the River Otter Journal

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Photo by Eric Peterson©

Small Missouri farm ponds where otter raised litter of pups
Photo courtesy of Missouri Department of Conservation

From Near Zero to Fifteen Thousand – in 20 Years! Missouri's River Otter Saga

By Dave Hamilton, Missouri Department of Conservation

You have heard it said that going from zero to 60 in less than 5 seconds is fast. How about going from zero to 15,000 in about 20 years? Now that is fast!

Well, not exactly zero, but pretty darn close. That is what happened in Missouri with river otters. With a little help, of course. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.

In 1980, biologists with the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) estimated that somewhere around 35-70 otters had managed to survive in the few remnant swamps and man-made wetlands down in the southeastern part of the state, known to Missourians as the Boot-heel, or Mississippi Lowlands. That remnant population had remained static for over 50 years, and it seemed like they would need a shot in the arm if they were ever to reclaim some of their empty habitats in the rest of the state.

The idea wasn't completely new -- Colorado and Minnesota had done a little experimentation with moving wild-trapped otters over land, but the jury was still out as to whether or not this would re-establish viable populations. Not an agency known to sit around and wait, the MDC jumped in

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THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL is a semi-annual publication of the River Otter Alliance. Look for the next edition of THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL in Fall 2006!

River Otter Alliance Mission

The River Otter Alliance promotes the survival of the North American River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*) through education, research and habitat protection. We support current research and reintroduction programs, monitor abundance and distribution in the United States, and educate the general public through our newsletter, THE RIVER OTTER JOURNAL, on the need to restore and sustain River Otter populations.

Our goal is to be a center of communications among wildlife biologists, environmental organizations, fishermen, and all interested parties on a national and international basis, in order to ensure the healthy future of the North American River Otter.

Missouri's River Otter Saga

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with both feet -- if it didn't work, it wouldn't be from a lack of effort!

Bring 'em Back to Missouri

The first batch came from Louisiana in 1982. They were fitted with radio-implants to tell us if they liked the new digs and we released them in some of Missouri's finest wetlands in and around Chariton County in north-central Missouri. A combination of the Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Fountain Grove Conservation Area, and the Yellow Creek bottoms, make for otter heaven along the Grand River watershed. Chariton County now ranks Number One in the nation in total acres of crops converted to wetlands via the Wetland Reserve Program. We weren't completely surprised that the otters hung around and, in a few short generations, made hundreds of new otters, spreading out into the adjacent duck clubs, and borrow ditches.

Missouri has a few similar wetland areas, but the real test of the program would be to see if otters could once-again exist in the every-day habitats along privately owned land next to our rivers and streams. Missouri isn't blessed with an abundance of public spaces (95% private lands), but it is widely-known for its beautiful streams, boasting some 15,000 miles of them -- in several flavors. Slow-moving, wandering prairie streams in the north, and gin-clear, rock bottom Ozark streams in the south. We wanted otters in them all if we could. Or so we thought.

The next experimental release showed that the otters seemed to like them too, so we went about spreading otters far and wide. During an 11-year program, we released 845 otters, setting them free in 43 streams in 35 counties -- trading our widely envied wild turkeys to Kentucky, and they acquired the Louisiana-caught wild otters for us, the same subspecies that once existed here.

Our Cajun supplier, Leroy Sevin, supplied over 2,000 otters to Missouri and other states in the Midwest for otter restoration; he bought them from his Cajun friends and relatives who caught them using the little No. 11 foothold trap -- healthy and rarin' to go.

During those first years, the otter program was very popular, bringing accolades to the MDC -- the Missouri Otter Comeback was featured in several major magazines and newspapers across the country, including the *Smithsonian* and *Sports Illustrated.* Hundreds of otter fans showed up at the otter releases, cheering as the otters scampered out of the cages and into the productive waters. Those were the salad years.

The rest, as they say, is history. The otters not only survived, they flourished. Otters now exist in about every county in the state and in most watersheds, even those miles from where otters were originally stocked. And they made their way into places we never would have believed, nor where they were really wanted.

Otters ready for restoration program release
Photos courtesy of Missouri Department of Conservation

Ozark Otter Disaster

In addition to the thousands of miles of beautiful streams, Missouri is also home to about 600,000-800,000 small man-made fish ponds -- called "farm ponds" here. These are generally about an acre in size to maybe as big as three acres, although some are much bigger. In the early years of their development in the 1960s, the MDC worked closely with other farm agencies to promote these ponds as a method to slow down erosion at the heads of ravines and gullies, and if managed properly, they could provide some excellent fishing. The MDC stocks fingerling fish in those that meet certain criteria, and free of charge. Most have a combination of largemouth bass, bluegill, and channel catfish.

Missouri farm ponds are one of the favorite places for grandparents to introduce young grandchildren to the art and science of fishing, and for any avid or casual angler to spend a wonderful spring or summer day. For otters, these ponds inadvertently supplied thousands of fast-food smorgasbords, where the food is easy and in constant supply. If one should go empty, there is always another just over the hill or just further up the creek somewhere.

