

SHORT NOTE

OTTER CONSERVATION IN PAKISTAN

Waseem Ahmad KHAN¹ and Hussain Bux BHAGAT²

¹WWF Pakistan, 60 – Bazar Road, G – 6/4, Islamabad, Pakistan. e-mail: khanwa@hotmail.com

²Sindh Wildlife department, Karachi, Pakistan



(received 8th April 2010, accepted 23rd April 2010)

Abstract: This note describes the conservation status and threats of the two otter species described in Pakistan; Smooth coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata sindica*) and the Eurasian or common otter (*Lutra lutra*). It also briefly describes the actors involved as well as the efforts made for its conservation.

Pakistan being located at western ends of Indian subcontinent and having various habitat types, hosts a mixture of Palaearctic, Oriental and Ethiopian fauna. Its vertebrate fauna is comprised of more than 1200 species with 120 (10%) endemic species. It is a unique feature that shows the zoogeographical importance of the country. Mammalian fauna of the country includes 188 species and sub-species representing 10 orders (Insectivora, Chiroptera, Primates, Pholidota, Carnivora, Perrisodactyla, Artiodactyla, Lagomorpha, Rodentia and Cetacea).

Otter Species in Pakistan

Two otter species exist in Pakistan: the Smooth coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata sindica*) (Figure 1) and the Eurasian or common otter (*Lutra lutra*). The Eurasian otter occurs in the northern mountainous region while the Smooth coated otter occurs in the Sindh, Punjab and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan (Roberts, 1997; Khan et al., 2009). A few reports of hunters also show the existence of the Smooth coated otter in Balochistan (pers. comm.; Mr. Faiz Mohammad, a local conservationist). The sub-species found along the Indus River has been referred as the “Sindh otter” (*Lutrogale perspicillata sindica*) by Pocock (1940).

Conservation Status of Otters in Pakistan

Wildlife conservation movement started in Pakistan during the early 1970's following the release of a report on the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) expedition to Pakistan (1967) and a report from the Wildlife Enquiry Committee (1971) under the Ministry of Agriculture and Works, Government of Pakistan. But since then only a few practical efforts have been made by wildlife biologists and ecologists to study or update the existing knowledge about mammals in the country. In 1997, Roberts described 188 mammalian species and provided their conservation status in Pakistan, which listed both otter species as being Rare. However, according to a more recent

assessment (Sheikh and Molur, 2005) both of the species have been assessed as Near Threatened in Pakistan. Both of the species are protected under Provincial Wildlife Acts being included in 3rd Schedule meaning that cannot be hunted under any circumstance.



Figure 1. Male Smooth coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata sindica*) at Haleji Lake in the Thatta district, Sindh, Pakistan @ WWF Pakistan

Threats to Otters in Pakistan

A major damage caused to otter populations worldwide is from illegal trade of their skins and body parts (IOSF, 2008). Similar is the case with Pakistan where both the species are hunted ruthlessly due to the demand for their fur that has decreased otter populations considerably. Other potential threats to otters in Pakistan include; habitat degradation, water pollution, weak enforcement of wildlife laws, increased tourists' activities in otter habitats, human-otter conflict upon common fish resources (i.e. food competition among human and otters) and the misconception of its use in medicinal recipes (Khan et al., 2009). Above all is the lack of awareness about importance and ecological role of the species even among the educated people.

Conservation Measures for Otters in Pakistan

WWF Pakistan took the leading role in otter conservation in Pakistan and launched an informal otter awareness and conservation campaign in 2008. Subsequently, several conservationists from different governmental and non-governmental organizations have come forward to become practically involved in otter conservation.

Role of WWF Pakistan

Indus for All Program and *Pakistan Wetlands Program (PWP)* are two major programs of WWF Pakistan with the former concerned with the conservation of the Indus Eco-region while the later concerns itself with the conservation of more than 200 wetlands throughout the country.

Indus for All Program, as a component of its conservation activities, has been focusing on three threatened wildlife species; the Marsh crocodile (*Crocodilus*

palurus), the Hog deer (*Axis porcinus*) and the Smooth coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) as the species of special concern from the Indus eco-region. It intends to conserve these species through habitat restoration, relocation, and management with the help of local communities. In this context, *Indus for All Program* has also funded a 2-year project for the conservation and management of Smooth coated otters in Indus Eco-region to the Sindh Wildlife Department (SWD). Under one of the project activities, the population of Smooth coated otter has been estimated to 161 individual recently (Khan and Qasim, 2010) in Indus Eco-region.

PWP has launched distributional studies in NWFP for the Eurasian otter and in the Punjab province for the Smooth coated otter with the intention to expand these studies up to Gilgit-Baltistan in northern Pakistan. PWP has also designed a poster showing paintings and brief write ups about the otter species found in Pakistan. Facilitating three conservationists from Pakistan to attend the Otter Training Workshop in Cambodia during February 2009 is another valuable contribution of the PWP towards otter conservation.

Role of Sindh Wildlife Department

SWD is playing a leading role in otter conservation in Sindh Province with its most important initiative towards otter conservation being the establishment of a Conservation Breeding Center at Haleji Lake in the Thatta district which is not yet fully functional but currently serves as an Information Center for students, researchers and general public. SWD is also planning the establishment of Wildlife Sanctuary for otters in the Sanghar district this year which will be the first ever otter sanctuary in Pakistan.

Conclusion

As a result of the otter conservation campaign in recent years, three students in three different universities in the country are now doing their PhD and Ms. phil. research on otters. More than five research and popular articles about otters have been published recently in Pakistan and a similar number of articles are presently being prepared. It is hoped that these initiatives about otters will lead other conservationists towards other threatened wildlife species in the country as well.

