

## REVIEW

### THE EURASIAN OTTER *Lutra lutra* IN AFGHANISTAN: A REVIEW OF THE SPARSE AVAILABLE INFORMATION

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**ABSTRACT:** The status of the Eurasian Otter in Afghanistan is particularly poorly documented, reflecting in part the effects of the country's turbulent history of recent decades on mammal survey. In the 1970's the species was reported in all major rivers and streambeds in Afghanistan between 400 and 2,900 m asl. Because of the poor security conditions that render most of the species's historical habitat inaccessible, surveys carried out by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) could only confirm since 2007 its presence in the Wakhan district of Badakhshan province, in the northeastern corner of the country. Surveys of Kabul fur market carried out by WCS in 2006 confirmed the continued trading of the species and a decline in market supply compared to survey results from the 1960's, possibly as a result of a decrease in population size. Since 2010, the Eurasian Otter is on the list of protected wildlife species in Afghanistan. Clarification of the species's current natural distribution, population trend and threats is necessary before appropriate conservation measures, if needed, can be proposed.

The Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra* has a wide range across the Palaearctic from Ireland to Asia's Pacific coast (congeneric populations in Japan are sometimes considered a separate species, Japanese Otter *L. nippon*) and across much of tropical Asia (e.g. Corbet and Hill, 1992). It remains widespread and locally common in much of its Palaearctic range, but the current status of the tropical Asian populations is much less well known (e.g. Conroy et al., 1998). Its status in Afghanistan is particularly poorly documented, reflecting in part the effects of the country's turbulent history of recent decades on mammal survey (e.g. Smallwood et al., 2011; Stevens et al., 2011). The Eurasian Otter is the only species of otter ever recorded from the country, and to find any other species of otter in the country would be a major extension of known range. Thus, all information about otters ('*sang abi*' in the Dari language) in Afghanistan is assumed here to relate to the Eurasian Otter.

In his benchmark review of the mammals of Afghanistan, Hassinger (1973) traced many records of the species from the country and considered that it lived below 2,500 m a.s.l. along perennial streams from a wide range of localities. He cited various statements indicating a high trade in pelts within the country.

Melisch and Rietschel (1996) published 22 distribution records from Afghanistan and showed that the species was once widely distributed. Nauroz (1974), cited in Melisch and Rietschel (1996), stated that otters occurred in almost all river systems of Afghanistan, except for the seasonally flooded Hari-Rud Valley, and ranged in altitude from 400 to 2,900 meters. Habibi (2003) reviewed information collected until the late 1970s and noted that the species is present in all major rivers and streambeds in Afghanistan between 500 and 2,000 m a.s.l. (probably misreading the value for upper altitude proposed by Hassinger 1973).

In summer 2007, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) confirmed the presence of otters in the Wakhan district of Badakhshan province (in the far

northeastern part of the country), in the Wakhan River near the villages of Sargez and Goz Khun (Habib, 2008). According to local information presented by Naumann and Niethammer (1973), in Melisch and Rietschel (1996), it also occurred in the early 1970s further eastward in the Wakhan corridor where it reached Baba Tangi at 3,000 m a.s.l. On 22 June 2013, one otter, possibly a transient individual visiting the area because of the high water level in this season, was observed in Wakhan in a tributary glacial stream of the Panj River (36°57'N, 72°34'E) at an altitude of 3,120 m, which constitutes the highest record for the species in Afghanistan (S. Ostrowski pers. obs.). In Wakhan the species seems to reside in a few localized populations, along approximately 45 km of the Panj and Wakhan rivers, approximately between 72°34'E and 72°55'E, but the lower reaches of the Panj river in Wakhan still need to be thoroughly examined for otter presence. Between 2006 and 2015 WCS has carried out numerous wildlife surveys, including along river courses and in wetlands in Badakhshan, Bamyán, Ghazni, Nuristan and Takhar provinces (Karlstetter, 2008; Ostrowski et al., 2008a,b; Shank, 2010; Stevens et al., 2011), with no positive results but in Badakhshan (i.e. Wakhan) (Habib, 2008). However, direct searches for otters were only attempted in Badakhshan and Takhar provinces.

