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### THE OTTER IN LITHUANIA

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**Abstract:** Official otter counts in Lithuania are not well-done, and underestimate the otter population. In fact, otters live in all 44 regions of Lithuania. Otter hunting is illegal in Lithuania. Conservation efforts concentrate the otters' habitat, establishing a network of reserves protecting the small rivers of the country.

It is necessary to present some facts about Lithuanian rivers and lakes before problems of otters will be discussed.

#### RIVERS AND LAKES

The territory of Lithuania is 65 200 km<sup>2</sup>. There are only two big rivers - Nemunas and Neris (their length is more than 500 km), 17 medium-length rivers (their length is 100 to 500 km) and more than 29 000 small rivers (their length is less than 100 km). The total length of Lithuanian rivers is 63 700 km. Small rivers make 94 % of the total length of the Lithuanian rivers. The total length of unregulated rivers of Lithuania is only about 17 000 km.

The average density of the rivers net is 1,2 km/km<sup>2</sup>. The naturalness of Lithuanian rivers (according to parts of unregulated river-beds) is shown in Fig.1.

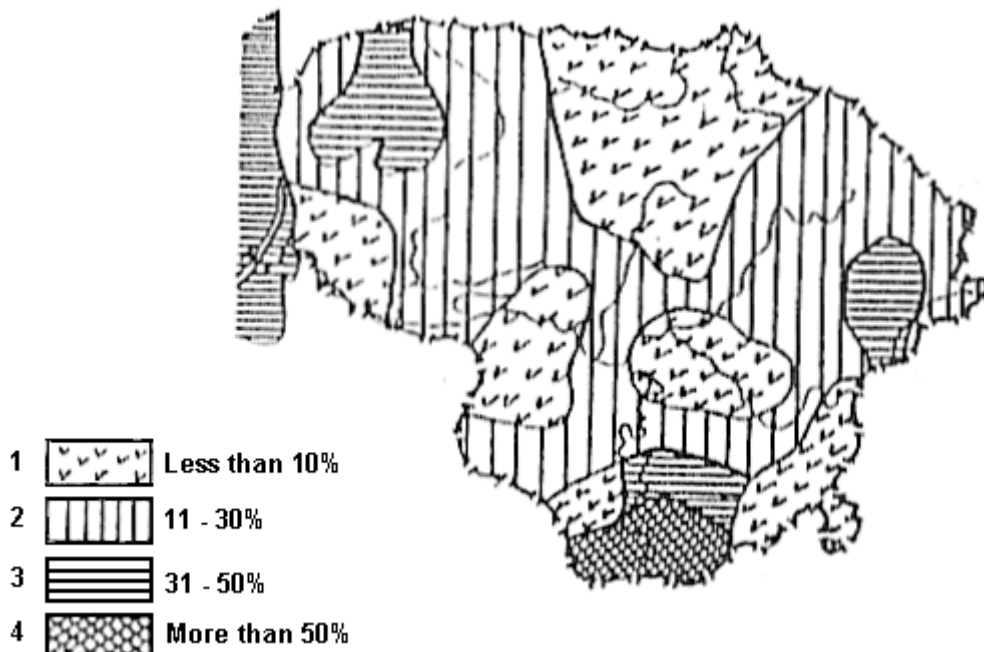


Figure 1. The naturalness of Lithuanian rivers according to the unregulated river-beds (from Kavaliauskas & Vaitkevičius, 1990)

There are about 6000 lakes in Lithuania. 2850 of them are bigger than 0,5 ha, but only 17 are bigger than 10 km<sup>2</sup>. The majority of lakes are concentrated in 5 regions of Lithuania (there are 44 regions). These regions are: Ignalina, Lazdijai, Molėtai, Trakai and Zarasai. The biggest number of lakes in these regions are connected with each other.

