

THE STATUS OF OTTERS IN ASIA

Pat Foster-Turley

1. Introduction

Five otter species are found throughout Asia. One, the Sea Otter, (*Enhydra lutris*) occurs coastally on both the eastern and western sides of the Pacific Ocean. It's biology and status in both the USSR and the United States have been well-studied and is detailed in Dr. Jim Estes' paper in these Proceedings.

Asian small-clawed Otter (*Aonyx cinerea*)

The Asian small-clawed Otter is the smallest of the world's otters, rarely weighing more than 5 kilograms. A gregarious species, it is often seen in large groups (FURUYU 1977) which captive studies suggest may be composed of an alpha breeding pair and their offspring from successive litters (FOSTER-TURLEY and ENGFER 1988). Asian small-clawed Otters have unu-

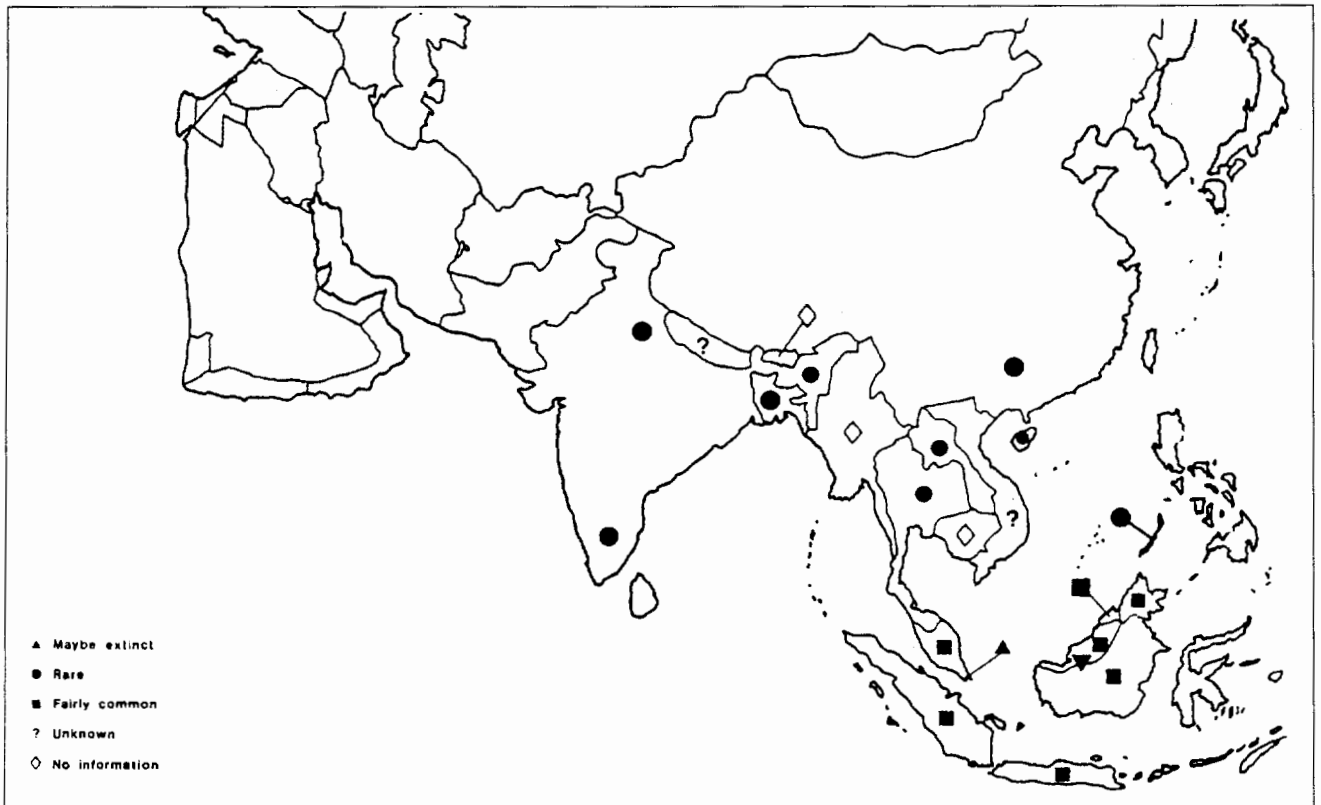


Figure 1: Distribution of Asian Small-clawed Otter (*Aonyx cinerea*) [map taken from the IUCN Otter Action Plan].

