the construction of the Tabaqa dam, which resulted in 400 000 ha of irrigated land.

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RESÚMEN:

La nutria eurasiática (*Lutra lutra*) aún presente en Siria. El autor presenta evidencia anecdótica fuerte de la presencia de la nutria eurasiática a lo largo del Río Eufrates en Siria. Los números, sin embargo, parecen haber bajado considerablemente siguiendo los esquemas de irrigación de los últimos 40 años.