

Insufficient data hinders otter conservation in northeast India

by Bikash Kumar Bhattacharya, Jyotirmoy Saharia on 19 February 2024

- *With some of the best otter habitats in India, the northeast region is home to all three otter species found in the country.*
- *A low-profile species, otters are under-researched across India. The first otter survey in northeast India was conducted along the Kameng river in Pakke Tiger Reserve only in 2019.*
- *Otters in the region are threatened by excessive hunting for the illegal wildlife trade and unsustainable fishing.*
- *Experts say detailed surveys and research inputs on the species are needed to formulate effective conservation plans.*

"It's a holt," said Jehua Natung, excited, pointing to a few rock crevices surrounded by thick roots that extended from a huge tree on the bank of the Kameng River. "You should find otters here during their mating season."

A local Nyishi tribesman, Natung is currently working as an animal keeper at Pakke Tiger Reserve in the East Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. The short, slenderly-built man was showing us potential holts — otter dens — in the sanctuary. A field-based study (https://iucnosgbull.org/Volume39/Borker_et_al_2022.pdf) published in the *IUCN/SCC Otter Specialist Group Bulletin* in 2022 reported 43 otter signs here. The authors surveyed a total length of 6,430 metres of Kameng riverbank of which 2,400 metres were along the main river, and 4,030 metres were along first order streams, tributaries of the main river.

Natung, who grew up in a village that abuts the protected area and the Kameng river, was one of the several local forest officials who assisted the researchers during the survey. The otter is a semi-aquatic mammal that belongs to the weasel family. Noted for its playful behaviour, the otter has a lithe and slender body with short legs and a strong neck. A long flattened tail helps propel the animal gracefully through water. Globally there are thirteen otter species, of which three – the Asian small-clawed otter (*Aonyx cinereus*), the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*), and the smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) – are found in India. Northeast India, along with the Western Ghats, is home to all three otter species found in the country. Once commonplace in the innumerable water bodies of northeast India, these carnivorous mammals are one of the least-researched species in the region. The 2022 otter survey was the first of its kind. Experts say that insufficient data on otters has made it difficult to chalk out comprehensive conservation measures for the species.



An Asian small-clawed otter rescued by foresters in Myanmar's Sagaing region is released to a stream in the wild. The Asian small-clawed otter occurs in freshwater and its habitat extends from parts of India to southeast Asia. Photo by San Lwin.

An ideal otter habitat

With its numerous rivers, wetlands (*beel*), marshes, and ponds, northeast India is an excellent otter habitat (https://www.iucnosgbull.org/Volume39/Savage_2022.html). Rock crevices, tree roots, sandy dug outs on river banks host otter dens where the species breeds and rears cubs. "Seram," – the Nyishi word for otters – "were everywhere," says Natung. "When we were young, we'd spot them throughout the Kameng river."

A 2021 study

(https://ruffordorg.s3.amazonaws.com/media/project_reports/IUCN_Otter_Spec._Group_Bull) published in *IUCN/SCC Otter Specialist Group Bulletin* also reported multiple sightings of Asiatic otters in the Kameng river.

Beels free from human disturbance are one of the most suitable habitats for otters.

Muniram beel in Nameri Tiger Reserve, adjacent to Pakke, is one such wetland where otters are spotted frequently.

"The *beel* has a healthy fish population. The short shrubby vegetation along the sides of the wetland provides security for otters to feed there. There is least human disturbance in the area," says Nripendra Nath Kalita, the divisional forest officer (DFO) of Sonitpur West forest division. "It's an ideal habitat for otters."

Similarly, Rangamati *beel*, a wetland with murky and muddy water in Dehing Patkai Biosphere Reserve is a permanent waterbody known for its otter population. But the site is under pressure from fishing and development

(https://rufford.org.s3.amazonaws.com/media/project_reports/IUCN_Otter_Spec._Group_Bull)

Recently the small-clawed otter was also recorded for the first time in the waterbodies of Kaziranga National

(<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/elusive-binturong-smallclawed-otter-added-to-kazirangas-mammalian-species-list/articleshow/107034390.cms>)ational Park prompting detailed otter surveys.

(<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/elusive-binturong-smallclawed-otter-added-to-kazirangas-mammalian-species-list/articleshow/107034390.cms>)

Kalita says that the majority of the protected areas in northeast India have wetlands where the historical presence of otters has been reported.