In our vision for otters living in Missouri, we

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Eulogy to Frank Webb

By Angie Berchielli

Frank Webb, born on May 3, 1904 in Walesville, New York, a pioneer in the live capture, caring and breeding of otters, passed away on February 10th, 2006 at the age of 101 (just two months shy of his 102nd birthday). He was a life-long resident of New York Mills, New York.

Frank's actual profession was as a self-employed building contractor in the New York Mills area. In 1940, however, he worked on the Alcan Highway in Alaska as a subcontractor to build housing for highway workers. He had many stories about his experiences while working in Alaska. They seemed to revolve around the wildlife of the region (wolves and grizzly bears) and the extremely cold temperatures. Sometimes the workers could only work 15 to 20 minutes at a time, before needing to go inside a shelter to warm up before continuing to work. When he returned home to New York, he continued his work as a building contractor.

Frank was an avid trapper, hunter, guide and educator, a true Adirondack woodsman. Because of his woodsmen's knowledge and his patient and gentle ways, Frank was later hired as a guide for the famous Adirondack League Club, located in the heart of the Adirondack Mountains.

Frank enjoyed spending time at his camp on the West Canada Creek in Noblesboro, New York when ever he could. These opportunities all fit in nicely with his passion for nature, wildlife and especially the otters. The West Canada Creek area is a diverse and rich habitat, where a woodsman such as Frank could spend days observing and learning about otters and other wildlife, first hand.

He was among the first to develop good techniques for the live capture of otters. He also developed such good methods for holding and maintaining the otters year 'round that it eventually led him to being able to successfully breed them in captivity. Not easily done then or today.

He was very generous with his knowledge about otters to anyone who was sincerely interested in them. Those who sought out his knowledge and listened, came away with more than just the answer to the question they may have asked. At over 100 years of age, you also came away with 100 years of history and changes that occurred in the Adirondacks. He mentioned to me once his mother had told him that at one time there had been pine marten on Tug Hill, (a plateau off the eastern shore of Lake Ontario). That's going back a long time. Currently Tug Hill is a combination of state land and private land that is owned primarily by timber companies and sustains a lot of logging. Back then, it was all privately owned, logged and farmed. Currently it is thought there are no pine marten in that area. A while ago, I mentioned Frank's comments about pine marten in the area to some of the furbearer biologists. They are now planning to study the habitat, to see if it

is an area that could again support marten. Someone with such a long history of an area can be so helpful and I believe his knowledge of the area helped with the decision to re-evaluate the area.

He was rarely critical and always patient in explaining his methods and techniques to anyone who asked. He was also very generous with equipment and advice in helping someone get started in the business of raising otters. I know that he helped me a lot. I always appreciated the time he took with me. He was a kind and gentle man, and a true gentleman. Those of us who knew him, loved to listen to his stories and we miss him. He was an original Adirondacker.

Frank is survived by two daughters, Gladys Rogers and Dorothy Chard, one son and daughter-in-law, Robert and Suzanne Webb, 10 grandchildren, 27 great grandchildren and 6 great-great grandchildren, and 2 sisters, and his dog, Tracy.

Editor's Note: For more information on Frank, see "Frank Webb, Otter Expert" in the spring 2001 River Otter Journal and "Any Otters for Me" and "President's Message" in the spring 2003 River Otter Journal.

Missouri's River Otter Saga

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Typical otter habitat in north-central Missouri
Photo courtesy of Missouri Department of Conservation

Otter eating smallmouth bass in Missouri Ozarks
Photo by Glenn Chambers©

sure didn't see these ponds as providing much habitat, nor did we see the impending train wreck that otter depredation would cause with the anglers. Missouri is a true fishing state, a $2 billion per year industry, and home to Bass Pro Shops.

Otters are a social animal, and at the top of the aquatic food chain. Occasionally called "water wolves," there is no predator more efficient in my mind as river otters. Traveling in groups of 2-6 animals, they can literally hammer the fish in a small pond before anyone even knows that they had moved in. Otters can travel over land to find these fast-food joints, sometimes traveling four miles or more from the nearest stream. Otters eat fish in the winter when they are most vulnerable, especially hand-fed catfish. At times, fish are so easy that otters kill many more than they eat, leaving the evidence of the massacre on the banks for the owners to discover.

As otters multiplied and spread out from the release points, calls began to pour in about their poor choices in dining locations -- farm ponds were soon ravaged to the point where anglers became angry, demanding some kind of relief. The damage wasn't limited only to farm ponds either. In the central Ozarks, small headwater streams and tributaries were also vulnerable, and like farm ponds, fish were easy targets in the shallow pools. These were to the local anglers, goodbets when looking for a source of fillets for the Friday night fish fry, and were popular hangouts. In the central Ozarks, conservation agents handled over 500 otter complaints in one year alone. As one local angler put it, "there's not enough room for otters and fishermen in the Ozarks."