REFERENCES

- IOSF (2008).** Alarming Trade in Otter Fur. IOSF. 7 Black Park, Bradford, Isle of Skye, IV49 9DE, Scotland. 11 pp.
- Khan, W.A., Qasim, M., Ahmad, E., Akbar, G., Habib, A.H., Ali, H., Qamar, F. M., Chaudhry, A.A., Iqbal, S., Bhaagat, H.B., Akhtar, M. and Ahmad, M.S. (2009).** A Survey of Smooth coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata indica*) in Sindh, Province of Pakistan. *IUCN Otter Specialist Group Bulletin* **26** (1): 15-31.
- Khan, W.A. and Qasim, M. (2010).** Otter Survey in Indus Eco-region: Otter Population Estimation. WWF Pakistan, Internal Report 167 pp.
- Pocock, R.I. (1940).** Notes on some British Indian Otters with descriptions of two new subspecies. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.*, **41**:514-518.
- Roberts, T.J. (1997).** The Mammals of Pakistan. Revised Edition, Oxford University Press, 5-Bangalore Town, Shara e Faisal, Karachi. 525 pp.
- Sheikh, K.M. and Molur, S. (2005).** Status and Red List of Pakistan's Mammals. IUCN Pakistan. 344 pp.

RÉSUMÉ

CONSERVATION DE LA LOUTRE AU PAKISTAN

Deux espèces de loutres subsistent au Pakistan, la Loutre à pelage lisse (*Lutrogale perspicillata sindica*) et la Loutre d'Europe (*Lutra lutra*). Rares et protégées, les menaces pesant sur elles sont celles communément répandues à travers le monde: chasse illégale pour la fourrure et la pharmacopée, destruction des habitats, compétition avec l'Homme sur la pêche et un manque d'éducation sur leur rôle et leur importance écologique fait défaut. Le WWF a lancé une campagne d'information en 2008 suivi d'un programme de conservation de Loutre à pelage lisse dans la région de l'Indus où 161 individus semblent subsister. Aujourd'hui, divers organismes régionaux s'investissent progressivement dans la conservation *ex situ* et *in situ* de ces espèces et des étudiants en font leurs sujets d'études.

RESUMEN

CONSERVACION DE LA NUTRIA EN PAKISTAN

Esta nota describe el estatus de conservación y las amenazas que se posan sobre las dos especies de nutria en Pakistan: la nutria lisa (*Lutrogale perspicillata sindica*) y la nutria común o Euroasiática (*Lutra lutra*). Adicionalmente describe las entidades relacionadas y los esfuerzos realizados para su conservación en el país.

اردو (Urdu)

پاکستان میں پائی جانے والی فقاریہ جانوروں کی بارہ سو انواع میں سے ایک سو اٹھاسی انواع دودھ دینے والے جانوروں کی ہیں۔ دو انواع کے لدھڑ: ہموار چمڑی لدھڑ اور یوریشیائی لدھڑ بھی پائے جاتے ہیں۔ ہموار چمڑی لدھڑ صوبہ سندھ، پنجاب اور سرحد کے میدانی اور دریائی علاقوں میں جبکہ یوریشیائی لدھڑ شمال کے اونچے پہاڑی سلسلوں میں پائے جاتے ہیں۔ ماہرین حیوانیات دونوں انواع کو کمزور اور خطرے سے دوچار قرار دے چکے ہیں۔ پاکستان میں صوبائی حکمہ جات برائے تحفظ جنگلی حیات کے تحت دونوں انواع کو قانونی تحفظ حاصل ہے اور ان کا شکار کسی بھی حالت میں ممنوع ہے۔ پاکستان میں لدھڑ کی دونوں انواع کو لاحق خطرات میں کھال کے حصول کیلئے شکار، آبی ذخائر کی آلودگی، لدھڑ کے مساکن کی تباہی، قانون کی بالادستی نہ ہونا اور لوگوں میں شعور اور آگہی کا فقدان شامل ہیں۔ پاکستان میں ڈبلیو ڈبلیو ایف نے دو جامع منصوبے شروع کر رکھے ہیں ان میں ایک انڈس فار آل پروگرام اور دوسرا آگاہیوں کے تحفظ کا منصوبہ پی ڈبلیو پی ہے۔ انڈس فار آل منصوبہ کے تحت ایک سروے کے مطابق ۲۰۰۹ء میں صوبہ سندھ میں لدھڑ کی آبادی ایک سو اکتھ شمار کی گئی۔ ڈبلیو ڈبلیو ایف پاکستان کے ان منصوبوں کے تحت لدھڑ پر تحقیقی کام کو سارے ملک میں پھیلا یا جا رہا ہے۔ صوبہ سندھ کے محکمہ تحفظ جنگلی حیات نے ٹھٹھہ ضلع کی مشہور ہالچی جمیل کے ساتھ لدھڑ کی افزائش نسل کے منصوبے کا آغاز کیا ہے جبکہ ضلع ساگھڑ میں لدھڑ سینکڑوں کی قیام کارا رہ رہتا ہے۔ لدھڑ کے تحفظ کی ان کوششوں کے پیش نظر مختلف تعلیمی اداروں میں لدھڑ پر تحقیق کا رجحان بڑھ رہا ہے اور یہ امید کی جاتی ہے کہ لوگوں میں خطرات سے دوچار دوسری انواع پر بھی کام کرنے کا شوق اور جذبہ بڑھے گا۔