River Pakke flanks the eastern expanse of the Pakke Tiger Reserve. Pakke and Kameng rivers are excellent habitats for otters. River otters hunt more effectively in shallow water like this stretch of the Pakke River. Photo by Jyotirmoy Saharia/Mongabay.

Imperilled by illegal pelt trade

Ecologist Katrina Fernandez, director of Wild Otters Research and co-author of a 2016 TRAFFIC report (<https://www.traffic.org/publications/reports/illegal-otter-trade/>) that analysed illegal trade of otters, says that pelt trade is one of the key threats faced by the species. "The otters are relentlessly hunted for their body parts. In the 2000s, otter skins made up around 30 percent of the fur trade in India, of which China was the largest consumer," she says. The TRAFFIC report stated that between 1980 and 2015, 2,949 illegal otter pelts were confiscated in India.

Most otters are hunted for their fur. Seizure data revealed that around 98 percent of the seizures, involving 5,866 otters, consisted of otter skins.

(<https://news.mongabay.com/2016/07/india-at-heart-of-illegal-otter-trade/>) Otter fur is often

used for an assortment of products—clothing, accessories, prestigious gifts, and decor pieces, among others.

Fernandez said that it is difficult to ascertain the actual scale of illicit otter parts trade due to little information available on otter-related law enforcement drives.

According to Melissa Savage, an otter specialist and associate professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, otter populations in northeast India are especially vulnerable. A 2022 study

(https://www.iucnosgbull.org/Volume39/Savage_2022.html) by Savage, published in the *IUCN/SCC Otter Specialist Group*, found that fifty otter pelts were seized in eight incidents in the northeastern states between 1997 and 2017.

“The numbers of otter pelts seized in the adjacent state of West Bengal are greater than in the Northeast states, reflecting its role as a major hub for wildlife trafficking through Sikkim into Nepal and China. Many of these pelts likely originate in the northeastern states,” the study states.

Another threat is the pressure of fishing on otter habitats and the resulting disturbance.

Unsustainable fishing not only impacts the food resources for the otters, but also severely affects their habitat. “It is a common practice in several parts of Assam to empty small waterbodies such as forested pools in order to catch all the fish found there,” says Kalita.

“This method of fishing not only depletes fish populations but also adversely impacts otter habitats.”

The IUCN classifies

(<https://www.iucnredlist.org/>) the Asian small-clawed otter and the smooth-coated otter as vulnerable, and the Eurasian otter listed as near threatened.



Pakke Tiger Reserve in Arunachal Pradesh has extensive suitable habitats for otters. The first otter-focused field survey in northeast India was conducted here in 2019. Photo by Jyotirmoy Saharia/Mongabay.

Scant data hinders conservation

Savage told Mongabay-India that “there is scant current documentation of otter distribution and anthropogenic pressures on otters in the eight northeast Indian states.”

The first otter-focused field survey in the northeast Indian region was conducted only in 2019, she added.

"Otter conservation in India is incidental, as the prime focus has been on charismatic species such as tiger, elephant, and rhino," says Asghar Nawab, an expert on amphibious mammals at Wetlands International (<https://www.wetlands.org/>), a global non-profit dedicated to conservation and restoration of wetlands. "A low-profile species, otters have always been on the margins of the national conservation plans. In the northeast, the species is remarkably little researched even though the region is home to all three otter species found in India."

Assam forest official Kalita says there's a large gap in information on the impacts of illegal trade on the region's wild otter populations. He adds, "Detailed surveys and research inputs are urgently needed in order to develop a management plan for the region's otters." Read more: [Otter sighting in Andhra bird sanctuary raises excitement and questions \(https://india.mongabay.com/2021/03/otter-sighting-in-andhra-bird-sanctuary-raises-excitement-but-also-questions/\)](https://india.mongabay.com/2021/03/otter-sighting-in-andhra-bird-sanctuary-raises-excitement-but-also-questions/)

Banner image: Smooth-coated otters, photographed in the Sundarbans. Representative image. Photo ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Smooth_Coated_Otter\(Lurtogale_perspicillata\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Smooth_Coated_Otter(Lurtogale_perspicillata).jpg)) by Anirnoy/Wikimedia Commons.

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