

REPORT

AFRICAN OTTER WORKSHOP

20 – 25 July 2015

College of African Wildlife Management, Mweka, Tanzania

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The [IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group 1990 Action Plan](#) highlighted the need for global surveys of most otter species to identify their current distribution, status, threats, and conflict areas. This document also recommended public awareness campaigns targeting communities and policy makers regarding the need to conserve wetland, riverine, and lake environments for people and wildlife alike. In 1998 the group identified as one of the priorities for Africa the assessment of current distribution, status and degree of legal protection for African otters ([Proceedings VIIth International Otter Colloquium, Trebon, Czech Republic, 14 – 20 March 1998](#)). In 2004 the group identified Africa as the top priority continent requiring initiation and support of research and conservation activities on otters and the Congo clawless otter (*Aonyx congicus*) as the species most requiring targeted research ([Recommendations IXth International Otter Colloquium, Frostburg, MA; 4 – 10 June 2004](#)). At that time the OSG also identified a pressing need to establish a network of professionals working in environments where otters may be present to assist in gathering current otter distribution and status data as well as training range country biologists in otter identification and survey methodologies. This 2015 workshop was the first Pan-African step taken to fulfill these pressing needs.

It was pointed out that of the 13 species of otter worldwide 12 of them are declining in number, and this includes the four species found in Africa, all currently classified as “Near Threatened” in the IUCN Red List. The Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) is only found in North Africa and so was not included in this workshop as the focus was on sub-Saharan species.

The recent process of assessing the status of the three endemic African otter species (*Aonyx capensis*, *A. congicus*, and *Hydriectis maculicollis* (previously known as *Lutra maculicollis*) for the IUCN Red List of Endangered Species highlighted the urgent need to address the paucity of information on these species. Outside of South Africa and a few recent studies or reports in Benin, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Namibia, Malawi, and Tanzania documented data is, for the most part, over 25 years old. This lack of information combined with increasing human populations, habitat loss or fragmentation, the impact of climate change, pollution, damaging agricultural and fishing practices as well as potentially unsustainable traditional use should alarm otter biologists. Despite what has been viewed as safety in the wide historic distribution of two of these species (*A. capensis* and *H. maculicollis*) literature searches, ad-hoc reporting from communities and available research indicates the distribution of these species is shrinking and that most populations are in decline. To address these issues and the identified need to raise awareness of Africa’s otters the [International Otter Survival Fund](#) organized the first Pan-African Otter Workshop. We report on the topics covered, information shared and actions identified here.

WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT SUMMARY

Attendees represented 10 African nations and two otter conservation organizations from outside the continent. Participants ranged from professionals and community members familiar with and working on otter biology and conservation issues to professionals and researchers working in associated fields such as wetland and marine ecosystem assessment or protection, national park management, ecology, outreach, and wildlife protection within national parks. Every effort was made to include all biologists currently working on otter issues in Africa but due to scheduling

conflicts, budget constraints or other complications some of these professionals were unable to join this workshop. It is hoped however, that these professionals and others interested in Africa's otters and water associated ecosystems will join this network and assist us in gathering status and distribution information as well as raising awareness.

GENERAL PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED IMPACTING OTTERS

Presentations and discussions identified 5 global issues and 8 key problems impacting African otters and their conservation or understanding of their current status and distribution:

Global issues impacting otters:

1. Increasing poverty and lack of job opportunities
2. Damaging agricultural, mining, and fishing practices
3. Climate change
4. Habitat destruction and fragmentation as well as erosion and pollution
5. Lack of infrastructure to address waste disposal and waste dumping in wetland areas.

Specifically impacting otters:

1. Lack of awareness that there are otters in Africa.
2. Lack of research into their distribution, status, ecological requirements in all habitats, and understanding of their behavior.
3. Confusion over their signs, specifically what the track of *H. maculicollis* looks like (at least 3 different tracks are identified as from this species in literature and on the internet).
4. Lack of biologists working on African otters.
5. Lack of effective protection for these species.
6. Human/otter conflicts and the fact that it appears most people who are aware of these species within their range view them as a problem.
7. Lack of funding for work on otters.
8. Lack of educational materials targeting all stakeholder groups, to include communities, students, fishermen and other business people, policy makers on all levels, community leaders, and other biologists working in ecosystems where otters are found.

WORKSHOP TOPICS AND PRESENTATIONS

Presentation topics included an introduction to African otters, their ecology, identification, and behavior; an overview of otters worldwide and their status; the work of IOSF; rehabilitating and raising injured/orphaned otters; an introduction to survey methods and an introduction to spraint analysis as well as an opportunity to look at scat from otters and that of other species that may confound identification.

Highlights of the workshop were presentations on:

- Status of Otters in Africa, Threats and Mitigation by Hugues Akpona in which he covered the range of threats facing Africa's otters, and mitigation efforts; those that have been successful, not successful and possible future options.