Local politicians got involved, and when the otter topic became one of the hot-rocks in the state capitol, a feeding frenzy of another kind erupted -- this time it was MDC at the bottom of the food chain. Newspaper headlines read: "Otters at Center of Controversy," "The fur flies over Missouri's cute but greedy river otters," and "Ozark Otter Disaster."

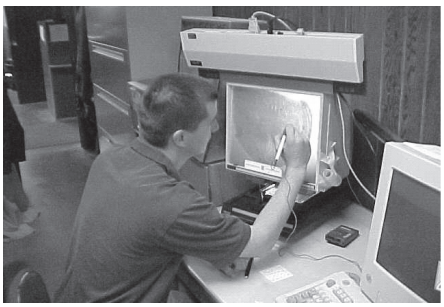
Seemingly overnight, we had gone from hero to goat, and otters were on the tip of everyone's tongue who wanted to poke a little heat at the Department. Even the MDC's funding, largely based on a self-imposed sales tax, became a political football as the otter controversy boiled over.

In Search of Balance

We had initiated our first regulated trapping season back in 1996, in an effort to bring some balance back to the rivers and ponds. Of course, this didn't sit well with everyone, and we ended up in court during the first two trapping seasons at the hands of two national animal rights groups, never known to miss an opportunity. We did eventually persevere however, and annual regulated trapping seasons became the backbone of our efforts to restore some balance.

However, it didn't appear that the two-month long trapping season was enough to take the heat off of the otters in the Ozarks, and we formed a citizen advisory committee to help tackle the issue. Composed of otter enthusiasts, anglers, county commissioners, an animal rights activist, fisheries and wildlife biologists, stream ecologists, crayfish experts, university professors, graduate students, a trapper, and a few local business owners, we went to work trying to find some middle ground and a workable solution.

After two long years of looking at data, consulting with scientists, taking field trips to farm ponds and to wade along local streams searching for otter latrines and fish parts, and lots of wrangling, the team reached an agreement in principle. They agreed on a compromise that otter management zones would protect otters in low-density areas with a limited otter harvest, and provide much needed relief in the



Missouri researcher studies otter diet
Photo courtesy of Missouri Department of Conservation

Ozarks by adding a full month to the trapping season -- with no limit. For now, a five-zone approach helps us to direct the most intensive trapping pressure where it is most needed and allows a sustainable harvest of otters in other areas where we want otter populations to remain stable.

Radio-marked river otter release
Photo courtesy of Missouri Department of Conservation

Lessons Learned – Current Status

We have studied river otters and their food since the beginning and some answers we learned may surprise you. Each year now, we intensively monitor otter and game fish populations in 20 Ozark stream segments. For instance, otters do eat the prized smallmouth bass in Missouri, but other similar fish, such as long-ear sunfish (unimportant to most anglers), are more important. About 10% of the otter meals consist of bass, while about 35% consist of long-ear sunfish. Missouri otters eat almost exclusively crayfish about nine months each year, and crayfish populations in Ozark streams are among the highest ever recorded anywhere in the nation. Combine that with the abundance of fish from the thousands of farm ponds, Missouri does indeed hold healthy otter habitats.

During each trapping season, we study otter reproduction by collecting otter carcasses from trappers and searching for blastocysts and implanted fetuses to provide estimates of reproductive efforts. Otters here (and probably other Midwest states) are breeding at earlier ages, and having more young in each litter than was previously documented.

River Otter Population Parameters
Pregnancy Rates and Litter Sizes

	Previous Literature	Missouri Data
Pregnancy Rates		
Adults	60-80%	80%
2 Year Olds	0-10%	80%
Yearlings	0%	40-60%
Litter Size	2-2.5	3.2-3.5

Many female otters are breeding as yearlings, giving birth to first litters near their second year of life. That factor alone cuts the generation time in half, and over a short time period, greatly increases the population growth rate.

Also contributing to the rapid population growth is the high survival rates we have witnessed. We are in the latter stages of a long-term otter survival study, implanting radio transmitters in live-trapped, wild otters. We have found that other than trapping mortality, otters have little else to control their numbers when food is abundant.

Since 2001, we have captured and successfully implanted radio transmitters in 234 river otters. Our trappers (two husband and wife teams) have well over 300 otter captures to their credit using the No. 11 long-spring foothold trap. Otters are transported to veterinarians where the radios are surgically implanted. They release the otters at the capture location the next morning and each one is located at least twice each month to monitor movements and determine if they are alive. We have documented 94 mortalities; 77 by trappers during regulated trapping seasons, and 17 from other causes. Those include:

- 1 road-kill
- 1 trapped after season closed
- 2 bacterial infections
- 6 suspected shot by people
- 7 unknown

Our management goal is to use regulated trapping to maintain healthy otter populations within the tolerance levels of the habitats and the people who live there. In some years, annual survival rates exceed 80% -- and averaged over 75% in areas where our goal is to allow populations to remain stable or continue to increase slowly.

