

ABSTRACT

GIANT OTTERS IN FRENCH GUYANA: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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The Giant Otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*, Zimmerman, 1780) is the largest of the world's 13 otter species and is endemic to the rainforests and wetlands of South America. The Guyana's together are generally accepted to be one of the last strongholds of the Giant Otter, a species of which probably only 5000 or less individuals are existent and classified as "endangered" by the IUCN Specialist Group. Until recently, virtually no information was available on this species in French Guiana, a French department situated adjacent to Suriname and north of Brazil.

KWATA NGO (Etude et Conservation de la faune de Guyane) and SFPEM (Société Française pour l'Etude et la Protection des Mammifères) funded by DIREN (Ministère de l'Environnement), CEPA (Conservation des Espèces et Populations Animales) and the Zoo de Doué have started a project aimed at:

- surveying the country in order to assess the distribution and status of the species
- assessing the impact of threats to the species and opportunities for minimizing these threats
- supporting the education of local people about otters as flagship species
- working with another otter projects in Guyana shield
- assessing possibilities for development of responsible ecotourism.

The first survey started in January 2000, consisting of interviews of local people and all river-course users (fishermen, hunters, tourism guides, etc.). More than 100 data points have been collected by this way.

Field trips have also been conducted along 3 rivers. Between 3 and 14 October 2000 (dry season), we actively searched for giant otters along the Litani River which forms the southern part of the frontier with Suriname. We observed giant otters at four locations, as well as four sprainting sites along 200 kilometres. Between 19 and 30 September 2001, we investigated the Sinnamary River and from 2nd to 7th October 2001 the Arataï River was explored, both rivers being situated in the centre of the country. We saw giant otters

on the Arataï River and found tracks on both rivers. A large campsite was also encountered at the point where the Arataï River merges with the Approuague River.

Our preliminary results suggest that the giant otter is widespread throughout the country except along rivers with heavy gold-mining activities. However numbers of individuals in each group seem to decrease compared to data collected from 5 years ago.

Only approximately 180,000 inhabitants populate the 90,000 km² of French Guyana, mainly in the coastal zone. Nonetheless, the country is currently facing a dramatic demographic pressure. In the coastal area, threats to the giant otter are indirect and include hunting, fishing, and tourism activities.

Legal and illegal gold mining is the greatest threat in the south of the country. In addition to the impact of associated human activities (hunting, deforestation), gold dredging results in large amounts of suspended particulate matter in watercourses which reduce light penetration and affect fish respiratory systems. Moreover, about 2 tonnes of the mercury used to amalgamate gold is lost in the environment every year in French Guyana and may also affect some physiological functions of otters. On the other hand, the deforestation rate is very slow and geographically limited, and logging activities do not affect riparian habitats.