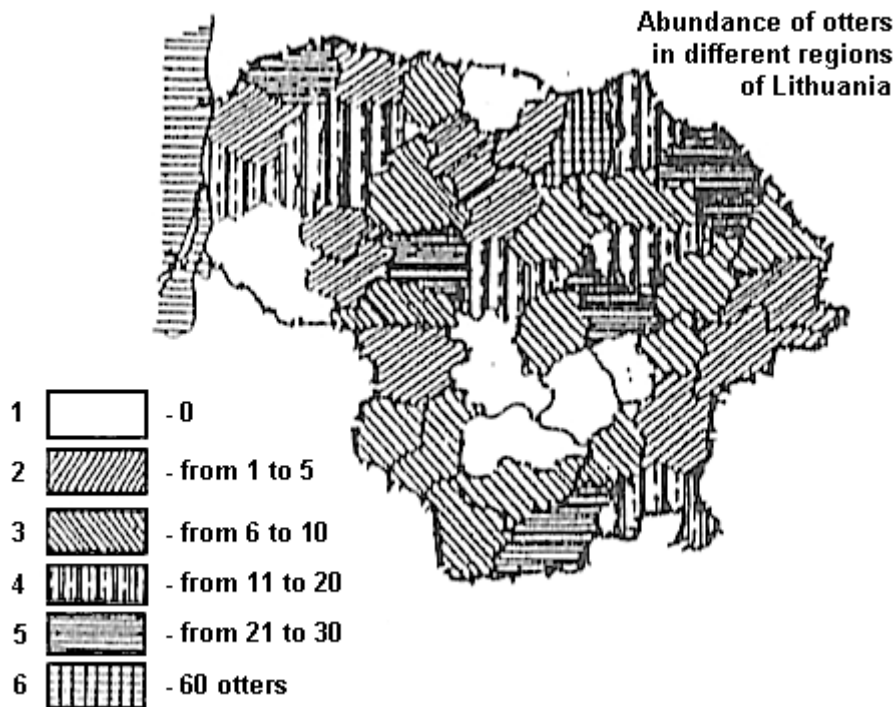
Some conclusions can be drawn from statements which are mentioned above:

1. Small water bodies are characteristic of Lithuania.
2. Hydrographical net is rather dense in Lithuania.

### OTTER STATUS IN LITHUANIA

It must be stated that the true status of the European otter is still unknown in Lithuania. It is because of the small number of scientific investigations on otters done in Lithuania and the lack of reliable data. The estimate of Lithuanian game fauna (it includes otters) is done in Lithuania yearly but the data of otter numbers are very unreliable and fully incorrect sometimes.

The map of otter distribution and density in Lithuania (Fig. 2.) is based on these questionable otter data, but when there are no other more reliable data it must be published.



**Figure 2.** Abundance of otters in Lithuania in 1990 according to the EPD data. The total number of otters 423 specimens (adapted from Buranauskas & Mickus, 1990)

According to the official otter data there were 420 otters in 1990 and only 340 in 1991 in Lithuania. Otter presence is proved only in 35 regions of 44 in Lithuania in 1991.

It must be asserted that these data are considerably diminished. Investigations were done in 1991 and their results allow us to maintain that otters live in all 44 regions of Lithuania. This fact means that the data from at least 9 regions where the presence of otter was not proved are incorrect.

There are two reasons why otter estimate data are very unreliable:

1. People who carry out otter counts have no material interest to do this work precisely (this work is not paid for) and as a rule they have no interest or experience.
2. There are still no scientific methods on how to estimate otter numbers in Lithuania.

Such a vague situation with otter status forced the Lithuanian Environmental Protection Department to assign means to create survey methods and to include the otter into Lithuanian Red Data Book as an insufficiently investigated species.

### **OTTER CONSERVATION**

Otter conservation measures may be divided into two groups: direct conservation measures and indirect conservation measures.

Hunting of otters has been forbidden in Lithuania since 1975. The fine of 2000 roubles is levied for poaching, and is 1,5 times bigger if poaching takes place in a reserve or in any other area of similar status; or if a poacher uses a snare.

Indirect conservation is conservation of habitats suitable for otters.

It is well known that otters prefer to dwell in unregulated rivers with dense riparian vegetation, i.e. in habitats where the natural environment is still intact. Such habitats are of high value not only in case of otter presence there but for many other reasons, too. Realising the value of such habitats the group of geographers led by Dr Povilas Kavaliauskas created a plan to conserve small rivers in Lithuania. The first 12 small rivers reserves were set up in 1974. Now there are 33 such reserves in different parts of Lithuania. The work to set up the net of hydrological and hydrographical reserves is going on in Lithuania and another 36 reserves would be set up in the near future. When this work is finished it will be possible to state that almost every valuable small river is under protection in Lithuania.

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