In the Ozark streams where the problems are the most severe, our goal is to reduce otter populations to the level where we can restore quality sport-fish populations. Thanks to a marketable otter pelt, trappers have been very helpful in achieving this. In areas where we want fewer otters, trappers have taken as many as 50% of the marked population each year, and otter populations are declining in these targeted Ozark streams. Anglers report better fishing recently and complaints about otters have declined to a tolerable level.

At the peak of the otter population, we estimate we had somewhere between 15,000 and as many as 18,000 otters. We have documented otter densities as high as three otters per mile in some small streams, and the fish populations did decline. In most streams however, densities are about an otter per mile, and fish populations look good. This past season, trappers took over 3,000 otters.

Happy fisheries biologist with smallmouth
Photo courtesy of Missouri Department of Conservation

Using regulated trapping as our management tool, the population has declined closer to our goal of 10,000 otters statewide. The reduced population makes for better neighbors -- they are now much more tolerable and most anglers don't mind sharing a few occasional fish with neighbors like that. Long live otters in Missouri!

Otter Updates

By Tracy Johnston

- Dr. Jim Conroy, Managing Director of Celtic Environment Ltd. in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, was recently appointed as the new chairman of the World Conservation Union's Otter Specialist Group. Dr. Conroy replaces Claus Reuther, who passed away on December 29, 2004. The Otter Specialist Group is one of the task forces of the Species Survival Commission (SSC) of the World Conservation Union (IUCN). The World Conservation Union "seeks to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable." The Species Survival Commission "serves as the main source of advice to the [World Conservation] Union and its members on the technical aspects of species conservation."

- The World Conservation Union's (IUCN) Xth Annual International Otter Colloquium will be held in Hwacheon, Gangwon, South Korea October 10-16, 2007. Han, Sung-Yong of the Korean Otter Research Center and the IUCN Otter Specialist Group is organizing the event. The colloquium, held every three years in locations around the world, will include academic presentations as well as various cultural events. Paper abstract summaries are due by May 1, 2007. See http://www.otter2007.org/eng/?w_p=00_home for information on the conference. Questions may be e-mailed to otter@otter2007.org. The IXth Annual International Otter Colloquium was held in Frostburg, Maryland June 4-10, 2004.

- A fisherman was captured on amateur video tape piloting his boat through raft of sea otters at Moss Landing Harbor in Monterey Bay on April 1, 2006, the opening day of sport salmon fishing. The area is a "no wake" zone with a posted speed limit of five knots. Those who witnessed the incident said the boater hit the otters intentionally, possibly injuring some, despite the presence of buoys directing boats away from otters. The individual was reportedly cited by the U.S. Coast Guard for violating the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act. The maximum penalty for killing a sea otter is one year in jail and a $100,000 fine.

Photo by Diane Tomecek©

Colorado Watershed Assembly Seeks Special-Interest License Plate

By John Mulvihill and Carol Peterson

The Colorado Watershed Assembly, CWA, a non-profit statewide organization, is applying to the state legislature for a special interest automobile license plate to raise money for the protection of water. The proposed license plate features a drawing of a river otter. The assembly chose the river otter because, "These playful animals are found in at least three of our major river systems--the Upper Colorado, upper South Platte and the Dolores River systems--and are considered one of the top aquatic carnivores in the Rockies. Because otters spend most of their lives in water and appear to be sensitive to pollution (Eric Ellis, 2003, University of Michigan), they are excellent indicators of river health."

The organization's proposed license plate design included an otter pictured with a fish in its mouth. However, following recommendations from the River Otter Alliance, CWA agrees that depicting the otter without a fish serves their goal of showing the otter as an indicator species without the added controversy that the otter potentially reduces game fish populations. (Otters actually have a varied diet and, as opportunistic feeders, they are generally more likely to prey on slower-moving, non-game fish.)

The process for creating the special interest license plate starts with circulating petitions to interested citizens to sign up for the plates. The petitions, application and the license plate design must go to the State Transportation Review Committee for approval in January, 2007. Once authorized, the plates will be issued in 2008, and citizens can purchase them for a one time additional fee of $75.00 above the cost of their vehicle registration.

Interested Colorado residents can send their name to be added to the list of people who would like to see this license plate approved. Please email, phone or send a letter with your name and address, county of residence, and how many plates you would like to purchase in 2008 to Ember Michel, Colorado Watershed Assembly, 633 Remington Street, Fort Collins, CO 80524-3024, phone 970-484-3678, email ember@coloradowater.org.

The Colorado Watershed Assembly will receive most of the money raised through issuance of the license plate. CWA develops programs and services across the state to "ensure protection of one of our most valuable resources-our water."

President's Message

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Spring 2006 edition of The River Otter Journal.

