

IUCN Otter Spec. Group Bull. 2 1987
IUCN OTTER SPECIALIST GROUP BULLETIN
VOLUME 2 PAGES 33 - 37

Citation: Jongh, A. W. J. J. de (1987) The Dutch Otterstation Foundation. *IUCN Otter Spec. Group Bull. 2: 33 - 37*

THE DUTCH OTTERSTATION FOUNDATION

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History

The initiative for starting up a Dutch Foundation for conservation of the Dutch otter population (*Lutra lutra*) and its habitat was taken by two former students of Dr. H. Kruuk. Because of his connections with the State University Groningen (the Netherlands), these two students were able to work on otters in the wild and captivity within an otter study programme of the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology in Scotland. During these studies ideas arose to start a Dutch Otterstation. Visits to the International Otter Symposium in Strasbourg and the Otter stations of The Otter Trust (P. Wayre) in England and Aktion Flschotterschutz (C. Reuther) in Germany emphasised the necessity and the possibilities of an otterstation for conservation purposes.

With the support of Dr. J.J. Videler of the State University of Groningen a set-up plan was designed in 1985. To accomplish the main aim (protection, management and recovery of the Otter population and its habitat in the Netherlands and abroad), four approaches were chosen: education, research, breeding programme and management advising.

Present-day

Now, after one year of its existence, the same approaches are still used. In this year a lot of attention has been paid to the foundation's plans and results. There were many articles about the otter and the foundation's work in newspapers and magazines. Several times the foundation was asked for comments in radio-broadcasting, and once it had the opportunity to present itself on T.V. The otter is becoming more and more popular in Holland now and the idea that the otter is the ambassador of the freshwater ecosystem gets more and more widespread.

Today twenty co-operators are working together. Amongst them there are biologists (specialized in animal, plant and environmental biology), trained teachers and trained animal keepers. One of the animal keepers was able to broaden her knowledge by visits to several European zoos and the Otterstation of Aktion Fischotterschutz in Germany, made possible by an IUCN-grant.

Education

By means of publications in newspapers and magazines, interviews (radio and T.V.), lectures, information material, exhibitions and teaching material, the foundation tries to make the public and policy makers aware of the threatened status of the otter and its habitat.

Besides this the Dutch Otterstation Foundation has developed building plans for a visitor centre where the public will be able to see otters alive and will be informed about the otter's biology and conservation needs. This first part of the actual Otterstation will be located in the north of Holland near Groningen. The foundation is trying to establish this centre by subsidies and sponsoring (any financial aid from abroad is welcome!)

Research

Research is done in the field and in the laboratory. In the field, surveys for otters take place, often in co-operation with other Dutch organizations dealing with otter conservation. From last year's surveys it appeared that the estimated otter population size of 350 specimens was far too optimistic. Numbers of 50-150 animals reflect the present situation in a more accurate way. It seems that the Dutch otter population is diminishing. One of the main factors causing the decline is water pollution. Since the otters found dead have not yet been analyzed for contaminants an M.Sc. Biology student of the State University of Groningen started a literature study under supervision of the foundation on the influence of the Dutch water pollution on otters in the Netherlands. From this it appeared that e.g. heavy metal and PCS pollution might severely threaten the Dutch otter population. These results were confirmed by the recent analysis of an otter found dead in the province of Friesland. For example, it contained approximately 290 ppm PCB (see p27).

A second student is now studying the diet of otters in the Netherlands. In the faculty where this is done, a research station with captive otters (as a second part of the Otterstation) will be completed in early spring under the auspices of the foundation.

Breeding Programme

As a third part of the Otterstation a breeding section is planned. The aim of this section is to breed otters and, if possible, to release them in suitable areas in the Netherlands, but only if habitat conditions are right. This will become clear after intensive studies of those areas for pollution, food availability, cover, ecological infrastructure, protection measures etc. The first releases will be considered as experiments in which the animals set free will be intensively studied by radio-tracking. All three parts of the Otterstation are planned separately to avoid mutual disturbance. Especially for breeding it is of vital importance to guarantee tranquillity.

Management Advising

All kinds of management measures can already be made in the field to favour the otter. The Dutch Otterstation Foundation designs and gives advice about landscape planning in freshwater habitats, mainly local. Because of the ambassadorial function of the otter in this ecosystem, measures taken for the otter will favour many other organisms.

The foundation has been involved in the development of a design for an ecological infrastructure between two lakes in the north of Holland. This is of vital importance in countering the continuing fragmentation of otter habitats. Plans are being developed now for an extension of these "otterroads".

The Dutch Otterstation Foundation is also working on "nature-construction". For one lake in particular a management plan is being developed (in co-operation with a department of the State Forest Administration and other parties concerned) to construct an alternative, natural bank protection, with, for instance, reed marshes. These projects are put forward as examples for other areas as well.