

Further observations on the Oriental short-clawed otter

Amblonyx cinerea

at Aberdeen Zoo

GEORGE LESLIE

Manager, Aberdeen Zoological Garden, Aberdeen, Scotland

On 7 December 1966 a five-year-old male Oriental short-clawed otter *Amblonyx cinerea*, called 'Koko' was donated to Aberdeen Zoo. In March 1967, he was joined by a female, 'Ovaltine'. Both animals were imprinted on human beings, and it was doubtful if they would be compatible with one another. However, mating took place as soon as they were introduced and, in July 1967, 'Ovaltine' gave birth to a cub, which did not survive infancy. In February 1968, a second cub was born, and in October of the same year a third – neither of which survived. I was beginning to give up hope of ever having a complete otter family on my hands when, in March 1969 'Ovaltine' gave birth to two more cubs.

On previous occasions she had proved a very negligent mother. After the birth of her first young, the only interest she had taken in it was when a group of visitors was around the enclosure. Then she would pick up the cub by the scruff of the neck and take it up to the edge of the enclosure, where she would display it to the visitors. Father 'Koko' would immediately retrieve his young and carry it back to the security of the nesting box – and, indeed, he proved the better of the parents. The second cub survived only 15 minutes, while 'Ovaltine' refused to suckle the third.

When the two cubs were born in March 1969, we decided to attach screens right round the enclosure, and to leave the animals severely alone. Apart from cleaning out the soiled straw, and putting in food, no one went near the otters for three months. By that time, it was noted that the youngsters were not only alive, but thriving. This time 'Ovaltine' had accepted her offspring – and by some inexplicable change of character that had taken place behind the closed screens – had turned into a 'model mother'.

Hitherto, the otters had been kept in indoor quarters at a temperature of 18°C (65°F). I then

decided to move them out of doors, into a large grassy enclosure measuring 11 × 9 m (36 × 30 ft), complete with a pool measuring 6 × 2 m (20 × 6 ft) and sleeping quarters in the form of an ark 2 × 1 × 1.25 m (6 × 3 × 4 ft). The ark was entered by a 1.5 × 0.3 m square (5 ft long × 1 ft square) L-shaped tunnel, while the interior was insulated with five bales of hay.

I did not know how these animals from Malaya would thrive in a Scottish climate – especially during the winter – but they took to the outdoors like hardy natives. And there was a visible improvement in their appearance through being in the open air all the time.

The long grass and the trees in the enclosure gave them plenty of opportunity for hide-and-seek, one of the many games they started to play as a family group. They explored every nook and cranny of their new surroundings with the notable exception of the pool. Both parents had always shown a dislike of water – which is strange because, in their natural environment, these otters are as aquatic as their European counterparts.

However, one day, when all four were sitting with their backs to me, facing the pool, I leant over the fence and with a broom handle tipped them all gently into the water. The shock treatment had results. The pool became their favourite play place; and their most frequent game became that of sliding down the embankment one after another into the pool, then through the water, out the other side and back down the 'chute' once more.

Although all four otters were friendly to human beings, we felt they were no longer imprinted, and had been weaned back gradually to something more akin to their natural state.

On 20 April 1970, 'Ovaltine' gave birth to three more cubs. As on previous occasions, she had given little sign of being pregnant, and so I was surprised when a lady visitor to the zoo came

up to me that morning to say that there were three new-born cubs. When I reached the enclosure I discovered, to my dismay, that 'Ovaltine' had reverted to her former unmaternal behaviour. Instead of leaving the cubs in the nesting box she had been dragging them out, one by one, to display to the public, despite 'Koko's' repeated attempts to keep them sheltered. I immediately got hold of the cubs, which were by now very cold, and carrying them under my

shirt for warmth took them back to the old indoor otter enclosure, where they were placed under an infra-red lamp. Their feeble squeaks gave me hope that they might survive. 'Koko' and 'Ovaltine' were put in beside them and screens were put up. But next morning all three cubs were found dead, presumably from the ordeal of being dragged out by their mother into the cold immediately after birth.