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**AN ACTION PLAN FOR THE CONSERVATION OF OTTERS**

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A fundamental aspect of SSC's work is the determination or conservation priorities through the production of Action Plans. This task is included in the Commission's terms of reference. A number of high quality Action plans were prepared during the late 1970s, and the SSC Steering Committee has now requested that a new generation of such plans be produced. To assist us in these efforts, WWF have financed two salaried positions in the SSC Executive Office. This article is being written while discussions are still taking place between the Otter Specialist Group leadership and the Executive Office on how the OSG can take part in this new Action Planning process. These discussions might well have been finalised by the time this article is published, so I apologise for anything written here which is clearly out of date.

The new generation of plans are all termed "Comprehensive Action Plans". They are the result of a study carried out by a Specialist Group which includes an overview of the status of all the species within their brief, a system of setting conservation priorities, and a compilation of proposed projects which address these priorities.

Why are Action Plans needed? There are six principal reasons :

1. We need to know the priorities for species conservation, if we are to effectively channel limited funds towards the most urgent needs. A thorough knowledge of the priorities is also required if SSC, and its Specialist Groups, are to provide the high calibre advisory service which governments and conservation organisations require.
2. Not only do the priorities need to be known. They also need to be published and thoroughly documented. Specialist Groups and their members are not immortal, and information that merely resides in the collective consciousness of the Group is always liable to be lost. It is certainly not so readily available, and needs to be published in a coherent form as an Action Plan.
3. Action Plans can be used in fund raising. This is without doubt the most controversial part of the Action Planning process. We are well aware of the funding disappointments in the past, which stem chiefly from the fact SSC has traditionally aimed its fund-raising at one over-burdened, WWF. The new generation of plans is being published attractively and will be aimed at a wider variety of donors. Clearly, there will be disappointments in the future, but the Executive Office will try to assist Specialist Groups in their fund-raising to a greater degree than was possible in the past .

4. The Executive Office, if it has the species conservation priorities readily to hand for a particular group, is able to exploit opportunities on behalf of the Specialist Groups. Often this means incorporating a species element in other conservation projects, such as habitat protection, protected area management and National Conservation Strategies. We are aiming to have a much stronger species component in general conservation initiatives.
5. The larger the number of Action Plans that are produced, the more we shall be able to identify regional "hotspots" of species conservation concern. We are moving ahead rapidly in this area. There are currently 34 Action Plans in preparation by 21 Specialist Groups. And we are considering new ways to make the Action Planning process more applicable and effective for fish, invertebrates and plants. We are working towards regional species conservation strategies, in which we want all Specialist Groups to be strongly represented.
6. The preparation of an Action Plan is a good discipline for a Specialist Group as it takes a hard, detailed look at the conservation problems and assesses the priorities. The process is proving successful in bringing several Groups to life. For a Group with a long history of activity, such as the OSG, the compilation of a plan might prove considerably easier than for some of the newer Groups.

We in the Executive Office are very much looking forward to working with the OSG in this Action Planning process. We are confident that the long-term result will be an increased profile and effectiveness of otter conservation. Your close relatives, the Mustelid and Viverrid Specialist Group, are already working on such a plan, so it is now particularly appropriate that the OSG should start as well.