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NEW FINDINGS OF OTTERS (*Lutra lutra*) IN ISRAEL

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Abstract: Until the mid 20th century, otters were abundant in the coastal regions and long the Jordan River. Hunting by fish breeders, water pollution and drainage work has dramatically reduced the population. The authors found evidence of otters along the Jordan down to the Dead Sea, continuing the work done in Jordan. Because of arid conditions, this may be an isolated population. More work is needed to clarify this.

Up to the middle of the 20th century, otters were abundant in Israel in all coastal regions from the Lebanese border to Tel-Aviv region, and along the Jordan River from the initiation up to the Dead Sea including the Hula Lake and Lake Kinneret (Sea of Galilee). Connecting corridor between these regions consist on Harod valley and Israel valley which is found between Bet She'an and Haifa. However, hunting by fish breeders, water pollution and draining of streams in most of Israel, caused a dramatic decline in its populations (MENDELSSOHN and YOM-TOV, 1999).

Little information about the current distribution of the otter has been published since the first initial survey by MACDONALD et al. (1986). They summarised the situation as: "Virtually extirpated in the coastal regions. Good populations still exist in the Jordan River catchment, including Lake Tiberias (= Lake Kinneret or Sea of Galilee; author's remark), but because almost the entire population is concentrated in the one system, it must be considered threatened. Within the system, otters occur in uplands, agricultural lowlands, and fish ponds." (FOSTER-TURLEY et al., 1990).

From December 1999 until June 2000 DOLEV (in prep.) carried out a survey covering 153 sites. Of these, 56 sites (36,6%) were found positive. The detailed results will be published elsewhere. During this survey no signs of otters were found in the western parts of Israel and in the Jordan River catchment south of the Lake Kinneret (Sea of Galilee), accept sites near Bet She'an (Harod valley).

A field trip of both authors, carried out on October 6-7, 2000, offered the opportunity to re-survey several sites in these areas. Signs of otters were found at three rivers in the western part of Israel in the coastal region near Haifa. These observations confirm sporadic reports of local people that otters have been observed on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. No signs of otters were found directly at the outlet of the Sea of Galilee. This area is intensively used for recreation activities. Possibly this is a reason for little chance in finding signs of otters. Two sites were found positive along the Jordan River between Lake Kinneret and the border to Jordan. These findings closed the gap in the findings made by REUTHER et al. (2000) at the river Yarmuk in the east and those parts of the Jordan River in the south which form the border between Israel and Jordan. Now we have new evidence of otter occupancy along all the southern Jordan River down to the Dead Sea. These data have been transferred to ISOS (Information System for Otter Surveys; REUTHER et al., 2000a) on the base of the UTM 10km-grid (Fig. 1).

