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AKTION FISCHOTTERSCHUTZ E.V. (GERMAN CAMPAIGN FOR OTTER PROTECTION) ACTIVITIES 1991-92

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Abstract: Following reunification, the work of Aktion Fischotterschutz has intensified. In the east, due mainly to hunting reserves for politicians, otter populations and habitat is currently good. As the east reaps the benefit of reunification, and development begins, this is likely to rapidly change. We must act quickly to avoid the mistakes made in the past in the west. In West Germany, the focus is recovery of habitat, with a new project, Otter 2000, intended to reconnect isolated otter populations through the provision of habitat corridors. Reports on other projects are also presented.

THE SITUATION AFTER THE REUNIFICATION

The German reunification brought a wide intensification for the AKTION FISCHOTTERSCHUTZ work. This is because of the very different situation of the otter populations in East- and West-Germany. The distribution of otters in Germany shows a clear east to west decline. In the federal states of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Brandenburg and the eastern parts of Saxony the species is widespread. But in Schleswig-Holstein (incl. Hamburg), Lower-Saxony (incl. Bremen), Saxony-Anhalt, Berlin, Southeast Bavaria and possibly Thuringia only isolated populations remain. In all other federal states (Northrhine-Westphalia, Hesse, Rhineland Palatinate, Saarland, Baden-Württemberg) the otter seems to be extinct.

Even if we proceed on the assumption that the higher population density in East Germany is based on the historical situation of an at all times higher number of otters, and possibly based on better original and natural habitat structure (e.g. a higher density of waters network), we have to realize that the recent situation is closely connected with the economic powerlessness of the former GDR. The political circumstances (e.g. large scale protected hunting areas for politicians) and the economic impotence of the political leaders as well as of the political system itself prevented large areas from being developed. The legend which is created now, that the remaining natural habitats have been protected because of ecological understanding by the former GDR government is wrong. The proof can be seen in all those areas where economic or prestige aspects have got the chance to be realised (e.g. the chemical centre of Bitterfeld of the brown coal surface mining in the Lower Lusatia).

Now - after the reunification - economic potency is available. And in the same degree as the people of East-Germany will profit by the free enterprise economy, nature in this part of the country will be endangered. Western technology will enable the intensification of all kinds of human use of the countryside. First steps can be observed in waters maintenance, road building, agriculture or tourism.

This development will be so fast that the chances for nature conservation are low. All available energy, manpower and money are needed to avoid, in East Germany, those mistakes that were made in West Germany in the time of the so called economic miracle after World War II. And there is a chance. Today, our ecological knowledge is much better than forty years ago and today we have the background of a powerful environmental movement.

Top priority for the otter populations in the five new German federal states must be the protection of otter habitats.



Figure 1. Recent distribution of *Lutra lutra* in Germany

Therefore it is necessary

- to map the biotope structures,
- to develop management programmes,
- to raise money, and
- to intensify the lobby for the realization of the management programmes.

The problem is that this has to be done very quickly, but there are also many other conservation problems and the new administration structures in East Germany are only just starting to grow. Therefore the involvement of private nature conservation organisations - especially of those from West Germany which are well organised and have experience in fund-raising - is needed.

We should be aware that damage to otter habitats is unavoidable, but it is our task to reduce the loss of otter habitats to an absolute minimum. As curious as this sounds, this damage and these losses can offer a new chance for otter protection. The increase of knowledge about otter biology and of new research

techniques will give us the possibility to prove our theories about the reasons for the decline of the otter. From there we can develop new protection and restoration strategies. But that requires an immediate registration of the status quo of the habitats. Only then can we describe and analyse the changes.

In West Germany, the situation is really different. Here the protection of habitats has not top priority, but the restoration of habitats. Most areas needing protection are protected now. But there are not enough areas which need protection. In Lower Saxony for instance specialists proceed on the assumption that only 3% of the flowing waters in this large federal state are in such a natural condition that a protection is justified. This is not enough to give the otter population a realistic chance of survival.

Therefore the "Aktion Fischotterschutz" is working on a habitat connection program for Germany. It is called "Otter 2000" and is based on the idea of restoring a network of river systems which can connect the current isolated otter populations.

MAIN ACTIVITIES IN 1991

Cooperation

Because of the situation described above many small steps have been made towards a better cooperation and understanding between "otter people" in East- and West-Germany. More than a hundred enquiries have been addressed from East-German scientists, conservationists and authorities to the AKTION FISCHOTTERSCHUTZ. In many cases practical help could be given, especially in habitat conservation problems.

Research

At the research station in Hankensbüttel three main studies were done or started:

- a morphological study about the topography of the organs of *Lutra lutra* (will be published in 1992);
- an ethological study about the marking behaviour of *Lutra lutra* (will be published in 1992);
- an ethological study about the prey catching behaviour of *Lutra lutra* (will run until 1994).

Breeding

Again one litter of *Lutra lutra* with one (female) cub was born on August 28 1991. Two females (11 and 12 years old) died because of disease of the kidneys.

Habitat management

Several minor projects to protect or to restore habitats have been finished, continued or started in Lower Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt. Most of them are directed towards the restoration of isolated tributaries of rivers, the creation of protected areas on river banks, or the planting of trees on river banks, to produce cover for the otter.

River Ise Project

The revitalization of the river Ise network (more than 100 km long) makes good progress. More than 200 ha of property on both sides of the main river were bought and changed from intensive to extensive agriculture. Approx. 2 km of hedges were planted and more than 10 km will follow within the next two years. A team of 6 scientists and several students of external experts has done a lot of scientific studies within this project.

Survey

In the Northern part of Lower Saxony a survey using the "IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group Method" was started in autumn 1991. It will last one year and include 1000 sites.

Stop-grids

1000 stop grids for eel fyke nets and information booklets were distributed to fishermen all over Germany. The interest of the fishermen as well as of the authorities to participate in this project was very high.

Otter Centre

In 1991 ca 125 000 people visited the Hankensbüttel Otter Centre, that means that since its opening in 1988 more than 400 000 visitors have come to this nature conservation education centre. A new otter enclosure for the public - the third one - was opened in 1991: the "Otter Waterfall".

Education

A new nature conservation magazine was created and the first 3 issues published in 1991. FAUNA continues, the idea of which the education philosophy of the Otter Centre is based: each issue is dedicated to one "key-species" and introduces an animal species and one of its typical habitats.

Looking ahead

In 1992 a long term, telemetric study on *Lutra lutra* will start in cooperation with the Ministry of Environment of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. It will be focused on the connections between habitat structures and the otter's behaviour.

A cooperation study is planned with the University of Essex (Ch. Mason) to analyse contaminants (PCBs, DDE, dieldrin, lindane) in spraint samples from different German otter populations.

In April 1992 a workshop is planned about sense and nonsense of otter re-introductions. Experts from several European countries and possibly the USA will report their experiences, suggestions and criticism.

In February 1992 the Proceedings of the V. International Otter Colloquium will be mailed.