In this issue, Dave Hamilton of the Missouri Department of Conservation updates readers on the Missouri river otter reintroduction program, which became controversial when the animals reproduced at a much higher rate than expected and started to prey on farm pond fish in competition with anglers. Claudio Delgado-Rodríguez also provides an update on his on-going studies of Chile's marine otters. This issue includes an excerpt from Zoe Bowers' manuscript "There's an Otter in My Tub," describing her experiences caring for an injured river otter in Alaska in the early 1960s. In addition, Angie Berchielli provides a eulogy to Frank Webb, a long-time friend to otters and otter care-givers, who passed away February 10, 2006 at age 101. Frank was valuable resource for advice on the care and breeding of river otters for over 50 years, as well as a source of otters which he live-trapped for educational facilities and reintroduction programs using traps he modified to minimize injury to the animals. Speaking from personal experience, Frank was truly a pleasure to know. On behalf of the River Otter Alliance and myself, I want to extend our sincerest condolences to his family and friends.

Thanks to you, our members, the River Otter Alliance has just awarded two $200 donations in support of river otter research. The first donation went to University of Alberta Master's student, Chris Desjardins, who is researching "the effects of land-use and landscape configuration on the occurrence and abundance of river otters in northeastern Alberta." The second contribution went to Scott Saffer, a biology teacher at Newcomb High School in New Mexico, to aid in a field survey for river otters on the San Juan River.

On a personal note: after five years as president of The River Otter Alliance and ten years and twenty issues as newsletter editor for The River Otter Journal, I plan to 'retire' from both positions this year to a less prominent position on the board. I want to thank all the board members – Carol Peterson, David Berg, Glenn Chambers, Jo Thompson, John Mulvihill, Judy Berg, Lissa Margetts, Merav Ben-David, and Paul Polechla – for all their assistance, support and work through the years. In addition, I want to thank Paige Shepard of Paige Design, Inc. for her hard work producing the newsletter artwork and David Berg and John Mulvihill for their help in proofreading articles. I also want to thank David Berg for his work on our web site and Bob Fetterman for hosting the site, as well as the board members and all others too numerous to list for their contributions, including articles, to The River Otter Journal over the years. Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank all of you, our members, who have made the work of the River Otter Alliance possible.

We hope you enjoy the newsletter.

--Tracy Johnston, *ROA President and Newsletter Editor*

Southern Sea Otter Translocation Recovery Plan – Update

By Chris Wittenbrink

In response to the threatened status of the southern sea otter *(Enhydra lutris nereis)* the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) developed a translocation program. The purpose of the program was to, among other things, protect the sea otter from catastrophic events such as an oil spill and to aid in increasing the overall population.

Between 1987 and 1990, the FWS translocated 140 otters to San Nicholas Island. In addition to the translocation area, a management zone was established where otters would be removed to protect shellfish fisheries and other users or marine resources. Subsequent evaluations of the translocation program suggest the program has not met its goal of increasing the population of otters. In addition, maintaining the management zone, including the removal of otters has been determined to jeopardize the continued existence of the species.

A supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is currently being performed to evaluate changed circumstances and new information obtained since the initial EIS and release of otters in 1987. The draft supplemental EIS was released in August 2005 (see http://www.fws.gov/ventura/es/SSOrecplan/seaotter_index.html) and proposes the existing translocation program be terminated. (Alternative 3C). The primary basis for this recommendation is the translocation program is not aiding the otter, but in fact may be causing further population declines. The final EIS has not yet been released.

Photo by Diane Tomecek©

There's an Otter in my Tub!

By Zoe Bowers

In the land of rainbows, waterfalls and shimmering white peaks, the small town of Ketchikan, Alaska sparkles from an afternoon shower. It is approaching July and something amazing is about to happen, for an encounter with a river otter no matter how brief is always amazing. In two days after I arrive in this small village on a forested island with my husband Clark, I will become quite unexpectedly--a "mama to an otter."

Our close relationship with this elusive, most non-aggressive species of carnivores will last nearly seventeen years, from infant pup, to "teenager," to a mature adult otter. My first hand account is a story of unconditional love for an innocent wild creature abandoned by its animal parents because of some unknown accident, then whisked into the civilized world of man where things are quite different from the forests of southeast Alaska.

The night sky was black and wet with rain as our final destination came into view. Across the dark waters of the Inland Sea, a faint sprinkling of lights beckoned to me and brightened my spirits. How relieved I was that our very long journey was about to end and how far away the world we left behind seemed at that moment, that day,
June 28, 1963.

My husband and I had managed to escape L.A., the sprawling West Coast mega-city with its twisted maze of multi-layered freeways and daily smog alerts that had been our home. In just three days we had driven 2,200 miles on pavement, 1,500 miles on the dust and gravel of the Alcan Highway, and completed 1,000 nautical miles aboard the mighty ferry, Malaspina, one of the vessels making up the very new Alaska State Ferry System.

We were in a hurry because lost days meant lost pay--Clark's new job as a summer temp with the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G) provided no travel funds. And of course, unbeknownst to us, fate had another reason for luring us north quickly, perhaps caused by that fleeting wish we had made after seeing the river otters romp at Marineland of the Pacific where Clark had been one of the whale trainers.

