Conservation news

Eurasian otter conservation: a collaborative approach

The range of the Eurasian otter *Lutra lutra* extends across Europe and Asia, with a limited distribution in North Africa. The species is categorized as Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List, having recovered following its Vulnerable categorization in 2000. However, the species remains threatened by climate change, habitat degradation, pollution, overfishing and conflicts with fisheries. In the UK there is concern regarding the effects of poor water quality on the otter, and in Austria conflicts with fisheries have resulted in culls. Little is known about the status of the Eurasian otter in most of Asia and North Africa, a large part of the species' range.

In November 2025, the International Otter Survival Fund invited conservationists and researchers to a 2-day international workshop at Colchester Zoo, UK, to share information, survey methods, and education and conservation techniques, with the aim to work together to achieve practical conservation of the Eurasian otter. Nearly 100 people from 33 countries, including experienced otter conservationists and new enthusiasts, attended in person or online.

The programme looked at the current status of otters throughout their range, at current threats, including culls, illegal killing and disease, and at survey and monitoring techniques, including citizen science projects, footprint identification technology and the use of detection dogs. Examination of conservation techniques covered the importance of training new surveyors, education and community awareness, habitat restoration and reintroductions. In addition, there were case studies from Wales, Thailand, Malaysia, Ireland and Germany.

Current survey protocols for otters were established many years ago and involve checking sites for otter signs for 600 m before moving to another site. This is appropriate where access is feasible but is challenging in remote areas or where there is more than one otter species, as in Asia. Regular surveys need to be carried out by trained surveyors to ensure accurate data, and information from citizen science and online recording sites needs to be verified. Data can be shared through apps, although detailed locations should not be made available publicly, to prevent persecution or disturbance. Spraint surveys can be used to identify otter presence in areas where they have not previously been recorded, or to document absence, but do not provide information on whether otters are resident or breeding.

Considering these matters, discussions examined the use of standardized survey techniques appropriate to the area concerned. Workshop participants agreed to form a Eurasian Otter Network to share data, survey techniques, educational materials and research papers, and to work towards increased populations in all parts of the species' range.

The International Otter Survival Fund thanks the speakers for sharing their knowledge and passion, all attendees for their participation, and Colchester Zoo for hosting the workshop. The full workshop report is available at tinyurl.com/eurasian-otter-report-2025.

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