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## **THE NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL ASIAN OTTER SYMPOSIUM**

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Otters are charming, charismatic animals with wide public appeal; they are also indicator species for the health of aquatic ecosystems. Otters can only live in clean water that is rich in aquatic prey and unpolluted by pesticides or industrial contaminants, where there is adequate bankside cover, and where they are unmolested by humans. Fewer and fewer places in the world meet these basic criteria.

The four species of otters in Asia are virtually unstudied in the field. Most of our information on them stems from brief sightings, museum specimens and captive studies. Undoubtedly, like river otters throughout the world, their distribution and ranges are rapidly shrinking. For instance, Peninsular Malaysia was once solidly in the historical range of the hairy-nosed otter (*Lutra sumatrana*); this species has not been positively sighted in recent years. A similar statement can probably be made about the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) in Thailand. As of July 1984, all species of otters in Peninsular Malaysia were classified as totally protected.

Throughout Asia, a similar situation of shrinking distribution and population is no doubt also occurring. In India, it is known that three species of otters occur, but little is known about their status, distribution or ecology. The most recent published distribution maps indicate that two species, the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) and the small-clawed otter (*Aonyx cinerea*) are found primarily in the south and in the northern areas bordering Nepal, Bhutan, Kashmir and Assam. The third species, the smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) is thought to be more generally found in these regions and throughout India. Despite this general agreement, otters not listed in some areas are nonetheless reported there. A case in point is the 1979 report in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society of a Eurasian otter positively occurring in Maharashtra. Unfortunately, even where otters are most likely to occur throughout India, sightings are infrequent and population numbers are unknown.

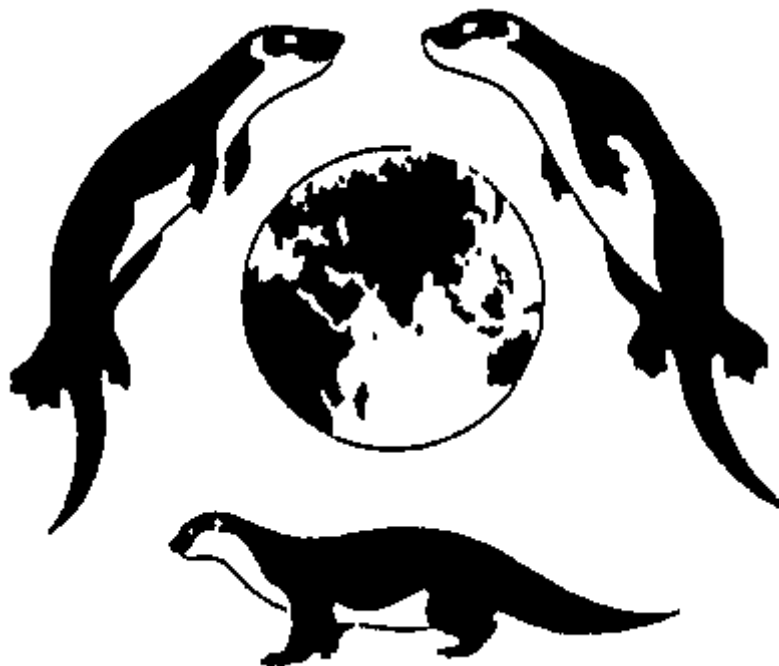
One reason for the confusion about the status of otters in Asia is the lack of organised research with these species. Another is the confusion in the identification between them. To the unschooled observer, two of the three species look very similar, and even a trained observer might have difficulty making a positive identification based on a fleeting glimpse. Unless field conditions are absolutely perfect, the signs of all three otters would be virtually indistinguishable. Not enough is known about the variable ecology and behaviour of these three species to enable such factors to differentiate them. Much work is needed with these species throughout their ranges in India and Southeast Asia to determine their status and the relative size of their populations. Because otters, as high-order carnivores, are very susceptible to the pressures of human population, trapping, and habitat destruction, and because they do not survive in waters that are polluted, there is reason to suspect that in many areas of their so-called range throughout Asia they are in trouble. Unless status surveys and ecological research is begun soon to document their status, we may not know in time.

For these reasons, throughout Europe and North America, there have been years of concern and concentrated survey research efforts with the otter species found there. In South America and Africa, there are a handful of studies underway and more are proposed. It is only in the vast Asian region that our knowledge of otter biology is sorely limited.

For all of these reasons, it is important that an effort be made immediately to heighten the awareness of Asian biologists and conservationists into the plight faced by otters and their habitat in this region. Holding an International Asian Otter Symposium in India will serve this purpose and hopefully stimulate more research and conservation efforts with these species.

The International Asian Otter Symposium is planned to include delegates from around the world with considerable expertise in the conservation and biology of other otter species. Delegates from all Asian nations with otter populations and from all states in India will also be invited. Formal papers will be presented on otter research in other parts of the world to give examples of the types of studies that can be undertaken. Formal papers are also planned on captive Asian otter research and breeding and reintroduction projects. Survey techniques that have been developed and applied in Britain and throughout Europe will be described and demonstrated in the field. Workshops will be conducted in otter identification through sightings, skulls, and field signs, and the Delegates from Asian nations with otter populations and from all Indian States will present status reports on otters in their region. Together all delegates will develop a survey strategy for the Asian region, and will formulate an Action Plan for Asian Otter Survival which will be published and distributed by the IUCN Otter Specialist Group.

The anticipated results of such an International Asian Otter Symposium will have a far-reaching effect and enhance the conservation of these charming, but fragile animals. The main consideration at this time is to start the otter conservation ball rolling in Asia before it is too late.



**INTERNATIONAL ASIAN OTTER SYMPOSIUM**  
**Bangalore, India**  
**October 14 - 18, 1988**

The first International Asian Otter Symposium is sponsored jointly by the IUCN Otter Specialist Group and the Government of India to increase the knowledge and conservation of the otter species and their habitats throughout Asia. Wildlife and zoo biologists, conservationists and governmental representatives from throughout Asia are strongly encouraged to participate.

The program will include formal summary papers on otter research and conservation throughout the world, sessions on captive breeding and husbandry of Asian otters, workshops on Asian otter identification and survey techniques and reports on the status of otters throughout India and Asia. Members of the IUCN Otter Specialist Group and other participants will together help formulate the IUCN Action Plan for Asian Otter Survival.

Following the formal symposium, a post-conference tour of the National Parks of Karnataka will include the study of otter habitats and the chance of viewing wild gaur, elephants and maybe even tigers. This tour will include special VIP attendance at the Dussera procession in Mysore, one of the largest processions of ceremonial elephants in Asia.

Papers are invited on all aspects of Asian otter biology and conservation. Survey papers are especially encouraged from all Asian regions. Please contact Pat Foster-Turley as soon as possible if you would like to present a paper. More information on the International Asian Otter Symposium can be obtained from

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