

SPECIES ACTION PLAN FOR OTTER

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Current Status

Historically, otters have been present throughout Nottinghamshire. However during the 17th 18th and 19th centuries there were large financial inducements to hunt and kill otters and up to the 1950s riparian (riverside) land owners from the Dukeries, North Notts Carrs and Hatfield Chase invited the Buckinghamshire Otter Hounds for an annual late summer weeks 'sport'.

In later years the wooded catchments of the Rivers Idle and Ryton supported otters and signs and sightings were still being recorded up to 1977. In recent years there have been many unconfirmed sightings, but the most recent confirmed record was in February 1996 on the Chesterfield Canal at Retford.

Threats

The main factors currently preventing the recolonisation of Nottinghamshire by the otter are:

- Historical land drainage and flood defence work, which has resulted in the extensive loss of habitat. In particular, the removal of scrub and overhanging trees has made many long stretches of watercourse unsuitable for otters.
- Poor water quality and unsympathetic land management along some watercourses, leading to poor populations of prey species such as fish and crayfish.
- Disturbance. Surveys carried out in 1978 and 1986 showed that this was increasing on many rivers due to angling, boating and the close proximity of urban areas. Although otters are reasonably tolerant, recolonisation of breeding sites may not occur where disturbance is high. Dogs are a particular problem, and for this reason mink hunting may be potentially damaging.
- The trapping of mink, and the use of fyke nets to catch eels. Otters get caught in both types of trap, and otter guards on fyke nets are required by the Environment Agency.

Current Initiatives - Examples

- A national Species Action Plan for otter has been prepared.
- Many private landowners manage areas of potential value for otters. They have an important role to play in the implementation of this plan.
- The Joint Nature Conservation Committee has prepared 'A Framework for Otter Conservation in the UK 1995-2000'.
- National surveys have been funded by English Nature and the Vincent Wildlife Trust to provide distribution data on a five to seven year cycle.
- The Environment Agency carried out surveys in 1995 on rivers arising to the north of Nottingham.
- The EA is currently researching the effects of aquatic pollutants on otters by analysing tissue samples from dead animals.
- Both Forest Enterprise and the Forestry Authority promote sensitive woodland management and expansion in favour of otters through implementation of their Forest and Water Guidelines.

Targets

To contribute towards the UK Species Action Plan by:

- *Establishing a base-line monitoring scheme by 2000.*
- *Enhancing riparian habitat in all river catchments in Nottinghamshire to a level that will encourage otter colonisation by 2005.*
- *Restoring breeding otters to all rural river catchments in Nottinghamshire by 2010 by natural recolonisation.*

Proposed Action

Policy and Legislation

1) Ensure that management agreements and incentive schemes take account of the requirements of otters where appropriate.

Action: Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF), Farming and Rural Conservation Agency (FRCA).

2) Determine Statutory Water Quality Objectives for all standing and running waters which will sustain otters by 2000.

Action: Environment Agency (EA), Severn Trent Water (STW).

Site Safeguard and Management

3) Include action for otters in Local Environment Agency Plans (LEAPs) for all rivers with potential for otter populations by 2000.

Action: EA.

4) Continue to secure appropriate management of riparian habitats and catchments, including woodlands, to encourage otter colonisation.

Action: EA, Forestry Authority (FA), Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust (NWT), British Waterways (BW), MAFF/FRCA, Sherwood Forest Trust (SFT).

5) Encourage the construction of artificial otter holts adjacent to watercourses where the habitat is considered to be suitable for otters.

Action: EA, MAFF/FRCA, NWT, SFT, FWAG, British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV).

6) Continue to ensure that flood defence and channel management work takes into account the needs of otters, retaining features such as old trees, scrub and overhanging root systems.

Action: EA.

7) Include habitat enhancement and restoration measures in all management plans for nature reserves with wetlands suitable for otters.

Action: EN, NWT, Local Authorities (LAs).

8) Create and appropriately manage complementary habitats such as wet grassland, woodland and scrub alongside watercourses to provide potential resting and foraging areas for otters.

Action: EA, FA, Biodiversity Action Group (BAG).

Species Management and Protection

9) Collaborate in the establishment of a River Trent Otter Project to co-ordinate conservation, research, information exchange and publicity.

Action: EA, EN, BTCV, LAs, NWT, in collaboration with neighbouring counties.

10) Continue to enforce byelaws on the use of otter guards on fyke nets.

Action: EA.

11) Encourage landowners to establish buffer strips to improve water quality and reduce silt inputs, while providing suitable habitat for otters.

Action: MAFF/FRCA, FWAG, NWT, EA, SFT.

12) Limit accidental killing of otters by providing underpasses on new and existing roads where appropriate.

Action: LAs.

13) Manage water courses to achieve sustainable fish stocks in all catchments.

Action: EA.

Advisory

14) Ensure that information on otter requirements and conservation is made available to key groups, including landowners, anglers and developers, by publication of guidelines.

Action: EA, EN, NWT, LAs.

Future Research and Monitoring

15) Collate information on prey productivity, biomass and pollution in occupied and likely recolonisation areas.

Action: EA.

16) Obtain baseline data on the status and distribution of otter in Nottinghamshire using trained field workers.

Action: EA, NWT.

17) Establish a facility to collect, store and analyse tissues from otter corpses to monitor levels of pollutants.

Action: EA.

18) Investigate the effects of disturbance on otter populations.

Action: EA.

Communications and Publicity

19) Use the otter as a key species to publicise the importance of water quality and riparian habitats to biodiversity.

Action: EA, BAG.

What You Can Do

- Report any sightings of otters or otter signs in Nottinghamshire to the Biological and Geological Records Centre at Wollaton Hall, stating exactly when and where they occurred.
- Always keep your dog on a lead when walking in any area where otters occur.