

Himalayan Otter Network



© Photo: Kencho Gyeltshen, Smooth-coated Otters in Bhutan

*Otters in the Himalayas*  
*Newsletter from the Himalayan Otter Network*  
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News from the Himalayan Otter Network is a new platform for sharing recent and current research and conservation projects in the Himalayan region. This newsletter is targeted towards the students, researchers and community to share updates on the research and conservation projects. Please email me if you would like to be removed from this newsletter, or if you would like to suggest names of others who would be interested.

**Ongoing Otter Research Work in the Himalayas**

## **Darwin Initiative Funds a Three-Year Project in Nepal**

### **Sanjan Thapa**

Strengthening communities' livelihood and stewardship to conserve otters

in the Karnali Watershed of Nepal

Otters need not only healthy wetland systems to thrive but also the protection and appreciation of indigenous river-dependent communities. A new three-year collaborative project has been funded by the UK government through the Darwin Initiative to engage local river communities, together with conservation organizations and government authorities, in the management of river resources in southwestern Nepal. Collaborative partners include WWF UK, WWF Nepal, the Small Mammals Research and Conservation Foundation, and local partners Freed Kamaiya Women Development Forum (FKWDF), Dolphin Conservation Center (DCC), and Sonaha Bikash Samaj.

The Lower Karnali Watershed in Nepal's Terai Arc Landscape is the focus landscape for the project, where diverse habitats support a population of smooth-coated otters. Heavy use of the river for fishing and aggregate extraction, have disturbed otter habitat and depleted fish populations and also threatened traditional livelihoods of Tharu and Sonaha communities.

The project aims to promote more sustainable fishing practices and protect fish spawning sites, thereby increasing fish populations, benefiting both otters and local community livelihoods. More than 200 marginalised river-dependent households will be engaged in the project. This community-based conservation effort is urgently needed for the conservation of smooth-coated otters, and the entire aquatic ecosystem with its broad diversity of species, together with the well-being of river-based villages. For the long-term, the project will lay the foundation for increased institutional capacity to strengthen conservation efforts in the region.

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## **Otter research and conservation in Arunachal Pradesh Himalayas, India**

### **Katrina Fernandez**

In March 2024, the Wild Otters team embarked on a 14 day ecological field trip to Arunachal Pradesh. Our primary objective was to survey for otter populations across various rivers and streams, particularly focusing on the mountainous regions that form the Himalayan foothills. During our time there, we conducted 13 surveys (totalling 11 rivers/streams) each covering approximately 1.5 kilometers along riverbanks, often exploring both sides where accessible. Remarkably, we found signs of small-clawed otter activity in 11 out of the 13 surveys. This indicated that otters inhabit a vast majority of riverine habitats in eastern Arunachal. The rivers where otter presence was confirmed include the Siang, Yamne, Siku, Deopani, Dri, Difu, Lohit, Lai, Malwa, Dibang as well as one unnamed jungle stream.

We had live sightings of small-clawed otters at the Malwa River and the Namdapha River, the latter of which we did not survey. While evidence of small-clawed otters was found in the Dri River, local conversations suggested the possible presence of Eurasian otters as well.

In addition to identifying otter signs, we collected scat samples to analyze their diet and gathered some eDNA (fecal) samples for potential future use. We also recorded various habitat parameters to better understand the environmental conditions preferred by these otters.

Throughout our journey, we engaged with local communities and discovered that otter hunting and trade are prevalent in the region. This highlights the urgent need for conservation efforts to protect these vulnerable species. Our findings underscore the importance of continued research and community engagement to safeguard the otters of Arunachal Pradesh.

## **Feral Dogs in Sikkim, India**

**Sunita Khatiwara**

In the Himalayan region, feral dogs are posing a significant threat to wildlife, including species like otters. These dogs directly compete for food resources and prey on native wildlife, including rare and endangered species. While local people in the region keep dogs to guard livestock or property and treat them as their own, there is a lack of awareness about the potential threat posed by these dogs to native wildlife and humans due to disease transmission, such as rabies, parvovirus, and canine distemper (CDV).

For the past year, we have been conducting assessments of the feral dog population in two protected area landscapes in Sikkim: Kyongnosla and Pangolakha, which are located in the Gangtok and Pakyong districts of the state. Our preliminary findings indicate a correlation between the increasing feral dog population in these landscapes and the presence of military establishments and open waste disposal sites. To address this issue, we have been organizing periodic awareness meetings with the army and local communities while also implementing sterilization efforts to manage the feral dog population in the surveyed landscapes."

