

NORFOLK BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

OTTER

(*Lutra lutra*)

Otters are large, with males reaching about 120cm (4 feet) in length and weighing over 10kg (much larger than mink which are 50-60cm in length). Otters are adapted for an aquatic environment with a long, streamlined body and broad, whiskered muzzle. They are carnivorous; an adult will eat on average 1kg of food a day comprising 80% fish. Otters occupy home ranges within river valleys, encompassing main rivers, other watercourses and wetlands. Breeding occurs at any time of year and the young remain dependent on the female for up to one year.

Ref 1/S3	Tranche 1	Species Action Plan 3
Plan Author:		Norfolk Wildlife Trust
Plan Co-ordinator:		Norfolk Wildlife Trust
Plan Leader:		Waterbodies Group
Date:		Stage:
31 December 1998		Final Draft
February 2002		Revised Final Draft

1. CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS

Legislation

- The otter is listed on Appendix 1 of CITES, Appendix 11 of the Bern Convention and Annexes 11 and IV of the Habitats Directive. It is protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Schedule 2 of the Conservation (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1994. The European sub-species is listed as globally threatened on the IUCN/WCMC Red Data List.

National Status

- The otter has a wide but sporadic distribution throughout the UK. It is most frequent in Scotland and the outer islands, Wales, Northern Ireland, parts of northern England, the West Country and East Anglia, the latter largely as a result of a reintroduction programme.
- In the majority of England, parts of Wales and areas of Scotland, it is in the process of recovering from a major population crash in the late 1950's (primarily due to the widespread use of organochlorine insecticides) and its population is increasing.

Norfolk Status

- The otter is currently found on all river catchments in Norfolk, on all main rivers, although it occurs patchily and/or only sporadically on some. Strongholds include the rivers Ant, Thet, Waveney, Wensum and Wissey. Recent surveys in 1997 and 2000-01 indicate a continuing, gradual increase in population and distribution, from a known low population in 1985.
- The Norfolk population is largely derived from animals released during 1984-1996 as part of a breeding and reintroduction programme undertaken by the Otter Trust.

2. CURRENT FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OR DECLINE IN NORFOLK

- Otter distribution in Norfolk is currently increasing, although numbers are not known.
- No factors are known to be currently causing a decline, although several factors may be suppressing ongoing population and distributional expansion. These include poor riparian and a lack of wetland habitats; poor food supplies, particularly unsustainable fish populations on some rivers; a lack of suitable, undisturbed areas for breeding; accidental road deaths; direct persecution; and drowning in nets (fyke nets) set for eels.

3. CURRENT ACTION IN NORFOLK

- Otter releases in Norfolk, as part of a breeding and re-introduction programme undertaken by the Otter Trust, ceased in 1996.
- A county survey was completed in 1997 and reports (divided by Environment Agency area (*i.e.* Central & Eastern Areas)) published (Yaxley 1997a&b). These reports establish baseline information on presence and distribution and outline how actions in the national species action plan for otter can be applied at county level.
- 141 sites in Norfolk surveyed in 2000-01 as part of the National Otter Survey of England.
- Routine monitoring of the presence of otters on the rivers Bure, Glaven, Wensum and Wissey is undertaken by Norfolk Otter Surveyors' Group volunteers, managed by the Anglian Otters and Rivers Project.
- Otter is included as an 'interest feature' within The Broads candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC), the North Norfolk Coast cSAC and the Waveney Valley Fens cSAC.

4. ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS

National

- Maintain and expand existing populations.
- By 2010 restore breeding otters to all catchments where they have been recorded since 1960.

Norfolk

- Maintain and expand existing populations.
- Ensure suitable conditions for otters on all major rivers by 2005.

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.1	Policy and Legislation			
5.1.1	Secure agreement on UK framework for otter conservation.	Implement appropriate actions from UK framework.	EN, NWT, BA, LAs, IDB, DEFRA (RDS), EA, OT	
5.1.2	Ensure agri-environment schemes take account of needs of otter.	Agree and promote appropriate changes to Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Countryside Stewardship.	EN, NWT, EA, DEFRA (RDS)	
5.1.3	Determine appropriate Water Quality Objectives by 2000.	Ensure all local Local Environment Agency Plans have appropriate Water Quality Objectives and that steps are taken to achieve them.	EA	
5.1.4	Review protection legislation and need to licence releases.	Support any national plan to licence releases.	EN, EA, NWT, Otter Trust, BA	
5.1.5	Clarify definition of trap and use of otter guards.	Implement advice on use of otter guards as appropriate.	EA DEFRA (RDS)?	
5.2	Site Safeguard and Management			
5.2.1	Include actions for otters in all Local Environment Agency Plans by 2005.	Implement actions for otters in all Local Environment Agency Plans.	EA	
5.2.2	Secure appropriate management of riparian habitats.	Identify key riparian landowners and provide advice to 5 per year.	FWAG, EA, BA, EN, NWT, LAs, IDBs, DEFRA (RDS)	

