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**REPORT ON THE REHABILITATION AND RELEASE OF TWO GIANT
RIVER OTTER (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) PUPS IN THE BITA RIVER
(VICHADA, COLOMBIA)**

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Abstract: Two Giant Otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) cubs were rehabilitated and released successfully and adopted into wild otter groups. The protocol used is presented. For a successful rehabilitation and release program, it is necessary to understand the basic ecology and behaviour of the species, as well as to have the appropriate facilities, feeding protocols, and adequate veterinary services available.

INTRODUCTION

Giant river otters face numerous biotic and abiotic threats throughout their geographical distribution. In Colombia, otters are also captured to satisfy the local demand for pets. Many of these pets, upon reaching maturity, become an enormous expense for the family that possesses it. This expense is a result of the large quantity of food that the otters require. Likewise, as a result of their considerable size and strength, many otters are killed by frightened humans. During the field phase of the Bojonawi Project [Ecology of the Giant Otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*), in the Bitá River, Vichada Colombia] (1997-1998), rehabilitation and release of two giant river otter cubs was undertaken. This activity was carried out by the two authors associated with the OMACHA Foundation over a period of 7 continuous months. Since this activity was not formally developed before hand, it was mainly through trial and error. Due to a lack of information and financial resources, our actions depended on the situation at the moment, but we always tried to make decisions that were for the benefit of the otter cubs. The first pup (Ñamñam), a female, was received at approximately 2 months of age and she participated in the program for a period of 6 months, until her liberation. The second otter cub (Pepe), a male of approximately 4.5 months old, participated in the program for only 1 month, but was also liberated. We know for sure that the two cubs were adopted by a wild otter family that resided within the study area, in an area adjacent to the NIMAJAY Ecotourism Campsite that also served as the base camp for the larger study on giant river otter ecology. The two cubs came from different places; Ñamñam came from a small village (Cumaribo, Vichada), and Pepe came from Puerto Carreño City (Vichada). Both cubs were kept as pets and they were donated after a long talk with the people that owned them. Neither cub was bought.

METHODS

Table 1 presents, in chronological order, each activity related to the rehabilitation and release process. The options are mentioned, the decision that was taken, and some comments in this respect are indicated.

Table 1.

ACTIVITY	OPTIONS	DECISIONS	COMMENTS
RECEIPT OF THE INDIVIDUAL # 1 (Ñamñam, Female, 2 month old aprox.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To rehabilitate it physically and biologically for subsequent release locally. To rehabilitate it physically, to maintain it in captivity To attempt the rehabilitation and release whilst keeping open the option to use the individual for breeding during this period. To sacrifice the individual. 	To rehabilitate it physically and biologically for subsequent release locally.	Ñamñam had 2 injuries in the neck region on the right side. These injuries were deep and not healing, but weren't infected. She was very active and had a good appetite.
PLACE OF TREATMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To treat her wounds in the city of Puerto Carreño. To take her to the otter study camp and to begin the rehabilitation process immediately. 	To take her to the otter study camp, and to begin the process immediately.	In Puerto Carreño, Ñamñam was in contact with domestic animals, from which she had contracted several illnesses. We considered that Ñamñam should be introduced as soon as possible to her natural environment.
TRAINING FOR THE CAPTURE OF FISH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To offer dead fish (whole or in parts). To create artificial ponds stocked with fish that could be captured by Ñamñam. In open areas (rivers or lagoons), to offer her live fish, but with restricted mobility. To swim and play with Ñamñam, in and out of the water, several times a day. During this time she would be able to capture fish when hungry. 	To create artificial ponds stocked with fish that could be captured by Ñamñam. In open areas (rivers or lagoons), to offer her live fish, but with restricted mobility. To swim and play with Ñamñam, in and out of the water, several times a day.	The period of confinement was modified as the individuals advanced in their ability to capture fish. These activities were continued until Ñamñam began to fish by herself in open areas locally, including pipes, lagoons, and the river.
FEEDING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To contact international otter specialists and obtain the information about diet and feeding products to raise giant otter cubs. To depend on our knowledge and intuitions, in order to offer the appropriate foods despite the scarce of economic resources that were available. 	To depend on our knowledge and intuitions, in order to offer the appropriate foods despite the scarce resources that were available	Initially, Ñamñam was fed with a mixture of human powdered milk formula for human babies, cod liver oil and a small dose of a multivitamin. As Ñamñam grew, we offered her live fish so that she would recognise them as prey and learn to capture them herself.
COEXISTENCE WITH HUMANS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To avoid contact with humans. To take advantage of Ñamñam's presence to develop an environmental education campaign. 	To avoid contact with humans.	Because the camp was a tourist site, containing numerous visitors and workers, an educational campaign was implemented toward the