This presentation was based on spotted-necked otter research done in Benin by himself and P. Bada as well as ongoing and future work there and in DRC.

- Understanding what otters eat: the uses and limitations of spraints analysis by Nicola Oakes. She reported on their ongoing study of the African clawless in the Cape Town region of South Africa as well as advances in isotope identification of species from spraint and prey identification in fecal remains.
- The Mazu Story by Rita Chapman, Lubama Delphin Kumbi, and Mubuma Chico Lunko of the Kikongo Otter Sanctuary in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This story of two rescued Congo clawless otter cubs raised and successfully released back into the wild by Delphin, Chico and Rita captivated many around the world in 2010 – 2012. The dedication of Chico and Delphin during and since that time to conserving otters and raising awareness in their local community was an inspiration to all at the workshop. They also helped participants to understand how to approach communities that live daily with otters and their sometimes undesirable impact.
- Engedasew Andarge (Addis Ababa University) currently doing his PhD work on the African clawless otter in and around Lake Tana in Ethiopia shared some of his findings and problems working in communities where otters are viewed as competitors.
- Hetherwick Msiska, Malawi shared the results and observations of monitoring spotted-necked otters in Malawi for several years now and soon will submit for publication two of his survey reports.
- Abdoulie Sawo, The Gambia shared some of the success in mitigating human/wildlife conflict the Department of Parks and Wildlife Management have had with their conservation and community development programs. Their approach has focused on alternative economic activities and working from within the communities.
- Yustina Kiwango, Tanzania, covered some of the environmental issues facing wetlands in Tanzania's national parks and their mitigation efforts to address the natural and man-made causes.
- All of the participants shared what they had, or had not known about otters several times over the course of the workshop which lead to many interesting and productive conversations.
- The practical session on spraint analysis was well received as were the breakout sessions to discuss social issues, mitigation, and educational tools. The only disappointment was due to budget/time constraints and the lack of presence data we did not see otters or their sign during our field trip. This however should be a lesson in the paucity of information on these potentially ecologically important species as top predators in many of their ecosystems. Since the workshop some of the participants have already reported finding signs in their own research area as they now know what to look for.
- Hobokela Mwamjengwa, Outreach Warden on Rubondo Island National Park in Tanzania presented an overview of how the Tanzania National Park Authority (TANAPA) handles their outreach to local communities as well as some of the solutions and problems facing this important otter refuge and the threatened biomes of Lake Victoria.
- Hugues Akpona shared an outreach program implemented in Benin and based on Project Management Conceptual Model (Plan, Do, Check and Act) and suggested that future interventions on otters adopt the same.

As threats to the otters and their ecosystems are the most important factors potentially impacting the status and distribution of Africa's otters these were themes we constantly circled back to and our discussion, conclusions, and preliminary mitigation suggestions will be elaborated on below.

DEALING WITH STAKEHOLDERS: AWARENESS, CONFLICT RESOLUTION, MITIGATION OR "WHAT DO WE DO?"

In addition to ongoing conversations regarding human/otter conflicts in some areas one day was spent discussing 1) Education and public awareness, 2) Interviews, social surveying, and public meetings, 3) Benefit sharing mechanisms or alternative economic activity.

This day was devoted to:

- Exploring methods to encourage stakeholders to be more committed to sharing their environment with otters as well as their conservation.
- Possible solutions to mitigating conflicts between fishermen and otters.
- Ways to help conservationists communicate with, and work with key stakeholders to build sustainable options; particularly methods appropriate for sub-Saharan Africa.

The day began with general global concepts, proceeded on to participants sharing their experiences and concluded with identifying key questions raised during the morning's presentations and discussions. The participants then divided into two groups to develop possible Actions for Otter Conservation.

Key Questions

- How to define priorities for effective public awareness?
- How to maintain engagement of stakeholders to otters' conservation?
- How to sustain awareness programs?
- What are some possible actions to be taken to address otter conservation in Africa?

Outcomes

1 - Priorities

- Work jointly with conservationists with compatible focus, e.g. wetlands, riverine, marine, species found in otter environments, etc.
- Develop messages from all points of view/interest/concern to include alternatives for stakeholders at odds with otters
- Identify problems in each area – traditional uses, fur or bush meat trade, economic uses/conflicts, other endangered species, depredation by other species, lack of knowledge, etc.
- Identify partner groups or neutral groups in the area and their issues, problems or potential benefits from otter conservation.
- Integrate political issues and partners and identify leaders in the community
- Find the best communication method for the situation (radio not TV, village meetings, etc.)

- Capitalize on previous awareness initiatives led by other groups, NGOs on the issue of habitat and ecosystem preservation or restoration. Sound resource use is good for ALL.