Afghanistan population estimate and trends are unknown. Before the Soviet invasion in 1979, otters were hunted in Afghanistan and the skins were highly prized (Niethammer, 1967; Nauroz, 1974 cited in Melisch and Rietschel, 1996). Historically, the otter was a major staple in the Kabul fur markets. Niethammer (1967) reported easily finding up to 40 otter furs in Kabul's fur market with the biggest proportion reportedly coming from Maidan Valley, Wardak province. Rodenburg (1977) also found 94 complete skins in his survey of the Kabul fur markets in autumn 1976 and estimated that another 34 animal pelts had been used in a variety of manufactured products put up for sale, including hats, gloves and occasionally coats. Although otter pelts were relatively common in Kabul fur markets in the 1960s, Niethammer (1967), quoting shopkeepers, stated that they were becoming rare and more expensive. In support of such a trend, surveys of Kabul's fur markets carried out by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in 2006 confirmed the continued trading of the species, yet it was only the ninth most common fur species with only seven observations (Johnson and Wingard, 2010). The survey also confirmed that foreign buyers from Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey and the EU prized otter pelts. Roberts (1977) indicated that Eurasian Otter was rare in the Pakistan/Afghanistan border regions (river valleys of Swat, Chitral and Kaghan). It is possible that the decline in Kabul's market supply mirrors a decline in harvest as a result of a decrease in population size.

One of the main threats to wildlife in Afghanistan is hunting (Formoli, 1995; Kanderian et al., 2011). While the Eurasian Otter is still hunted for its pelts, WCS, during a continuous presence in the country since 2006, has collected no evidence that the species is hunted as food, sport, or as a pest species. In Wakhan the species does not compete with humans for fish resources: the latter are scarcely harvested and traditionally not valued as food by local people (S. Ostrowski pers. obs.). Habibi (2003) noted that hunting has reduced numbers and the species is now only seen in isolated areas, those where trapping and other forms of hunting are limited.

Since 2010, the Eurasian Otter is on the list of protected wildlife species in Afghanistan, and off-take from the wild, transportation, export or re-export are strictly forbidden without prior authorisation from the National Environmental Protection Agency. In spite of this formal protection, people continue to hunt otters and dealers to buy and sell their furs with relatively limited law enforcement, although there are no hard data available indicating the magnitude of this contravention. Afghanistan is also a party of CITES and CBD since 1985 and 2002, respectively.

Clarification of the species's current national distribution, population trend and threats is necessary before appropriate conservation measures, if needed, can confidently be proposed. However, given this otter species' wide global distribution and, in some areas, buoyant populations, and the various other mammal species of high global concern which inhabit Afghanistan, Eurasian Otter cannot be regarded as one the country's mammal species conservation priorities from a global perspective.

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## **RÉSUMÉ**

### **La Loutre Commune *Lutra Lutra* En Afghanistan: Résumé Des Rares Information Disponibles**

Le statut de la loutre commune en Afghanistan est très mal connu, du fait notamment de la difficulté à organiser des missions d'étude dans un pays en guerre depuis des décennies. On sait cependant que dans les années 1970 l'espèce était présente dans toutes les rivières et torrents majeurs d'Afghanistan entre 400 et 2900 m d'altitude et qu'elle était chassée pour sa fourrure. Les problèmes de sécurité récurrents rendant toujours la majeure partie de son aire historique de distribution inaccessible, les informations récentes sont malheureusement très parcellaires. La Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) a cependant pu montrer à partir de 2007 que l'espèce était toujours présente dans le district du Wakhan, dans la province nord-orientale du Badakhshan, et qu'en 2006 on trouvait encore des peaux de loutre sur le marché aux fourrures de Kaboul, bien qu'en moins grand nombre que ce qui était observé dans les années 1960, ce qui pourrait traduire une diminution de la population. Depuis 2010 la loutre commune est protégée en Afghanistan. Il reste nécessaire de clarifier sa répartition et sa situation démographique actuelles, ainsi que les menaces qui pèsent sur sa survie, avant de proposer, s'il y a lieu, des mesures conservatoires.

## **RESUMEN**

### **LA NUTRIA *Lutra lutra* EN AFGANISTÁN: UNA REVISIÓN DE LA ESCASA INFORMACIÓN DISPONIBLE**

La condición de la nutria en Afganistán está particularmente mal documentada, lo cual refleja los efectos de la turbulenta historia del país sobre los estudios de mamíferos en las últimas décadas. En los años 70, se registró la presencia de la especie en los principales ríos y corrientes de agua en Afganistán entre los 400 y 2.900 metros sobre el nivel del mar. Puesto que las malas condiciones de seguridad han imposibilitado el acceso a la mayor parte del hábitat histórico de la especie, los estudios llevados a cabo por la Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) a partir del año 2007 sólo pudieron confirmar su presencia en el distrito de Wakhan de la provincia de Badakhshan, en la esquina noreste del país. Las investigaciones sobre el mercado de pieles en Kabul llevadas a cabo por WCS en 2006 confirmaron el tráfico continuado de la especie y una disminución de la oferta de mercado con respecto a los resultados de los estudios realizados en la década de 1960, posiblemente a causa de una disminución en el tamaño de la población. Desde 2010, la nutria figura en la lista de especies silvestres protegidas en Afganistán. Será preciso aclarar la distribución actual, la tendencia poblacional y las amenazas a las que se enfrenta la especie antes de proponer medidas pertinentes de conservación, en caso de que sean necesarias.