### **Recent HON publications**

Jamwal, P.S., Bruno, A., Galimberti, A., Magnani, D., Casiraghi, M. & Loy, A. 2023. Environmental DNA revealed high accuracy in detection of the Eurasian otter in Himalaya. *Aquatic Conservation: Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aqc.4010>

Mohan B. Shrestha, G. Shrestha, M. Maharjan, K.N. Shah. 2023. An unusual sighting record of Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) in Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. *OTTER: The Journal of the International Otter Survival Fund* 64-71.

Jyoti Bhandari, B.Rijal, R. Shau, D. Bijaya. 2023. Conservation status survey of Smooth-coated Otters (*Lutrogale perspallata*) in Babai River of Bardia National Park, Nepal. OTTER: The Journal of the International Otter Survival Fund 144-152.

Purna Man Shrestha, S. Gwachha, S. Shrestha, A. Hamal, T.T. Tamang, B. Awasthi, S. Ghimire, R. Koju. 2023. People's perceptions of the Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*) conservation in Mugu District, Nepal. OTTER: The Journal of the International Otter Survival Fund. 128-143.

Paras Mani Acharya, Panu Thainiramit, Kuaanan Techato, Suraj Baral, Naresh Rimal, Melissa Savage, Ahimsa Campos-Arceiz, Dinesh Neupane. 2023. Predicting the Distribution and Habitat Suitability of the Smooth-coated Otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) in Lowland Nepal. Global Ecology and Conservation 46. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2023.e02578>

Acharya, P.M., Saeung, S., Techato, K., Rimal, N., Gyawali, S., and Neupane, D. 2022. Review of Environmental Policies and Otter Conservation in Nepal. IUCN Otter Specialist Group Bull. 39(1): 44 – 55.

Ranjana Pal, Aashna Sharma, Vineet Kumar Dubey, Tapajit Bhattacharya, Jeyaraj Antony Johnson, Kuppusamy Sivakumar, Sambandam Sathyakumar. 2021. A rare photographic record of Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra* with a note on its habitat from the Bhagirathi Basin, western Himalayas, India. Journal of Threatened Taxa 13(13): 20072-20077.

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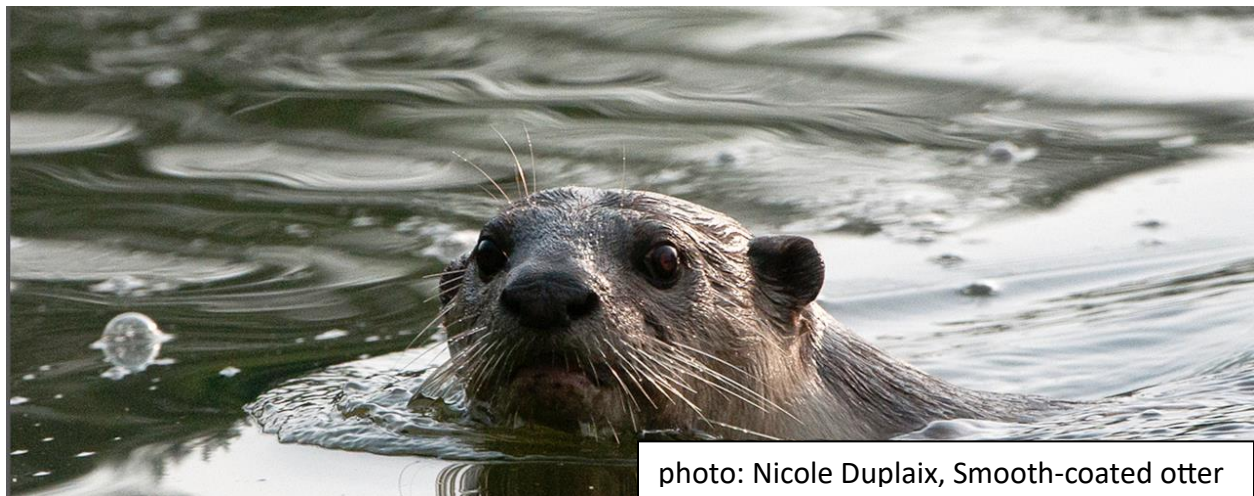


photo: Nicole Duplaix, Smooth-coated otter

