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GIANT OTTERS AND ECOTOURISM IN PERU

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Abstract: Giant otters are the most endangered otters in the world, threatened by rainforest destruction, over fishing, the contamination of the water systems with mercury in areas of gold miners, illegal hunting and, possible infections with diseases of domestic animals. Numbers are so low that every otter is valuable. A new and increasing threat is tourism. Tourists find these animals very memorable and attractive, and guides lead their clients to find them. This disturbs otters, especially in places where tourist visits are irregular, and this can lead to them abandoning an area completely. We presented recommendations to mitigate this at the International Theriological Congress in Australia, 1993: the need for education of tourist guides; the prohibition of tourist groups accompanied by unlicensed guides; coordination among tourist agencies to stagger visits; provision of better information to tourists on conduct in the area and their likely impact on the environment; the provision of alternative attractions to relieve pressure on the lakes; limiting the number of lakes that may be visited by tourists and leaving the others undisturbed; and suggestions to improve administration and regulations.

GIANT OTTERS - AN ATTRACTION TO TOURISTS

The giant otters (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) are one of the largest carnivores in the tropical rainforest of South America. Of the 13 species existing worldwide they are the most endangered otters (IUCN Otter Specialist Group 1989). They are in Appendix 1 of CITES, the strongest protection category. An intensive hunting period from 1940 to 1970 for the international fur trade brought them close to extinction. Giant otters are protected everywhere nowadays, but up to now the populations have not recovered. There are now new endangering factors. First, the destruction of the tropical rainforests. In addition to that there are over fishing, the contamination of the water systems with mercury in areas of gold miners, illegal hunting, possible infections with diseases of domestic animals, and also tourism. Today only relict populations remain in the former huge distribution area, the tropical lowland from Venezuela to the north of Argentina.

One of the largest remaining populations appeared to be present in southeastern Peru. But, even in this area the number of animals is alarmingly low: in Manu National park we counted about 45 otters, in three surveys. We estimate the total number of giant otters at the river Manu with its oxbow lakes to be about 65 animals. The situation in the Manu National park seems to be natural. Nearly all suitable habitat is occupied by otters, seasonally or all year. In the Tambopata area we counted about 20 animals in two surveys. We estimate the whole population to be about 25 giant otters in this region. A few otter groups exist in the surroundings of these protected areas. These numbers show the importance of every single otter.

Giant otters are especially attractive animals to nature tourism in tropical rainforest. They are active by day, they live in groups, they are noisy and live in the oxbow lakes of the rivers, the only "open" areas in the tropical rainforest. Therefore they are easy to find and observe, in contrast to most other animals of the rainforest. The same characteristics that made giant otters easy prey to pelt hunters, makes them attractive to nature tourism nowadays. Social living, big mammals are especially interesting to observers. Giant otters are always in action, their common hunting and the eating of fishes, grooming, and their plentiful play are spectacular.

Giant otters approach canoes or boats on a lake until only a few metres away. They periscope and sound warning snorts. After some minutes they retreat. This behaviour often is wrongly interpreted as

tameness: but is a threat and should drive intruders from the area. If the intruder, for example a canoe with tourists, does not retreat, then the otters retreat and sometimes even leave the area altogether. During our field period we accompanied several hundreds of tourists. Most of the tourists did not know giant otters, and knew nothing about the threats to this species. When we asked the tourists at the end of their trip about the "highlight" of their animal observations, most of them told us the giant otters. The local tourist agencies have recognised the importance of giant otters to tourism, and promote them as a major tourist attraction.

NATURE TOURISM - A THREAT TO GIANT OTTERS

In Manu National park three of the 16 oxbow lakes are open to tourism. Nearly half of the giant otter population in Manu National park, with an area of 18 000 km², is consequently under influence of tourism. Today Manu National park is visited by about 500 tourists yearly, and the Tambopata area is visited by a few thousands. In spite of these low numbers there are already many problems. With the view of the expected high increase of tourism in tropical rainforests, an increase of the existing problems is also expected.

Giant otters are very sensitive to disturbance, and sometimes leave their area after one single contact; e.g. when tourists approach very close to take photos, or otter groups with bad experiences have greater flight distances. Although our investigations show that giant otters can get used to humans, this didn't happen as the visits by the tourists are not regular. Especially damaging is disturbance when the otters have cubs, normally at the beginning of the dry season, when the tourism season starts. Giant otters with cubs are particularly shy, and disturbances can easily cause the loss of the litter. Tourist groups sometimes inadvertently approach otter dens, where the cubs stay the first two months. But there are also tourist guides, who search for the dens to show the otters to the tourists. Furthermore, tourist hiking trails are along the shores of the lakes, and tourist activity disturbs otters at dens and resting places.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations have been made for solving the problems outlined above. The recommendations were given in detail in a presentation at the International Theriological Congress in Australia, 1993. In essence the recommendations cover the need for education of tourist guides; the prohibition of tourist groups accompanied by unlicensed guides; coordination among tourist agencies to stagger visits; provision of better information to tourists on conduct in the area and their likely impact on the environment; the provision of alternative attractions to relieve pressure on the lakes; limiting the number of lakes that may be visited by tourists and leaving the others undisturbed; and suggestions to improve administration and regulations.