			conservation of the species. Ñamñam was transferred to a nearby area not visited by humans.
RECEPTION OF INDIVIDUAL 2 (Pepe, Male, approx. 5.5 month old)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To isolated him in quarantine, away from individual 1 (Ñamñam). To put him in contact immediately with Ñamñam. 	To put him in contact immediately with Ñamñam.	Although we knew that quarantine would be better, due to the lack of personnel and appropriate facilities Pepe was placed with Ñamñam. We chose this option in order to take advantage of the fact that Pepe could learn important survival skills from Ñamñam.
RELEASE (Ñamñam and Pepe)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Release them in an area already inhabited by other otters and to let them establish a territory or join an existing group. Release them in an uninhabited area. 	Release them in an area already inhabited by other otters and to let them establish a territory or join an existing group.	They were adopted by a wild family group that inhabited the area near the camp. Thus, it was not necessary to force the separation between the otters and humans.
FOLLOW-UP OBSERVATIONS	Follow-up observations were made on three occasions during which the released individuals were confidently identified.		During the larger study on the ecology of otters, it was necessary to establish the distribution and abundance of otters throughout the study area. These observations facilitated the identification of the group that eventually adopted the two pups. The pups were individually recognisable due to the unique fur coloration on their necks.

CONCLUSIONS

The rehabilitation and release of the giant river otter cub (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) into the natural environment is a difficult process, but can be accomplished successfully.

For a successful rehabilitation and release program, it is necessary to understand the basic ecology and behaviour of the species, as well as to have the appropriate facilities, feeding protocols, and adequate veterinary services available.

It would be helpful to compile other rehabilitation and release experiences in order to develop an action protocol based on the knowledge obtained.

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Resumen: Reporte de la rehabilitación y liberación de 2 crías de nutria gigante (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) en el Río Bitá (Vichada, Colombia)

Las nutrias gigantes de río además de todos los factores de presión comunes en las diferentes áreas donde se distribuyen, se enfrentan en Colombia, a la captura de sus crías para ser usadas mascotas. Muchas de estas mascotas, al alcanzar cierta edad, representan un gasto enorme para la familia que la posee, debido a la gran demanda de alimento que requieren, así mismo como una amenaza por tratarse de un animal de considerable tamaño y fuerza, por lo que son asesinadas. Durante la fase de campo del proyecto Bojonawi [Ecología de la Nutria Gigante (*Pteronura brasiliensis*), en el Bajo Río Bitá Vichada Colombia], se llevó a cabo el proceso de rehabilitación física y biológica de dos crías de Nutria Gigante, durante un período de 7 meses. La primera cría (Ñamñam), una hembra, se recibió de aproximadamente 2 meses de edad. Se trabajó con ella durante un período de seis meses, hasta su liberación. El segundo (Pepe), un macho de aproximados 4,5 meses, también fue liberado. Se tiene la certeza que los dos individuos fueron ‘adoptados’, por una familia silvestre, que habita dentro del área de estudio. Se presenta un cuadro en orden cronológico donde junto a cada actividad relacionada al proceso de rehabilitación y liberación de los individuos, se mencionan las opciones a seguir, la decisión tomada y algunos comentarios al respecto.