Tafi and Zoe
Photo by Clark Bowers©

The horn blasted for all passengers to return to their vehicles parked on the lower car deck of the big ferry liner, the big ship was tied snuggly against the massive dock. Minutes later the muffled roar of twenty-some vehicles starting their motors broke the silence, all anxious to exit. No doubt looking as green as our sage green VW van, we obediently disembarked along with other more rugged looking cars, motor homes, and trucks, then breaking from the procession headed for town, my weary driver pulled into the parking lot next to the dock.

We got out and searched for our contact; my husband's new boss, the southeast director of the ADF&G, who easily spotted two weary travelers scanning the sparse crowd in the dull light. The next morning we were greeted by the sun playing hide and seek with scattered clouds gathering for yet another onslaught, a normal weather pattern for the temperate rain forests of Southeast Alaska.

A quick tour of our new town revealed a pioneer charm unfamiliar to my eyes. Rustic Ketchikan had only one mile of shops squeezed along the shored up main street, and one grocery store. There were two marinas filled with commercial fishing boats, one movie theater in the center of town, and one bar that looked as though it had been built during Yukon gold rush days, all of which completed the picture of rural Alaska in the 1960's.

But where could we live? I looked to the green hills rising sharply from the blue channel separating Revill, as the locals call their island and smaller Gravena Island. Modest wood-frame houses clung to their allotted spaces at forest's edge; it appeared there was precious little flat land to build on.

We soon found there were precious few rentals also, and expensive! Our prospects were not looking good, far worse than we had expected. We only needed one however, and that we found on our third day, a newly renovated upstairs duplex only lightly furnished.

With uncanny timing, more good news came on this soon to be legendary "third day"--a stray otter cub had been found by a woman living to the north of town. She spotted the lone youngster wandering across the road near her house, and called the ADF&G for help.

My heart leapt when I heard the news--were strays found often I wondered, then found they were not. (In fact, by the end of summer the only other animal reported was a bald eagle.) Since the otter appeared healthy and normal, it could be adopted immediately. Clark and I, as a presently unencumbered young couple, were the logical choice to be parents of the little orphan of the wild.

The summer sun was still high in the western sky when the otter delivery team arrived at the house after work, my husband carrying an uncovered crate with all the attentiveness of the stork himself. I stretched for a peak at the precious cargo and caught a glimpse of a small, dark, bundle of brown fur stirring on the bottom of the box. It looked bigger than

Photo by Jon Eric Dieges©

I expected a baby otter to be, about the size of a slightly deflated football. Still, the otter appeared to be nothing more than a genderless fur-ball. I could hardly wait to observe "it" more closely. The unveiling proceeded in the basement of our host family's house; a safer place in case the otter might try to scamper away.

Our first offering of friendship, we agreed, should be in the form of food. We knew that our little castaway must be hungry for some form of nourishment, but not knowing how old it was and if it had been weaned yet presented our first concern.

Our anxiety was short-lived however, as the little pup devoured Clark's offering of hamburger meat with such gusto there would be no need to concoct a 'baby' formula. This indicated the otter had been out of the den possibly six weeks.

Clark then reached into the box and placed the otter on the floor for better viewing. Expecting something on the order of a puppy dog with a snout or a kitten with pointed ears I was startled at the brown puff of nothing before me. "What tiny ears you have," was my first thought, and "What a big flat nose on such a small head." "Or does it just look that way because of no indentation where a neck might be?"

I was on the verge of disappointment, wondering if I could ever learn to love this oddness when the little fur-muff began to move ever so cautiously. After advancing a few steps four stubby short legs stopped in their tracks. What's wrong? I wondered, and waited for the next move. The little otter arched its back and lifted its tail off the floor into a rigid point, holding it for just a moment; then it relaxed all but flexed tail and preceded forward, exposing a small brown heap of "relief."

Several days passed before we could determine for sure the gender of our otter. By the time we moved into our own place and were able to observe our new pet closer, we knew it was time to select a girl's name. Clark was certainly more experienced at picking names, having chosen some for the dolphins and whales he had worked with at Marineland. But I definitely wanted to be part of this naming event, so I set about to find a very special one; a name with all the mystery and heritage of the land our otter was born into.

I scoured the shelves of the small Ketchikan library for a Russian or Tlingit Indian name, but nothing I found seemed to have that special ring to it, besides being feminine sounding and easy to call. (I was still thinking in cat terms of "kitty-kitty!") Clark, in his seemingly haphazard method for picking names, thought of *Taffy*; perhaps because of her marvelously svelte body that she could stretch into so many shapes. I agreed, but liked the spelling a little different. So *Tafi* it became.

After this wonderful surprise from the 'animal stork', our whole purpose for being in Alaska seemed to have altered. All our original plans for a new life of adventure in rugged Alaska became hazy in the light of our new attraction. The unexpected had happened–our fleeting wish had been fulfilled.

