



14 Otter species action plan

14.1 Introduction

As a 'top predator' the Otter *Lutra lutra* is naturally scarce and also highly sensitive to the health of the whole ecosystem that supports it. As such, the Otter is an important indicator species in riparian habitats. As recently as the 1950s it was widespread. However, a significant decline in numbers took place in the 1960s and 1970s, which was attributed to the use of persistent organochlorine pesticides, especially Dieldrin and Aldrin. While other factors are likely to have been involved, such as habitat loss, the detailed reasons for decline are not fully understood.

The Otter has high public appeal. Otter-related events generally attract much attention. The value of such an animal in raising awareness generally about nature conservation, and the water environment in particular, is considerable.

14.2 Current status

National surveys showed an actual or effective extinction over most of the Midlands and south-eastern counties as numbers reached an all time low in the 1980s. Otters became extinct in Hertfordshire in the late 1970s. Viable populations remained in Scotland, Wales and south-west England. This decline also occurred on the continent and the UK populations are one of the best left in Europe.

Recently there has been an encouraging expansion in range and (probably) numbers, notably from the south-west. This spread has taken place despite increasing numbers of Mink, indicating that the establishment of wild Mink populations and consequent food competition was probably not a cause of Otter decline, as is often suggested. However, expansion has been mainly from the regions least affected by decline, other areas such as Yorkshire and Northumberland have not shown the same trends.

The re-introduction of Otters to former haunts has also taken place in recent years, notably in East Anglia. In Hertfordshire six Otters were re-introduced to two sites in 1991/92 by the Otter Trust. Their subsequent movements were monitored by the Wildlife Trust and the Herts Mammal Group. Currently it is known that these animals have bred at least once, at Rye Meads in 1995, and that Otters are still present along the valleys of the Stort and lower Lee. However, their movements appear to be restricted to a small area, probably as a result of poor quality river habitat and the numbers of Otters present is unknown.

The Otter is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (Schedule 5) and is listed on Annexes 2a and 4a of the EC Habitats Directive, Appendix 2 of the Bern Convention and Appendix 1 of CITES.

14.3 Current factors causing loss or decline

14.3.1 Water quality

Pollution of water courses, especially by polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) is thought to be a major issue. PCBs incorporate a wide range of substances which are likely to act as pollutants, and the complex way they interact in the aquatic environment, and with Otters, is still poorly understood. Low flows can concentrate pollution levels adding to the problem and potentially reducing food availability.

14.3.2 Insufficient food

Insufficient prey (low fish stocks) associated with poor water quality and poor river habitat quality may be relevant in some areas.

14.3.3 Loss of habitat

Impoverished bankside features needed for breeding and resting, due to the continuing loss or degradation of wetland habitats, is likely to be a contributory factor.

14.3.4 Accidental death

Incidental mortality, primarily by road deaths forms a significant issue locally. Drowning in fish/eel traps, may also be an issue in some areas, but is not an important factor locally.

14.4 Current action

The JNCC has prepared a 'Framework for Otter Conservation in the UK 1995-2000'.

National Surveys have been conducted at 5-7 year intervals and may be repeated in the future. Local surveys by Wildlife Trusts and others have established the present distribution and the potential for future spread.

Practical conservation management (e.g. river enhancement schemes, creation of logpiles and artificial holts) is in progress. Corporate responsibility for Otter Conservation and management has been accepted and acted upon by the Environment Agency – formerly the National Rivers Authority (NRA). In Hertfordshire, the NRA and BT supported an Otter Habitat Project from 1991-3 which surveyed river catchments in the county and drew up a priority list of river enhancement schemes.

Releases of captive bred Otters have successfully reinforced fragmented wild populations in East Anglia and Yorkshire, although success elsewhere is unproven and the whole issue of releasing Otters has become controversial. Research on the implications of heavy metal and PCB contamination in fish and the wider environment is in progress.

14.5 Otter action plan objectives

To maintain the existing released Otters in order to achieve a viable population in Hertfordshire within 10 years.

To achieve a regular presence of Otters throughout Hertfordshire river catchments by 2010.

To enhance river habitat quality through a programme of river enhancement schemes with at least three schemes completed annually for the next 10 years (to overlap with Water Vole and White-clawed Crayfish Action Plans, Chapters 11 and 23).

14.6 Proposed action**14.6.1 Policy and legislation**

OT1. Ensure all wetland Wildlife Sites regularly used by Otters are recognised and protected through Local Plans and LEAPs, at the next review. At the same time, endeavour to strengthen river corridor policies where appropriate.

Action: LA's, EA, HBRC, HMWT.

14.6.2 Site safeguard and management

OT2. Seek to include action for Otters in all LEAPs covering Hertfordshire by the next review. This will include specific river enhancement projects at a target level of three per year throughout the county, one of which should include specific features for Otters.

Action: EA.

OT3. All riparian nature reserves and country parks to consider the requirements of Otters within the management plan by 2000 and subsequently to implement actions if appropriate.

Action: HMWT, RSPB, LA's, LVRPA.

OT4. A list of key river corridor sites forming a refuge network for Otters in Hertfordshire should be drawn up by 1998 (from Otter Habitat Project Report). Secure appropriate management of these sites over 10 years.

Action: HMWT, HMG, EA, LA's.

14.6.3 Species management and protection

OT5. The merits of a further release of captive bred Otters (to agreed national framework) to boost the survival chances of existing animals, should be considered and if appropriate, initiated. Discussion paper by 1998.

Action: HMWT, EA, HMG.

OT6. Attempt to reduce accidental deaths by identifying key sites for the provision of road underpasses or similar and fencing. Present list to the Environment Agency and HCC by 1999. Seek to undertake remedial work on 50% of sites within five years.

Action: HMWT, HMG, EA.

14.6.4 Advisory

OT7. All conservation advisers operating within the county to be aware of the requirements of Otters and the aims of this plan, and to promote this when in contact with riparian landowners. Arrange a meeting/training seminar by 1999 for conservation advisers.

Action: HMWT, CMS, FWAG, GCT, FRCA.

14.6.5 Research and monitoring

OT8. Review existing monitoring arrangements during 1998, with a view to covering the movements of the released Otters and likely entry points to the county of 'wild' Otters as a minimum. Ensure local monitoring is structured to allow inclusion in national dataset.

Action: HMWT, HMG, HBRC.

OT9. Contribute to national Otter surveys, as appropriate.

Action: HMG, HMWT, HBRC.

OT10. Review and update by 1999 the list of enhancement schemes prepared as part of the Otter Habitat Project to ensure degraded stretches of river are highlighted (particularly regarding rivers of the Ouse catchment as they were excluded from the OHP).

Action: EA, HMWT.

OT11. Monitor effectiveness of implemented enhancement schemes, by 2000.

Action: EA.

OT12. Collate information on prey productivity, biomass and pollutant levels. Report as appropriate.

Action: EA.

OT13. Continue studies on the diet of the released Otters in the county.

Action: UH, EA.

14.6.5 *Communication and publicity*

OT14. Organise at least one meeting annually with all interested local parties to discuss progress and agree future actions.

Action: HMWT, HMG, EA.

OT15. Progress reports on the released Otters to be sent at least once every two years to all interested parties.

Action: HMWT, EA, HMG.

OT16. Use this popular species to publicise the importance of water quality and riparian habitats to biodiversity, through events, press releases and articles. At least one event annually.

Action: HMWT, EA, EN.