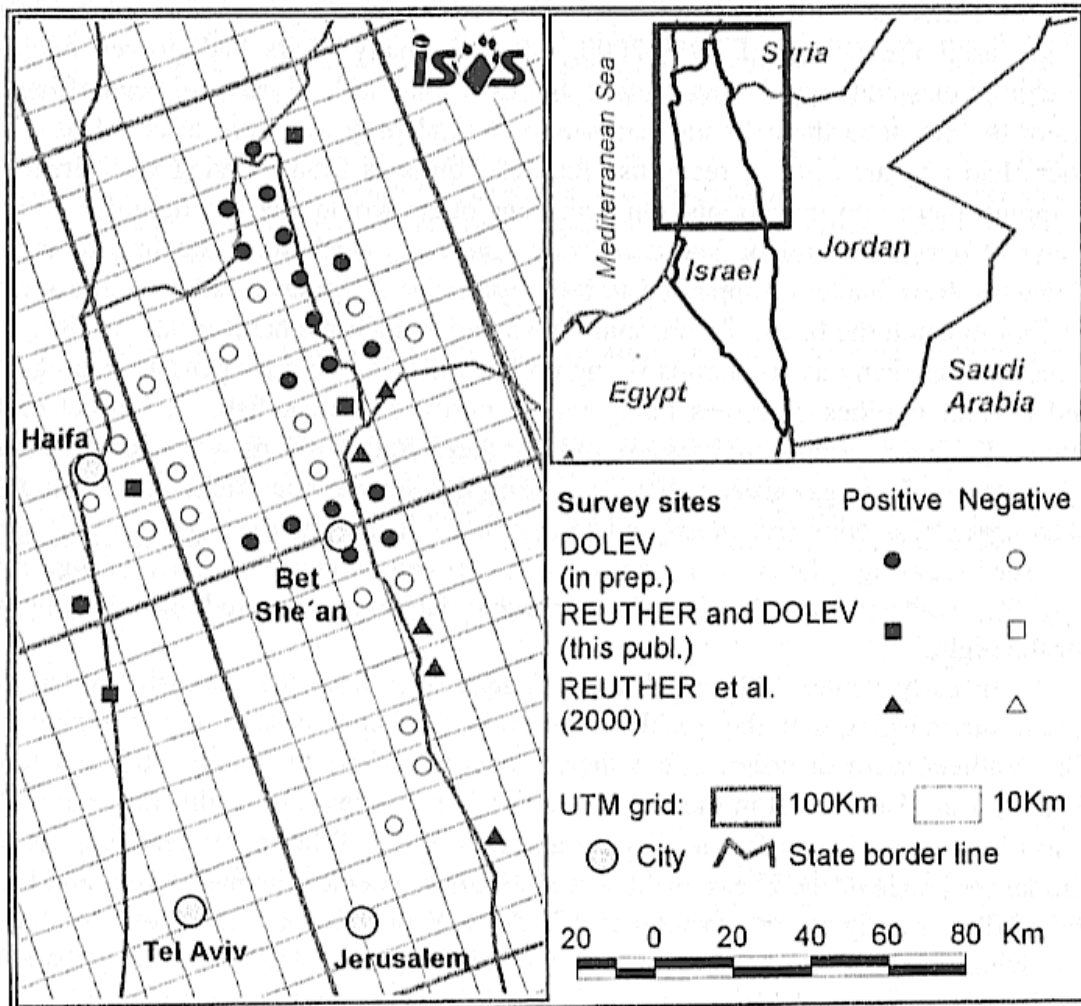


Figure 1. Otter distribution in Israel on the base of the UTM 10km-grid resulting from surveys of DOLEV (in prep.) and REUTHER et al. (2000b).

The Israel otter population is of great importance because of two reasons:

1. Together with the Jordanian otter population it forms the south-eastern border of the Mediterranean-Arab range of the Eurasian otter (REUTHER et al., 2000b).
2. Comparing the distribution of otters and the presence of permanent running or standing waters (including fish ponds) in Israel it is obvious that otters have to overpass long distances without any waters or to use the coast of the Mediterranean Sea migration - if the otter occurrences are connected. This phenomenon needs further investigation.

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RESUMEN

Nuevos registros de nutrias (*Lutra lutra*) en Israel

Hasta mediados del siglo XX las nutrias eran abundantes en Israel en todas las regiones costeras, desde el límite con el Líbano hasta la región de Tel-Aviv y a lo largo del Río Jordán, desde su inicio hasta el Mar Muerto, incluyendo los lagos Hula y Kinneret (Mar de Galilea). Sin embargo, la caza, la polución del agua y el drenaje de arroyos en la mayor parte de Israel causó una declinación dramática en sus poblaciones. En 1986 MacDonald *et al.* consideraban que las nutrias habían sido virtualmente extirpadas de las regiones costeras pero que mantenían buenas poblaciones en el Río Jordán, incluyendo el Lago Tiberias (Lago Kinneret o Mar de Galilea). Dado que toda la población está concentrada en un solo sistema, sugerían considerarla amenazada. Entre Diciembre de 1999 y Junio de 2000 se llevó a cabo un relevamiento que cubrió 153 sitios. Cincuenta y seis de estos (el 36,6%) resultaron positivos. Durante dicho relevamiento no se encontraron signos de nutrias en las zonas occidentales de Israel ni en el Río Jordán al sur del Lago Kinneret. Una salida de campo en Octubre de 2000 permitió relevar nuevamente varios sitios en esas zonas. Se encontraron signos de nutrias en 3 ríos en la zona costera de la parte occidental de Israel, cerca de Haifa, confirmando reportes esporádicos de registros en la costa mediterránea por parte de habitantes locales. No hubo registros en la zona del Mar de Galilea. Esa área es usada intensamente para actividades recreativas lo que posiblemente disminuye las probabilidades de encontrar rastros de nutrias. La población de nutrias de Israel es importante por 2 motivos: 1- junto con la población de Jordania constituyen el límite sudoriental de la distribución árabe - mediterránea de la nutria europea; 2 - comparando la distribución de las nutrias y la presencia de cursos de agua permanentes, para estar conectadas, éstas tienen que desplazarse largas distancias a lo largo de áreas sin agua, o utilizar el Mar Mediterráneo. Este fenómeno requiere ser investigado.