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RESEARCH ON THE OTTER IN ITALY

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In Italy, the distribution of the otter was surveyed by the "Gruppo Lontra Italia" (Cassola, 1986). The species presently occurs only in some rivers of Central and Southern Italy, except for a new population of otters which has recently been found in the Northern Apennines (Beseghi and Donati, 1987). The first data on the otter's diet were recorded by Arca and Prigioni (1987) on the river Fiora (Tuscany and Latium regions).

So far, the available knowledge on this reduced population of otters is very scarce and further studies are necessary in order to propose a conservation strategy for the species. A detailed research programme was undertaken in September 1987 on the five rivers (Rivers Sele, Calore, Agri, Basento, Fiora), which hold the most important populations of otters. Fifteen co-operators (University researchers and members of "Gruppo Lontra Italia") are working on this study, financially supported by the Environment Italian Ministry. The main aims of the study are:

- to analyse the sprainting activity of otters throughout the year; eight or nine stretches (1 km) were selected on each river, and the spraints and the sprainting sites are counted at monthly intervals; stretches are spaced 4-5 km from one another;
- to study the seasonal variations of the otter's diet by the analysis of spraints;
- to analyse the factors affecting the use of habitat by otters surveying sprainting activity; bottom type, shore type, bankside vegetation cover, disturbance, water pollution, food supply are the main variables estimated;
- to obtain information about holts and the breeding of the species.

The water quality of each river is being assessed, using chemical criteria and by surveying the macro-invertebrate community. Sampling of fish is carried out by electrofishing, and fish are analysed for heavy metals and chlorinated hydrocarbon pesticides. In connection with the field research, a study programme on captive otters has been started at the Faunistic Park "La Torbiera" (Northern Italy), where 4 pairs of otters, born in captivity, are held in suitable enclosures (Table 1). This study aims to obtain useful information for the field research on the otter. Sprainting activity, the seasonal production and the composition of the "anal jelly" for both sexes are studied. In addition, the characteristics of otter's footprints on differing substrata (sand, mud of differing compactness) are examined.

Table 1: Otters held at the Faunistic Park "La Torbiera"
(report start date: 10th January, 1988)

Sex	Age		Origin
	Year s	Month s	
Male	3	6	Norfolk Wildlife Park, UK
Female	3	4	"
Male	1		"
Female	1		"
Male	2	4	Bern, Städtischer Tierpark Dahlholzli
Female	1	9	Zurich, Zoologischer Garten Zurich
Male	1	5	"
Female	1		"

At "La Torbiera", the "Gruppo Lontra Italia" has made a permanent exhibition on the otter. The public is informed about biology, ecology and conservation problems of the species, and a pair of otters is visible in an enclosure.

The first data of the field survey and captive research on the otter will be available at the end of 1988.

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