

The giant river otter in El Tuparro National Park, Colombia

Thomas R. Defler



Giant river otter in Guyana (Keith and Liz Laidler/International Centre for Conservation Education).

Giant river otters were once widespread in the rivers and creeks of the greater Amazon Basin. Hunting for their skins caused many local extinctions and only small scattered populations now remain, although total numbers are unknown. It is seriously endangered in Colombia, and one of the places where it still occurs in any numbers, El Tuparro National Park, is becoming increasingly accessible to people, while the otter populations in adjacent rivers outside the park are even more vulnerable to poaching.

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In 1981, 1982 and 1983, I travelled about 1750 km by canoe on the rivers of El Tuparro National Park, censusing the giant river otter *Pteronura brasiliensis* for the Institute for the Development of Natural and Renewable Resources and the Environment (INDERENA). This 548,000-ha park (see *Oryx*, January 1983) helps protect the best remaining populations of the otter in Colombia. The animal is classified by the IUCN as 'vulnerable' over its present range (Thornback and Jenkins, 1982). During my travels on the Tomo, Tuparrito and Tupparo Rivers and the

Quinvaza Creek, I contacted individuals or groups of the animals 49 times, totalling 163 individuals, well-spaced along the rivers. Some of the sightings were undoubtedly multiple sightings of the same group, as I repeat-surveyed parts of the river systems and did not attempt to distinguish individuals. By best guess, I contacted about 30 different groups of otters. Sightings varied from lone otters to a group of seven. The total length of rivers surveyed was about 1000 km.

I observed a unique and previously unreported series of associations of otter and bottlenose or Amazon dolphin *Inia geoffrensis* during these census trips (Defler, 1983b). On six occasions, I saw the two species swimming and fishing together, sometimes mingling. Although the river dolphin or *Sotalia fluviatilis* is found in the sites where Duplaix (1980) studied the giant river otter in Surinam, she did not observe associations of the otter with that species of dolphin (N. Duplaix, pers. comm.).

There appears to be no commercial hunting in the area at this time, but, if prices for the skins encourage hunting, the populations will be brought under increasing pressure. In 1982, I heard of two young otters being held in captivity at the mouth of Mesetas Creek on the Orinoco River 30 km north of the Park. The 'owners' were offering the animals for sale, but the park authorities were unwilling to do anything about it. I also heard of the killing of two otters by a colonist west of the Park, who talked of selling the skins in 1979. I do not know whether he was successful. I had also heard of an otter held in captivity by a man in the village of Santa Rita on the Vichada River south of the Park, but when I was able to interview him, in November 1982, he told me the otter had recently died. Police in the village either ignored or were ignorant of the illegality of holding otters in captivity. A retired otter-hunter now working for INDERENA and who previously lived with the Guahibos told me that those Indians occasionally hunt giant river otters with bow and arrow for the meat. My observations suggest that the Indian population is increasing within the Park so that such hunting may be a hitherto unrecognized pressure on the otter populations. Effective protection of the otter by INDERENA is extremely

difficult due to the great distances involved and the chronic scarcity of petrol.

There are probably good populations of the giant river otter in the next river north of the Tomo (and just north of the Park), the Rio Bitá; I talked to several people who had hunted otters in that remote river in previous years. The Bitá River has no protection whatsoever and the otters should be considered much more vulnerable than those in the Park. Isolation is ending for this region of eastern Colombia; the Colombian Air Force is building a large air base just north of the Tomo River, and President Betancourt has announced plans for a large town to be developed near the base. There are also plans to connect a road from Puerto Carēno, the capital of the state of Vichada, with the road that runs through the Park, bypassing portions of the old road that become impassable during the rainy season. The Tomo River will be used increasingly for traffic as well. These developments make it imperative for INDERENA to develop a management plan that is capable of protecting this healthy population of otters as well as protecting the highly endangered Orinoco crocodile *Crocodylus intermedius*, which is also found in the rivers. However, a very low national parks budget makes such protection very difficult. Increasingly, international funds will have to be tapped if populations such as those found in El Tuparro are to be adequately protected.

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T. R. Defler, Apartado Aéreo 4559, Bogotá, Colombia.

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