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RECENT INFORMATION ON THE CONGO CLAWLESS OTTER

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Abstract: Distribution data for *Aonyx congica* is reviewed. Little is known about the ecology of this species. Over much of its range there is little human population, but elsewhere habitat degradation has occured. There is a particular need for a detailed study of *A. congica*.

INTRODUCTION

The distribution of the Congo clawless otter *Aonyx congica* in central Africa has been broadly described by Coetzee (1971). In the course of a questionnaire survey conducted during 1989, to collect information for the IUCN Action Plan for otter conservation, data were obtained on the current distribution and status of the Congo clawless otter.

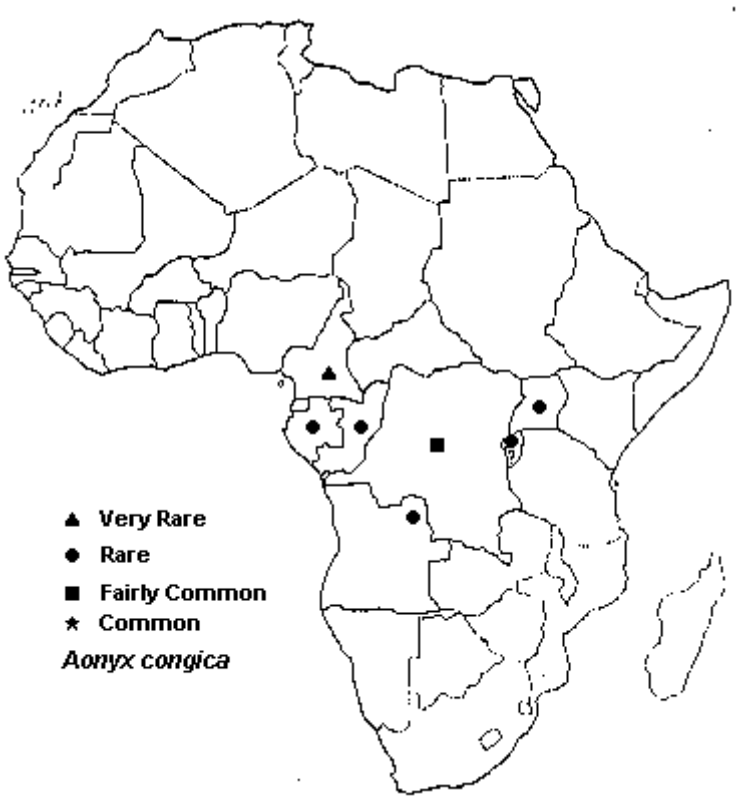

Figure 1: Distribution of *Aonyx capensis* in South Africa, based on data from Lynch (1983), Rautenbach (1982), Rowe-Rowe (1978), and Stuart (1981).

This otter is reported to be widespread and fairly common in Zaire; rare in Gabon, Congo, Rwanda, south-western Uganda, and north-eastern Angola; and very rare in Cameroon (Fig. 1). No assessment of its status was made in Burundi, where the otter is believed to occur. Coetzee (1971) reported *A.*

congica from the upper Cross River in south-eastern Nigeria, near the Cameroon border. In the current survey the otter was reported from the upper Cross River in Cameroon, so may still occur in Nigeria.

An unconfirmed report was received of *A. congica* in the Ubangui River, which forms part of the border between Central African Republic and Zaire.

Very little is known about the ecology of *A. congica*. It has been reported from forest rivers and streams, as well as in swamps and other wetlands. Kingdon (1977), in reviewing available literature on the otter's diet, suggested that it lives on worms, insects, molluscs, crustaceans, and amphibians. Pygmies in the Ituri Forest of Zaire stated that *A. congica* lives on fish and crabs, that the otter is both diurnal and nocturnal, and that shelter is taken in natural cavities along river banks (Carpaneto & Germi 1989).

No serious threats to *A. congica* were identified. In most of the countries within its range some otters are caught in fish nets or fish traps. Otters are also killed by those who regard them as competitors for food (fish), or because they damage fish traps. Most of the regions in which *A. congica* occurs are still sparsely populated by humans. In areas where human populations are fairly dense, deforestation, draining of wetlands, and increased agricultural activity have changed the otter's habitat.

The status estimates reported in this article are subjective, and their limitations are recognised. Some respondents commented on the fact that little was known about otters in their countries, and identified the need for field surveys. There appears to be o particular need for a detailed study on *Aonyx congica*, concentrating on habitat requirements, diet, and behaviour.

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