

FACTSHEET

OTTER

© Chi King - Asian Small-clawed Otter, CC BY 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=33950400>

The energetic and playful otters are small in size with elongated bodies, long tails, soft yet thick layer of fur with short ears and nose. Taxonomically, they belong to the mammalian order Carnivora and family Mustelidae which also includes weasels, badgers, ferrets, and mink. Of the 13 species of otters found worldwide, India is home to three:

Asian Small-clawed Otter *Aonyx cinereus*

Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra*

Smooth-coated Otter *Lutrogale perspicillata*

“The Asian Small-clawed Otter is the smallest species of otters.”

“Otters are found on every continent except Australia and Antarctica.”

“Smooth-coated Otters are excellent divers and swimmers, covering long distances and staying underwater for 6-8 minutes with a single breath! On the other hand Eurasian Otter though an exceptionally good swimmer and fish catcher, cannot hold its breath for long underwater and the average dive is for about 30 seconds.”

#DYK

“Otters have the densest fur of any animal which is waterproof and keeps them warm.”

“Baby otters are called pups or kittens. They stay with their mothers until they're up to a year old, or until the next litter.”




ECOLOGICAL ROLE:

Otters are top predators of the river ecosystem and are usually found in water bodies that have plenty of prey and clean water, thus indicating the health of the waterway. They play an important role of transferring nutrients from one ecosystem to another as they take in nutrients from the aquatic ecosystem by feeding upon fish and other aquatic organisms and then transfers those nutrients to the terrestrial ecosystem by depositing their waste on land.



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SIZE, HABITAT, DISTRIBUTION AND POPULATION STATUS:

SPECIES	AVERAGE SIZE	HABITAT	DISTRIBUTION	POPULATION TREND
Asian Small-clawed Otter <i>Aonyx cinereus</i>	65–94 cm (body 40–63 cm; tail 25–35 cm); weight: 2–5 kg	Freshwater and peat swamp forests, rice fields, lakes, streams, reservoirs, canals, mangrove and along the coast.	Tamil Nadu (mainly Ashambu, Nilgiri and Palni hills), Karnataka (hill ranges of Coorg), Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh, Assam, Kerala	
Eurasian Otter <i>Lutra lutra</i>	102–138 cm (body 57–70 cm; tail 35–40 cm); weight: 4–11 kg	Wide variety of aquatic habitats, including highland and lowland lakes, rivers, streams, marshes, swamp forests and coastal areas independent of their size, origin or latitude.	Found in the foothills of the western Himalayas as well as in the States of Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.	
Smooth-coated Otter <i>Lutrogale perspicillata</i>	106–130 cm (body 65–79 cm; tail 40–50 cm); weight: 7–10 kg	In the Indian subcontinent, they live even in the semi-arid region of northwestern India and Deccan plateau. Generally, this species inhabits large rivers and lakes, peat swamp forests, mangroves and estuaries, and even rice fields for foraging.	Distributed throughout India in all the major rivers south of the Himalaya.	

CONSERVATION STATUS:

SPECIES	WILDLIFE (PROTECTION) ACT, 1972	CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA (CITES)	INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR CONSERVATION OF NATURE (IUCN) RED LIST
Asian Small-clawed Otter	Schedule I	Appendix I	Vulnerable
Eurasian Otter	Schedule II	Appendix I	Near Threatened
Smooth-coated Otter	Schedule II	Appendix I	Vulnerable



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OTTERS IN PERIL:

- **HABITAT DESTRUCTION AND DEGRADATION** due to expanding agricultural practices, deforestation, quarrying, soil erosion, and climate change.
- **TRAPPING AND HUNTING FOR ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE** for fur and to keep live animals as pets.

TRAPPING AND HUNTING FOR ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE:

Otters have been found in illegal wildlife trade in India for decades, poached mainly for their extremely soft and lustrous fur.

Between 1980 and 2018, over 250 otter seizures representing a total of 6,010 individual otters were recorded in various databases including the CITES trade database. Among the few records that included details of the species concerned, several referred to otters found in Asia, in particular Eurasian Otter, Asian Small-clawed Otter, and Smooth-coated Otter.

A TRAFFIC study between 1980 and 2015 found a total of 161 otter seizures in 15 countries in Asia involving a total of 5,881 specimens with India representing the most reported otter seizures—51.6% of all those recorded, a total of 83. Of the identified seized animals, most were Eurasian Otter (824 individuals, 14% of total), followed by Smooth-coated Otter (79 individuals, 1.3%), and Small-clawed Otter (31 individuals, 0.5%).

Globally, the trade in live otters as pets has also been a threat especially to Smooth-coated Otters, as they have increasingly been found advertised for sale on online portals. Studies conducted on illegal pet trade on social media primarily Facebook between 2017–2018, reported the sale of Asian otters especially the Asian Small-clawed Otter and the Smooth-coated Otter.

Earlier investigations had also revealed presence of otter skins in most of the tiger and leopard skin contrabands being smuggled to other countries. Reports have claimed that “For every one Tiger skin found illegally 10 otter furs are also found.”



Lutra lutra
Euras. Fischottern
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RECENT CONSERVATION EFFORTS:



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- In 2016, the Government of Karnataka declared the formation of India's first '**Otter Conservation Reserve**' in Karnataka – 'Tungabhadra Otter Reserve'. Thereby acknowledging the importance of otters and encouraging necessary actions to protect the animals.
- In March 2019, for the first time, Uttar Pradesh undertook a "**Otter Census**" in its protected areas.
- During the 18th Conference of Parties (CoP18) to CITES held in 2019, India proposed uplifting of the protection status of the Smooth-coated Otter and Small-clawed Otter from Appendix II to Appendix I due to the risk of future extinction due to the illegal pet trade as well as demand for their skins. Both listing proposals were adopted.
- **WWF India**, within the scope of the Rivers for Life programme primarily funded by the HSBC Water Programme (2012–2017), has started to develop an atlas of otter distribution and threats, part of a wider advocacy strategy to increase protection for otters and their habitat.

SECURING THE FUTURE OF OTTERS IN INDIA:

- Enhance regional co-operation between the South Asian countries to curtail otter smuggling across borders.
- Law enforcement agencies such as Forest Department, Customs, Railways, Police and others should take cognizance of the growing threat from illegal otter trade and poaching in the country and take collaborative actions to curb this.
- Wildlife crime has not left the cyberspace behind and increasing online trade in wildlife species has been reported including that in otters. It is crucial to engage with internet-companies to track and curtail such illicit activities on online portals.
- More research needs to be done on the population estimates of otters so as to formulate adequate conservation and protection strategies.
- Educational materials like mobile applications/ identification tools/ posters and awareness campaigns to sensitise the general public about otters is needed.
- As a responsible citizen, one must report immediately to the nearest Forest Department office, WCCB or local police incase encountering any illegal wildlife trade.



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TRAFFIC's India Office
c/o WWF-India Secretariat; 172-B, Lodi Estate
New Delhi-110003
Email: trafficind@wwfindia.net
Website: www.traffic.org & www.trafficindia.org
Tel: 011-41504786

TRAFFIC
the wildlife trade monitoring network