II - Engagement

- Identify issues and messages important to politicians (national, regional and local level).
- Identify and address the needs of each target group (students, teachers, business, fishermen, etc.) and create messages appropriate for their concerns and needs.
- Remember to share information in appropriate places and formats for target audience/community.
- Timing and format of engagement is important. Be aware of potential conflicts with other NGO messaging, aware of current issues in communities, politics in region, etc.
- Alternative economic activities which meet communities' needs should be developed and presented as a priority to the community. You are on their side as well as that of the otters and ecosystem.
- Value added or win – win solutions and strategies. An example presented was from Java and the use of living fences made from pineapple plants around fish ponds. The otters could not reach the ponds and the owner had the added benefit of pineapples to sell.

III - Sustainability

- Local ownership and involvement is key to sustaining any conservation effort
- Format is important! Be innovative - Fun is Ok!
- Sustainable reusable materials that are durable and cost effective. Resources are limited or non-existent in many Sub-Saharan areas.
- Use opportunities as they arise. Again, be creative and adaptable!
- Maintain all networks (those that support you, those that you support, and those that are important to your target community)
- Share experiences and learn lessons from others in the network
- Do things that are important to communities and compatible to biodiversity.
- Cultivate good will.
- Remember, information not shared or documented is information LOST.

In conclusion all concerned thought it was an excellent workshop with important progress made towards creating a viable beginning of an African Otter Network. There is a long road ahead but the 2015 African Otter Workshop is a start on developing range country partners, activists and researchers as well as collaborating on issue identification and resolution which will assist in preserving at least some refugia for Africa's otters. As a group the following list of actions was agreed upon.

ACTIONS FOR THE AFRICAN OTTER NETWORK

In conclusion the group agreed to the following actions; specific actions were assigned to individuals while others were pledged:

- Creation of an African Otter Network using social media, i.e. google groups or similar to foster communication. This group will be founded with workshop participants but is open to any professional or conservation activist interested in otters or their ecosystems. This has already been done.
- Creation of an Otter Awareness Facebook page open to the public where photos, information, experiences, questions, etc. can be posted and shared. This site can be used by African Otter Network members to post updates on their work to encourage public interest and dialogue, human interest stories associated with their work, etc. Again this has been done (<https://www.facebook.com/AfricanOtter1?fref=ts>). The African Otter Outreach Project (AoTOP), working since 2009, also maintains a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/African-Otter-Outreach-Project/181450325232204>) where information can be shared and the African Otter reporting form can be accessed. Data collected from these reporting forms will be monitored, evaluated, and shared with the professional community by AoTOP.
- Creation of an African Otter website maintained and monitored by IOSF. This website will initially be in English and French with a future option of providing Swahili translations being considered.
- Carry out a practice awareness survey – each participant to ask at least 5 individuals if they have heard of otters, what they have heard and record the age, sex and tribe of or where they live (or lived) if possible. This will be collated and published.
- Creation of Otter sighting or signs reporting forms designed for professionals which can be catalogued and documented for continental status reporting.
- Encourage all participants to share and publish their findings so this information becomes part of a permanent record.
- Develop education tools that can be translated into regional or local languages. For this two drafts of posters have been designed and will be finalized by the IOSF to send to each country to be translated in different languages and widely used.
- Several participants, who are more focused on ecosystems, committed to doing some simple community surveys to assess awareness of and attitudes towards otters.
- Wetland specialists have agreed to assist with questions, etc. when needed.
- All participants pledged to spread the word to other professionals working within ecosystems where otters may be found that we need information on sightings of otters, their tracks, or their scat.
- The group proposed targeting a 2nd African Otter Workshop be held in 2017 and located in another region of Africa to facilitate attendance from other nations.
- As funding is an ongoing issue the network members should work together to share information on sources that are not appropriate for themselves but may assist other members with their work.

- Several participants expressed the wish that surveys be conducted in their region or parks. These ideas should be pursued when possible and participants kept informed and asked to participate.
- All participants pledged to pay more attention to otters in their home regions or finding out if there are otters in their nation/region/park.

Deep gratitude and thanks are extended to the College of African Wildlife Management at Mweka. Mr. Edward Msyani and the entire staff worked hard to make the workshop successful and they succeeded in doing an excellent job. Accommodation, food, transportation and materials were all excellent and all participants are very grateful. We also would like to thank all home institutions for the participants for making it possible for them to come to the workshop. A special thank you goes to the Tanzanian Park Authority (TANAPA) and the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife in Tanzania for allowing so many of their staff to participate in the workshop.

Finally we again would like to thank the sponsor and donors who made this event possible. However, the biggest thank you goes to all the participants for making the workshop such a success. We are confident they will all continue to share awareness of Africa's otters and work to conserve the otters' future in sub-Saharan Africa.