Six days after our arrival in Ketchikan, we unloaded our meager belongings from the van into our apartment; it was time to find out what otter parenting was all about. Of course I wondered if otter and human could even co-exist on a daily basis. I really had not a clue how living with this creature of the wild might be, naively assuming it should be much like raising a dog or cat that swims and since I had only a cat as a child, my perspective was quite limited.

Clark however, grew up on a farm in Nebraska with lots of animals and had also gained some otter-behavior knowledge from his years at Marineland. Fortunately he remembered the formula for otter chow, the hamburger mixture we introduced to Tafi. His time spent in the "animal kitchen" of the oceanarium proved helpful.

And so armed with limited knowledge and plenty of love and enthusiasm, we entered the classroom for our first lesson in how to raise an otter. We had already decided the room next to the kitchen (the size of a small bedroom) would be just right for Tafi's special private quarters as there was no carpeting on the floor, just easy to clean vinyl tile.

Photo by Jon Eric Dieges©

And what might she need for the night, we both pondered? Most importantly, she needed a bed, a cozy spot to cuddle up in and sleep. We brought our groceries home in a brown cardboard box, so it should do just fine. Cats like to sleep in paper shopping bags and grocery boxes, perhaps otters do too. Of course a bowl full of fresh water was essential, and plenty of newspapers laid out for her toilet area. With the elaborate preparations complete, we were ready to tuck the baby otter in and say goodnight.

Our youngster should be as tired as we, right? And so with all the loving tenderness of a new father, Clark carried Tafi into her "bedroom" and put her down beside the brown box. When she began to sniff

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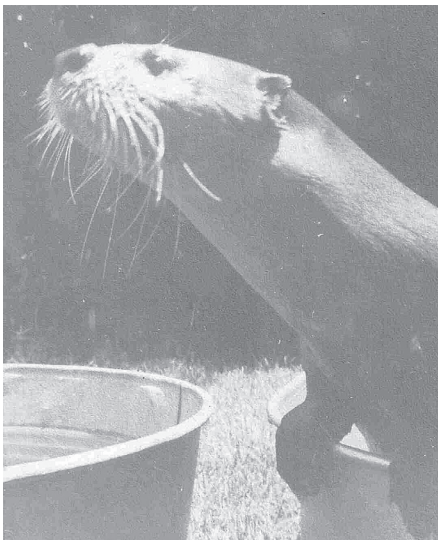
There's an Otter in my Tub! *continued from page 9*



Tafi's long neck
Photo by Jon Eric Dieges©

and inspect the unfamiliar surroundings, he quickly stepped out of the room and shut the door behind him thinking a quick disappearance by the "parent" would prompt her to accept the new environment more readily.

Was this technique working? All we could hear was the light shuffling of baby otter claws on vinyl tile as the little animal went about exploring the perimeters of the unfamiliar room and then most likely moving on to investigate it's sparse contents. After acquainting herself with all that is new around her, she will settle down for the night, we assured ourselves.

Tired but content we retired to "our" bedroom on the opposite side of the apartment, the living room and kitchen separating us from Tafi, and collapsed onto our mattress five inches off the floor (the box spring was still stuck in the van). As I pulled the covers over my tired body, closed my eyes and settled into the calm, dark silence of the Alaska night, waiting for blessed sleep to envelope us...

BANG! The air was suddenly shattered with a horrendous noise resembling a slamming door. Our eyelids snapped open, ears became alert, and our senses jarred awake in an instant. "What was that?" we both muttered into the dark.

Then again the loud noise reverberated throughout the house. It was Tafi, we realized, using the door as her instrument to communicate with us, pawing and scratching her dislike at being left alone, and from her point of view, probably again abandoned.

As she continued banging and scratching out her S.O.S., I was thankful we had no neighbors downstairs, as yet. More importantly though, we began to fret about whether this behavior was going to be Tafi's nightly routine. Clark had read that otters are primarily nocturnal animals and especially those living near civilization where they become more wary because of human activity. Perhaps our young otter desired to prowl in the night.

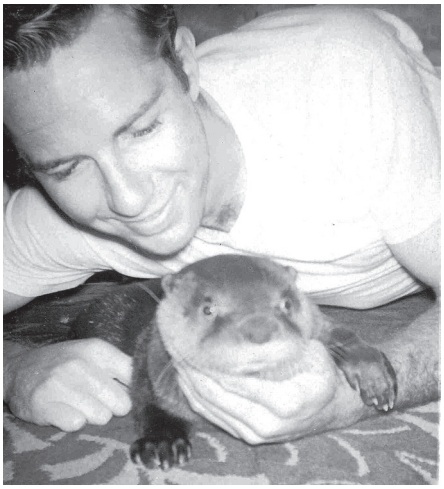
When the banging and scratching continued, we reluctantly got up and headed for the refrigerator, thinking food might pacify our restless otter. Clark reached for the bowl of hamburger mixture, formed a few bite-sized wads then held them over Tafi's head. This motivated her to lift her nose to the smell and lazily open her jaw wide to let the meat fall in. Her slow and rather mechanical acceptance of three more bites told us, it probably wasn't food she wanted. Perhaps a bit of exercise will give us the desired results, a tired otter. We proceeded to run and prance about clapping our hands, like one would engage a dog in play.