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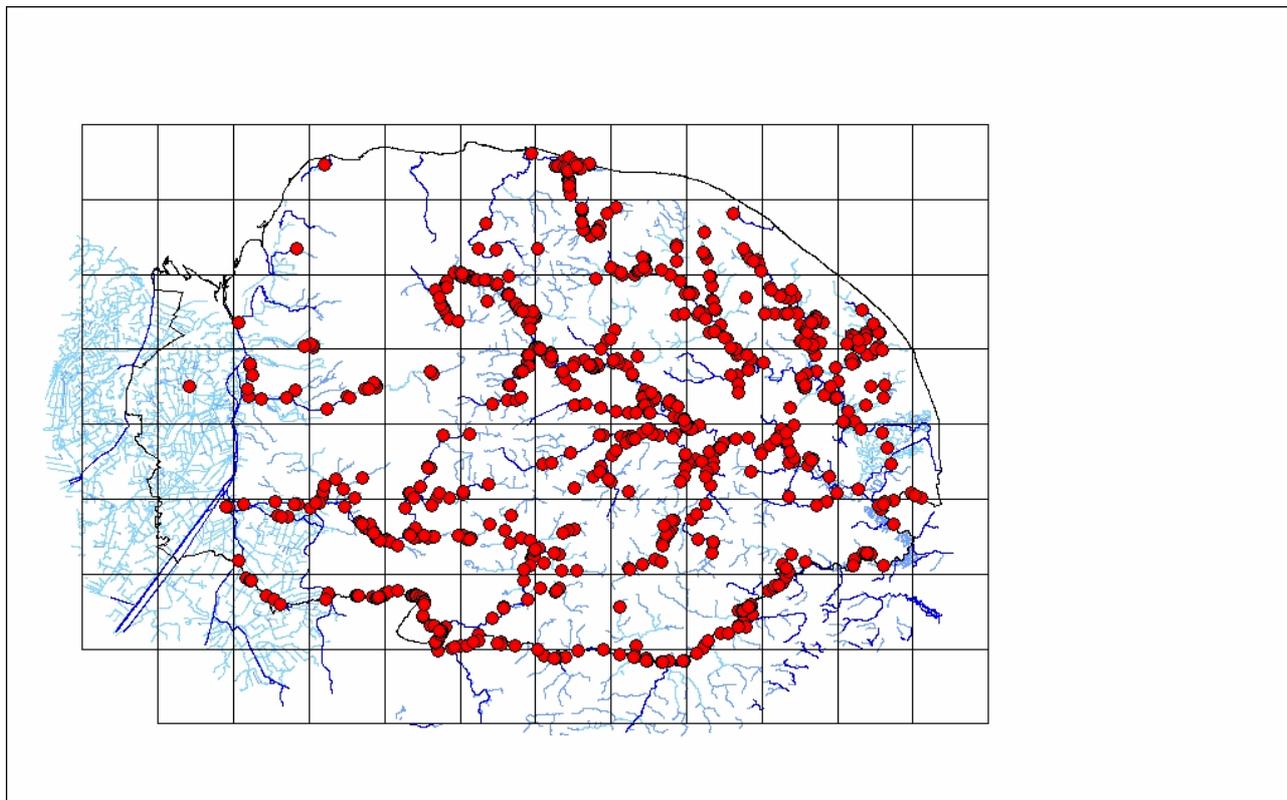
NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
		<p>Ensure that all people involved in river and river bank management are aware of the requirements of otter conservation.</p> <p>Seek to establish an otters and rivers project covering Norfolk.</p>	<p>FWAG, EA, BA, EN, NWT, LAs IDBs, DEFRA (RDS)</p> <p>NWT, EA</p>	<p>Farmers, Landowners and Managers, Frontline EA and IDB Staff</p>
5.3	Species Management and Protection			
5.3.1	Establish an otter forum to co-ordinate actions.	Consider establishing local/regional otter forum.	EA, NWT, OT	
5.3.2	Ensure otter releases conform to Framework guidelines.	Implement any national guidelines on otter releases.	EA, EN, NWT, OT	
5.3.3	Limit accidental death by using underpasses and eel net guards.	Record all accidental deaths, identify problems and seek mitigation measures. See 5.5.2.	NWT, NCC, EA, DEFRA (RDS)?	
5.4	Advisory			
5.4.1	Ensure key bodies and individuals are aware of conservation needs.	See also 5.1.3 and 5.2.2. Produce guidance in Norfolk Protected Species Handbook.	EN/NWT	
5.5.	Future Research and Monitoring			
5.5.1	Collate data on prey, biomass and pollution.	Incorporate questions on prey and environmental factors in otter survey form where appropriate.	NWT	
5.5.2	Devise methodology for analysing bioaccumulation of pollutants.	<p>Encourage the reporting of dead otters.</p> <p>Ensure all dead otters are sent for analysis.</p>	<p>NWT/EA, NCC</p> <p>NWT, EA, BA, EN, OT</p>	<p>The public, NCC Highways</p>
5.5.3	Investigate effects of	Identify local issues of	NWT, EA	

