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REPORT ON THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL ASIAN OTTER SYMPOSIUM

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The first International Asian Otter Symposium, held in Bangalore, India from October 17-22, 1988 was a great success. Sixty-six participants were fully registered from more than 15 nations, including the Asian Countries of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Malaysia, Thailand, Japan and Indonesia. In addition, papers were received from China, Bhutan, Vietnam, and the Philippines. India was well represented with status reports presented on otters in 15 states by the respective Chief Wildlife Wardens. Other Indian agencies and NGOs represented included the Zoological Survey of India, the Wildlife Institute, the Bombay Natural History Society, the Indian Institute of Technology and others. The sponsoring agencies, the IUCN, the government of India and the government of Karnataka were also well represented. Students from throughout India and other interested parties were also present. The press, including television, radio and newspaper reporters covered the entire conference. In all, some sessions had more than 120 people in attendance.

The inaugural session was opened by the Hon. Minister for Agriculture and Forests, Government of Karnataka, Shri B. Rachaiah, who lit the "eternal torch". This very formal session also included speeches by Dr. Ranjitsinh (Director of Wildlife Preservation, Govt. of India), Mr. M.K. Appayya (Chief Wildlife Warden, State of Karnataka), Shri Parameswarappa (Karnataka Chief Conservator of Forests) and by myself, representing the IUCN Otter Specialist Group. A moment of silence and respect was given to commemorate Lt. Col. Fatesinghrao Gaekwad, the initiator of this conference in India.

The enthusiasm of all participants blossomed all week. Many contacts were made and conservation projects were generated. A move to make otters the symbol of wetlands in India is being spearheaded by Dr. Ranjitsinh, Govt. of India, and a survey plan for otters throughout the country is being handled by the Indian Wildlife Institute under the direction of Dr. Panwar. An Action Plan for Asian otters was generated by the entire group, led by Dr. Ranjitsinh and myself. This plan was typed up by Ranjitsinh's staff and given to all participants at the closing session. An official move to accept the Action Plan was made, seconded and voted on by the entire assembly. Parts of the plan were later quoted by the press.

Now that otter conservation projects have been initiated in Asia, there is also some follow-up planned to keep up the momentum. An Asian section of the IUCN Otter Specialist Group is being formed, and will be chaired by Dr. Charles Santiapillai of WWF Indonesia. He has already produced an Asian Otter newsletter for continued communication with symposium participants and others after the conference. The next Asian Otter Symposium is being planned and will be hosted by Japan in 1991. Otter surveys are now also being initiated throughout Asia.

The Proceedings will be edited by Dr. James Estes, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Santa Cruz, CA. The Indian papers will be coordinated by Dr. Ranjitsinh and the other Asian papers by Dr. Santiapillai.

All in all, this conference was a great first step towards conservation of otters and their habitats in Asia. The ball is rolling, the excitement is high and lots of connections and information was exchanged by all. I am pleased to have been involved in this effort and look forward to seeing the fruits of my labour develop further as the conservation work begins in earnest by Asians throughout the region.

I am very grateful for the strong financial and personal support given me in this project by the Marine World Foundation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Chicago Zoological Society. I am also grateful for the financial support for select conference participants provided by the IUCN, WWF, WS, WWF Indonesia, Wildlife Fund Thailand, UNEP (Bangkok), US AID, Bombay Natural History Society and the Institute of Marine Sciences, Santa Cruz. Without the support and encouragement of these organizations this meeting would not have been possible. Thank you, one and all.