The other four otter species are less well-known. These include the Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*), the Smooth Otter (*Lutra perspicillata*), the Asian Small-clawed Otter (*Aonyx cinerea*) and the Hairy-nosed Otter (*Lutra sumatrana*). Both the Asian Small-clawed Otter and the Smooth Otter have been the subject of recent captive studies (FOSTER-TURLEY and ENGFER 1988; DESAI in press) but apart from the information present in general field guides and references (i.e. MEDWAY 1978; LEKAGUL and MCNEELY 1977; ROBERTS 1977; NOWAK and PARADISO 1983) little is known about the natural behavior and ecology of these species in the wild. This information is summarized below:

sual hand-like front paws with increased tactile sensitivity (RADINSKY 1968) and reduced webbing, which they use to forage for their diet of crustaceans, mollusks and small fish (FOSTER-TURLEY et al. 1990). Asian Small-clawed Otters are found from Palawan (Philippines) northward Indonesia, Southeast Asia and westward through southern China, Nepal, Bangladesh and southern India.

Smooth Otter (*Lutra perspicillata*)

Smooth Otters are so-named for their shorter, smoother coats, as compared to the similar-sized sympatric *Lutra* species. From captive studies (DESAI in press) this

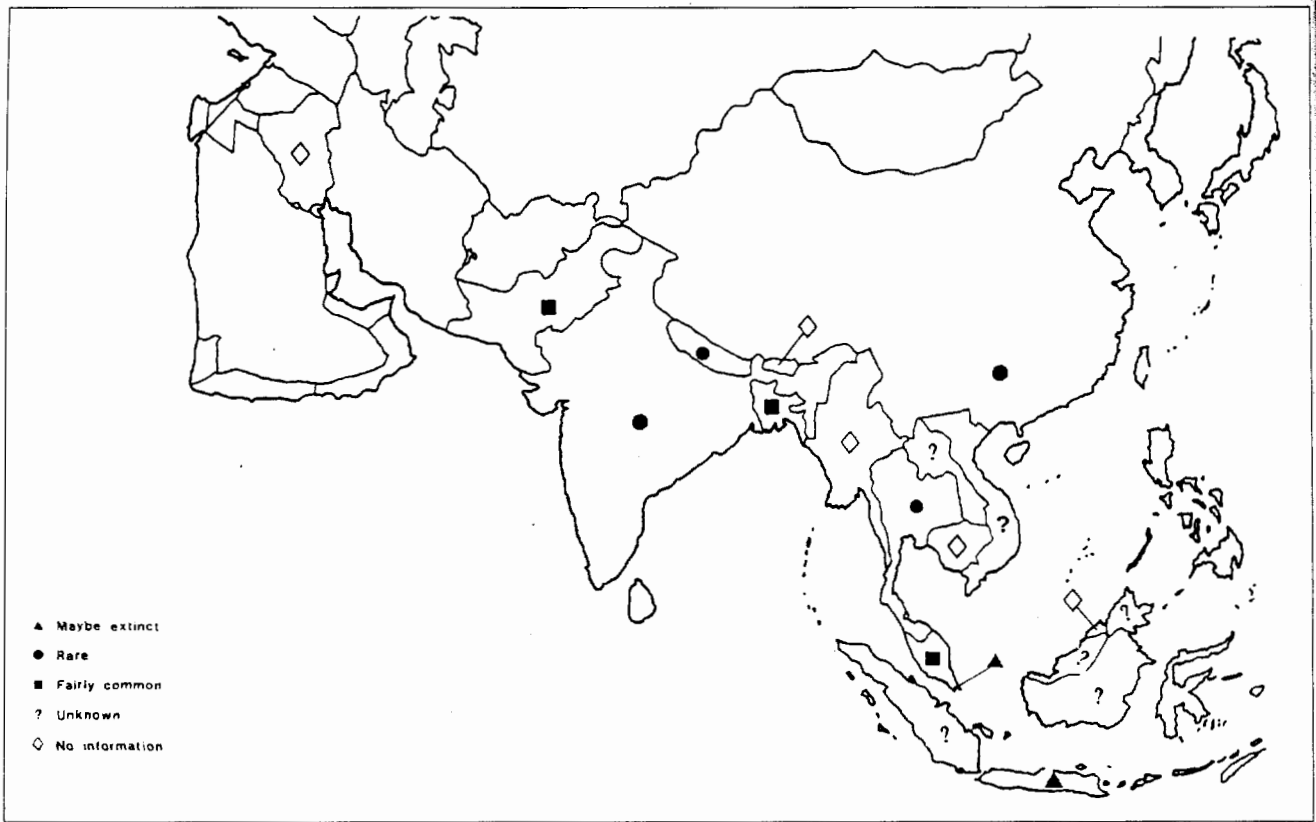


Figure 2: Distribution of the Smooth Otter (*Lutra perspicillata*) [map taken from the IUCN Otter Action Plan].

otter appears to be monogamous, and is usually seen year round in small family groups. Although little is known about the ecology of this species it is known to occur in a variety of Asian habitats from mangroves, to freshwater wetlands and large forested rivers. The Smooth Otter is distributed throughout southern Asia from Indonesia through Southeast Asia and westward from southern China to India, with an isolated population in Iran. In most of its range it is sympatric with the Asian Small-clawed Otter and sometimes the other *Lutra* species. Of all the Asian otters, this one seems the most common, where it occurs.

Hairy-nosed Otter (*Lutra sumatrana*)

The Hairy-nosed Otter is the least known of the Asian otters, and is also the most difficult to identify in the field. It gets its name from the presence of hair on its rhinarium; in most other respects it is similar to *Lutra lutra*. The Hairy-nosed Otter is the rarest otter in Asia, most likely verging on extinction in the northern parts of its range, and of uncertain status elsewhere. This otter was once found from southern Thailand through Malaysia and Indonesia, although its current distribution is unknown.

