

SHORT NOTE

INITIATION OF A NEPAL OTTER NETWORK

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The Nepal Otter Network hosted its first collaborative meeting in Kathmandu in January, 2017, with participation of the Nepal Biodiversity Conservation Society, the IUCN Otter Specialist Group, the Himalayan Otter Network, and other organizations. Twelve Nepali otter researchers, from government departments, academia (Tribhuvan University), and the non-profit sector participated in the meeting, and otter conservationists from China and the US.



Nepal Otter Network members

The goals of the meeting were two-fold: to develop a set of priorities for actions to improve the understanding of the status of otters in the country, and to form a collaborative to work together on a continuing basis on issues affecting research and protection of the three otter species in Nepal, the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*), small-clawed otter (*Aonyx cinereus*), and smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*). All three species face threats from habitat destruction, conflict with fishermen, hydroelectric generation construction, pollution and the illegal trade in otter fur. Nepal is an important hub of the illegal wildlife trade from south Asia to China, and otters are often traded with other valuable animals such as tigers and leopards because of their luxurious pelts.

Urgent objectives for otter conservation in Nepal were discussed and plans made to develop tools to strengthen the protection of otters across the country.

Projects initiated included: digital mapping the geographic location of current and past otter research projects, identifying habitat priorities by geographic location, documenting gaps in research, developing a database of illegal otter trade records, understanding the shortcomings of the legal protection status of otters, and creating a library of education and community outreach materials. A first step taken toward standardizing research is a plan to conduct a field training workshop on otter survey that will be offered by Paras Acharya in October, 2017, in Chitwan National Park, Nepal.

Contact Jyoti Bhandari (angeljb7@gmail.com) for more information about the Nepal Otter Network. Charter members of the Nepal Otter Network are: Paras Acharya, Jyoti Bhandari*, Dhruva Bijaya*, Deepak Gautam, HE Bing, Rajesh Jha*, Gandhiv Kafle*, LI Mengjiao, Melissa Savage*, Mohan Bikram Shrestha*, Purna Man Shrestha*, Sanjan Thapa (*members of the OSG). The Himalayan Otter Network is serving as an umbrella organization for this new collaboration. This is an exciting start to an initiative that will create a country-wide strategy for the protection of otter species in Nepal.

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