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
	disturbance on otters.	disturbance and incorporate avoidance or mitigation into management plans and agri-environment scheme proposals.		
5.5.4	Develop and implement methods for population assessment.	As they become available, include methods of population assessment in survey techniques of otter surveyors.	NWT	
5.5.5	Monitor populations throughout UK.	Expand and develop Norfolk Wildlife Trust otter survey groups.	NWT	
5.5.6	Pass data to Joint Nature Conservation Committee.	Pass data to Joint Nature Conservation Committee/ Biological Records Centre and Norfolk Biological Records Centre.	NWT, NBRC	
		Encourage reporting of sightings and other evidence of otters.	NWT, NBRC	Fishermen, Farmers, Landowners, General Public
5.6	Communications and Publicity			
5.6.1	Publicise otter and importance as river health indicator.	Produce a co-ordinated strategy for publicity.	EA, NWT	The Public, Fishermen, Land Managers

NORFOLK DISTRIBUTION

Broad-scale map of otter distribution in Norfolk, inclusive of all records from 1996-2005.



MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE

(This guidance is a general summary; for more detailed information or advice, please consult the references or contacts below.)

Otters require river valleys with good water quality, an abundant, varied food supply and sympathetically managed vegetation offering undisturbed, secluded sites with sufficient cover and shelter for breeding, lying-up (during daylight hours) and feeding. As a large proportion of an otter's diet comprises fish, favoured areas will support abundant fish populations, with appropriate bankside and in-channel features such as large overhanging trees, marginal tall-herb vegetation and in-channel riffles and pools.

The relative importance of each habitat feature is difficult to assess and may vary according to other factors such as food availability and levels of disturbance. However, the following features are important in providing breeding, resting and feeding sites:

- broad-leaved woodland and mature trees
- scrub including willow carr
- tall herbaceous bankside vegetation
- reed and sedge beds
- small streams and ditch/dyke networks
- lakes and ponds
- in-channel features including islands and sandbars.

Otters, particularly males, have large overlapping home ranges extending up to 40km along river valleys. They are mobile, opportunistic predators capable of utilising seasonally available food sources (e.g. breeding amphibians in Spring). Movements and foraging trips are not restricted to main river channels and may encompass a variety of watercourses and wetland habitats across river valleys plus, in some locations, coastal marshes and estuaries. Although it may be difficult for a single landowner to provide all the features that otters require, individual riparian and wetland habitat creation and enhancements contribute towards the overall structural diversity of river valleys and wetlands, which in turn yields benefits for otters.

Riverbanks and surrounding areas lacking the appropriate features required by otters can be enhanced by implementing a range of measures that includes planting appropriate bankside trees, establishing patches of dense undisturbed scrub and creating ungrazed or uncultivated buffer zones alongside watercourses. In certain circumstances artificial holts that provide lying-up or breeding sites are a valuable additional element.

- leave scrub areas undisturbed; ideal areas should be not less than 25 square metres
- retain traditionally-managed wet grasslands, grazing marshes, fens and reedbeds
- use low maintenance management policies for grassland, fen and scrub habitats
- re-create riparian habitats by reverting arable to wet grassland, fen and reedbed
- leave a buffer zone along river, stream and ditch banks uncut to provide a zone of tall, dense herbaceous cover. Protect banks from excessive poaching by livestock
- fence off and plant-up river or stream meanders (if not of existing conservation value) with scrub species including hawthorn, blackthorn, bramble and willow to provide cover
- retain mature trees on riverbanks, particularly oak, ash and sycamore as these form large root cavities. These provide cover for fish and potential holt/lying-up sites for otters
- retain structural features including ox-bow lakes, backwaters, ditches and ponds.

Otters and stillwater fisheries

There is the potential for otters to predate fish at stillwater fisheries and fish farms and there have been a number of recent incidents in Norfolk. Utilisation of stillwater fisheries by otters appears to be seasonal, being restricted to the late autumn-winter period. Large fish are targeted and in some cases losses, particularly of large carp, can be high. Where such losses are intolerable to site owners and users, measures need to be taken to prevent otters from gaining access to fish by the installation of appropriate fencing, whilst still allowing their free movement along any adjacent watercourses. Expert advice and guidance should be sought if predation of fish by otters is suspected.

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Refer to English Nature Area Office for legislation and licensing advice:

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60 Bracondale
Norwich
NR1 2BE
Tel: 01603-620558 / Fax: 01603-762552 / Email: norfolk@english-nature.org.uk