2. Status

Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*)

The Eurasian Otter has been well-studied in Europe (MACDONALD and MASON 1986; CHANIN 1985) but its ecology in Asia remains unknown. *Lutra lutra* are primarily fish-eaters, although they also eat crustaceans, mollusks and occasional vertebrate prey. In Europe these otters tend to be fairly solitary when found in freshwater rivers and marshes, but are more gregarious in coastal environments where food is more plentiful. In Asia, they are very elusive and rare. They are especially susceptible to human-induced disturbances and thus occur mostly in higher altitude streams and other remote areas. *Lutra lutra* is widely distributed throughout all of Eurasia from Western Europe to the Northern Pacific coast and south through Central and Southeast Asia.

In Asia, although much attention has been focused on the conservation of "charismatic megavertebrates" like tigers, elephants and rhinos, little attention has been paid to smaller vertebrates like otters. Also, apart from the Sea Otter, the other species of Asian otters are difficult to tell apart in the field, making status determinations extremely difficult. Thus, virtually nothing was known about the status of otters in Asia prior to the First International Asian Otter Symposium held in Bangalore, India, in October, 1988. This conference was attended by delegates from many Asian countries, most Indian states, and by otter experts from around the world.

Based on papers presented during this meeting (ESTES and SANTIAPILLAI in press) certain generalities about the status of Asian otters are evident. Overall, through-

sympatric with any other otter species. Although these otters are legally protected, they are disappearing due to habitat destruction and degradation.

Sri Lanka

The island of Sri Lanka has only one species of otter, *L. lutra* and the results of a first survey is published in this volume by Dr. Padma Kumari de Silva. Like elsewhere in Asia, habitat destruction is resulting in a perceived decline in the distribution and numbers of otters in Sri Lanka.