Twenty minutes later our wild gyrations had only succeeded moderately, but we were more wide awake than ever and definitely wondering what on earth was going through Tafi's little otter mind as she observed our strange antics, especially considering the outcome of this first night of co-habitation. Again we quickly exited her room and returned to our bedroom hoping to hear nothing from the other side of the house. We lay silently waiting and hoping our display of attention had lured her into slumber. After all, it was quite late by then, close to midnight. A moment later the big bangs continued and the futility of our sleeping arrangement finally sunk in. She was obviously trying to tell us it was not food or play she wanted, it was us!

Too late in the night to care about using "the discipline by ignoring" technique on our new house-mate, we quite willingly gave in to the pleasure of her company beside us. There on the rug next to our low-lying bed she quickly curled into a ball and was fast asleep within seconds, problem solved.

Sometime during the early morning hours, Tafi eased quietly onto our mattress on the floor and settled next to the human warmth our bodies provided; frequently in the nights to come this was her preferred spot, even after the bed was returned to its normal height.

Having established the basic requirements for food and sleep, we ventured on into the unknown territory of otter parenting. During the following days we watched a very curious Tafi acquaint herself with all the nooks and crannies of the apartment; *but why does she drag herself around that way?*



Tafi and Clark
Photo by Zoe Bowers©

We feared from the start she might have been injured and now it was confirmed; her rear legs were weak, the webbed feet sensitive and unable to spread for proper support in the upright stance of a normal otter. The cause of her injury would remain a mystery, but happily in the years to come, as her strength improved, we found her lameness did not hinder her mobility that much.

This is a short except from "There's an Otter in my Tub!" The unpublished manuscript includes the travels and adventures of Tafi during her nearly seventeen years of life. For more information contact The River Otter Alliance or the author. ZB

Update from Chile: Marine Otters *(Lontra felina)* as an umbrella species, preliminary assessment in central-south Chile

By Claudio Delgado-Rodríguez
(E-mail: cdelgado@conservacionmarina.cl)

The use of shortcuts is broadly used in conservation practices in order to minimize the expenditures, ensuring the protection of biodiversity. In this sense, the umbrella species concept seems to be a good approach. This concept has been proposed as a tool to help the management of wide natural communities by focusing on large-bodied or wide ranged species. Then, several definitions to this concept have been proposed, although one of the last could be suggested as a consensual definition: "a species whose conservation confers protection to a large number of naturally co-occurring species." However, the use and the recognition of umbrella species as an effective tool in natural areas management is still a matter of controversy. While some authors have demonstrated the effectiveness of the concept, other studies show the limited use of umbrella species. Anyway, the concept could be a useful tool especially to determine types and size of habitats to protect during a reserve network planning process. However, few researchers have tested the usefulness and the applicability of the concept.

In Chile, only during the last five years, governmental agencies have developed efforts to design marine reserve networks. However, much of those efforts are using the umbrella species approach under a pre-supposed base and few attempts to demonstrate this assumption have been done. This might have some considerable negative effects in the efficiency of marine biodiversity protection and future reserve management.

Marine Otter
Photo by Ana Pfeifer© of Conservacion Marina

For this reason, since January 2006, the Research Program of Conservacion Marina, a Chilean non-profit organization, has been developing a preliminary test for the efficiency of marine otters as umbrella species in exposed shores in central-south of Chile. A project principally supported by the Research Fellowship Program of the Wildlife Conservation Society will contribute preliminary information about the efficiency of marine otters as umbrellas. It's expected

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that data obtained by the organization since 2003 could be useful to marine reserve design and also to contribute to the marine otter and habitat conservation program.

This research is focused on three sites with different otter densities and similar human impact. Main aims are to assess and compare coastal biodiversity including macroinvertebrates, algae and fishes at both intertidial and shallow subtidial zones between the sites, to characterize the terrestrial and subaquatic habitat, and to assess the seasonal variation of the coastal biodiversity at different sites.

Furthermore, public diffusion campaigns about the project and the importance of marine otter conservation have been implemented, involving especially local fishermen and environmental organizations.

Photo by Ana Pfeifer© of Conservacion Marina

This project is supported by WCS-RFP and has the cooperation of IOSF, Reserva Costera Valdiviana and The Nature Conservancy.

Visit the River Otter Alliance Web Page at www.otternet.com/ROA

River Otter Alliance Board of Directors

The River Otter Alliance is a non-profit, tax-exempt group organized to promote the survival of the North American River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*) though education, research, reintroduction, and habitat protection.

All work and efforts for this organization and newsletter are on a volunteer basis by those who share a common concern for the welfare of the river otter and its habitat. We invite all interested persons to contribute their time at any level of the organization.

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The River Otter Alliance

Photo by Eric Peterson©