Thailand

Two species of otters, *L. perspicillata* and *A. cinerea* are found in protected areas in the south, and along the Burmese border, but in very reduced numbers. There have been no recent confirmed sightings of the other two otter species recorded from Thailand, *L. lutra* and *L. sumatrana*. No otters of any species appear to remain outside of protected areas.

Vietnam

Although *L. lutra*, *L. perspicillata* and *A. cinerea* should occur in Vietnam, the difficulties in identifying them in the field has led to confusion about the relative status of these species. Initial surveys are beginning in Vietnam to assess the status of these otters.

3. Conservation Priorities

Despite the general pessimistic outlook for otters throughout Asia, there is now an awakening conservation movement and biologists throughout the region are focusing on the following conservation priorities:

1. Studies on basic biology and ecology of Asian otter species:

We still need to know much more about the biology and ecology of the Asian otter species. Otter populations still appear healthy in many protected areas throughout the region and in some countries, like Malaysia, otters seem to coexist peacefully with people even outside protected areas. By studying the otter situation in such positive circumstances, we can hope to learn more about the requirements of the Asian otter species, in order to provide better opportunities for them elsewhere.

2. Surveys on all otter species in all countries:

We need to know the present status of all Asian otter species throughout their range. Training sessions need to be undertaken in all Asian countries, and the resulting trained field workers should be encouraged to conduct surveys of otters in their regions.

3. Public education programs:

The people living in otter habitats throughout Asia need to be educated about the value of clean wetland habi-

tats. Where possible, alternative forms of agriculture and fishing practices need to be developed and taught to insure the protection of wetlands and wetland resources throughout Asia.

All of the above can be accomplished for the benefit of otters and the wetlands they inhabit throughout Asia. What is needed is an infusion of Western dollars, the collaborative help of other otter researchers from around the world, and the encouragement of Asian biologists and conservationists in these efforts. By working together, we can all help insure the continued survival of the Asian otters and their world.

4. References

- CHANIN, P. (1985): The Natural History of Otters, Facts on File, New York
- DESAI, J.H. (in press): Breeding of the Indian smooth otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) in captivity – some important regulatory factors. – in ESTES, J.; SANTIAPILLAI, C.: Proc. Int. Asian Otter Symp.
- ESTES, J.; C. SANTIAPILLAI, (in press): Proceedings of the International Asian Otter Symposium
- FOSTER-TURLEY, P.; ENGFER, S. (1988): The Species Survival Plan for the Asian small-clawed otter (*Aonyx cinerea*) Int. Zoo Ybk. 27: 79-84
- FOSTER-TURLEY, P., MACDONALD S.; MASON C. (1990): IUCN Otter Action Plan, IUCN, Gland, Switzerland, 126 pp.
- FURUYU, Y., (1977), Otters in Padas Bay, Sabah, Malaysia – J. Mammal. Soc. Jpn. 7: 39-43
- LEKAGUL, B.; MCNEELY, (1977): Mammals of Thailand, Association for the Conservation of Wildlife, Bangkok
- MASON, C.F.; MACDONALD S., (1986): Otters: ecology and conservation, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- MEDWAY, L., (1978): The wild mammals of Malaya (Peninsular Malaysia) and Singapore. – 2nd edn., Oxford University Press, Oxford
- NOWAK, R.M.; PARADISO, J. L., (1983): Walker's mammals of the world 2. – The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London
- RADINSKY, L.B., (1968): Evolution of somatic sensory specialisation in otter brains. – J. Comp. Neurology 134, 495-506
- ROBERTS, T.J., (1977): The mammals of Pakistan. – Ernest Benn Ltd., Condent, Tonbridge

Pat Foster-Turley
Marine World Foundation
Marine World Parkway
Vallejo
California 94589
USA

from:

REUTHER, C.; RÖCHERT, R. (eds.): Proceedings of the V. International Otter Colloquium. – Habitat 6, Hankensbüttel, 1991