

the River Otter Journal

SPRING-SUMMER 2008

VOLUME XVII NUMBER I

ON THE DOCKS IN MONTEREY

By Jason Watts

It was the second week of August 2007. The morning sun is just beginning to light the water of the Monterey Bay. While walking towards my boat, optimistic about a day of wildlife photography, Eric, a fuel dockworker at the

Breakwater Cove Marina, asked me if I'd seen the "new addition." A young southern sea otter had given birth to a male pup the night before and was hauling out

on the dock to rest and feed. A noisy dock may seem like an odd place to give birth and raise an otter pup, but it is the backdrop of this unusual otter story.

When I arrived that first morning, I found the young mother foraging for food on the pilings of the marina. Her pup rolled around on the dock, occasionally calling for his mother with a "mee." As I approached, I could see that there

was another photographer already set up with his tripod. I recognized him as Jim, the owner of the *Escapade*, a local scuba diving charter boat. The otter pair had hauled out in the slip next to Jim's boat, so I carefully and quietly approached.

Over the next week Jim and I met every morning to watch and photograph these beautiful animals. We watched as the mother popped out of the water with her

pup, tossing him onto the dock like a doll. After a little time of settling down, she would usually begin grooming herself and the baby, pulling his fluffy body on top of her chest. Not long after grooming had begun, the hungry pup would start to nurse, then slip off to sleep. More often than not however, the playful pup would jump back into the water, resetting the whole chain of events.



Photo © Jason Watts

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Special point of interest

After submitting his article, Jason shared this additional story:

"While doing homework on my boat in March, I heard—tap,tap,tap.....tap, tap,tap..... Right away I deduced correctly that an otter was using my hull as a mussel mallet. Peeking over the side, I saw a young untagged otter pulling tasty treats off of my slip."

Thanks again, Jason, for sharing your extraordinary experiences with us!



The River Otter Journal has been printed on 100% recycled paper.

President's Message – The Doctrine of Nature's Trust

Welcome to the Spring 2008 issue of *The River Otter Journal*. Wait, did I say 2008? Where have the months gone? For last spring's issue, I wrote of the rite of passage for our flora and fauna to be renewed and introduce us to new generations of their species. I also wrote of the perils of climate change, perhaps most obviously marked by earlier arrivals of spring flowers and migrant birds each year, and widened spatial and temporal shifts of prey and predator, flora and pollinator. The last twelve months have given us a multiplicity of events and phenomena to remind us that the planet is in transition to a new climatic state – one it hasn't experienced since life as we know it first appeared. Severe weather, drought, melting glaciers and ice floes, rising sea levels, temporal and spatial shifts of flora and fauna, all give rise to uncertainty about the planet's future. Polar bears and penguins – the poster children of climate change – are, if I may use the phrase, both proverbially and literally at the tip of the iceberg. Speaking of icebergs, precisely as I write this, a large chunk of Antarctic ice has just broken from the Wilkins Ice Shelf, threatening the survival of the entire 6,000 square mile shelf.

Otters aren't exempt from the effects of climate change, but their adaptability will serve them better through the transition than species that are less

adaptable, more locally indigenous, and whose symbiotic dependents' spatial and temporal shifts are disparate from theirs.

Mary Christina Wood is a professor of law – and distinguished faculty fellow – at the University of Oregon. She specializes in natural resource law and American Indian law. Two years ago I heard her deliver an address from her paper “Nature's Trust – Reclaiming an Environmental Discourse.” I haven't thought the same way about environmental regulation since. This paper is available at her website (www.law.uoregon.edu/faculty/mwood). I recommend and encourage you to visit it and read all her publications and speeches available there. Her Doctrine of Nature's Trust is bound to become legendary. While not directly or specifically pertaining to otters, it certainly involves otters inasmuch as they are a component of the biodiverse community it attempts to affect. I take this opportunity to introduce the Doctrine to you by excerpting this paper, that you will have a new model for evaluating environmental protection. The ideas and quotes expressed below are Professor Wood's, unless otherwise attributed, and are published here with her consent and encouragement.

Four statutes enacted in the mid twentieth century form the foundation for environmental protection: The National Environmental Policy Act, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and Endangered Species Act.

As a consequence, we have more environmental law than any other country in the world. These statutes give agencies tremendous authority to oversee the

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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-Winter 2008!

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 wild-life 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. The River Otter Alliance is a tax-exempt, non-profit organization. All efforts to our organization are on a voluntary basis by those who share a common concern for the river otter and its habitat. We welcome any interested persons to volunteer their time at any level of the organization.

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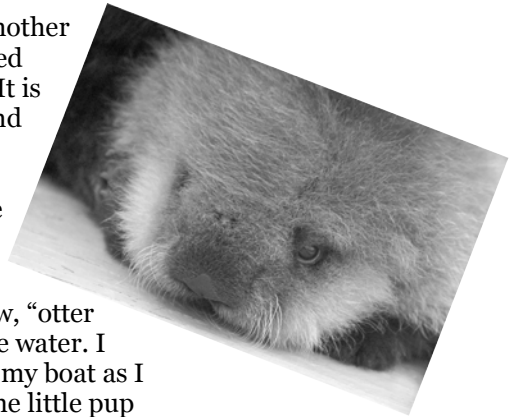
ON THE DOCKS IN MONTEREY (CONT'D)

All Photos (page 3) © Jason Watts

(Continued from page 1)

It seemed to me, at the time, that the mother was healthy and well fed. She was tagged and a frequent resident of the marina. It is my understanding that this is the second pup she has raised in this location and that her own mother raised her here as well. This may help explain her strange tolerance for human activity.

Over the next few months the pair was spotted daily. However, as the pup grew, “otter school” moved off the dock and into the water. I would often spot the two of them from my boat as I came in and out of the marina. Soon, the little pup was as big as his mother and finding food of his own. At some point, the pup was tagged for research like his mother. My last encounter with the pair was on December 24, 2007. The two were foraging among the boats near the coast guard pier.



Like most marinas found along the California coastline, the Breakwater Cove Marina is a busy place. Any day of the week, there is a steady flow of boaters, workers, and boat traffic contributing to the sights and sounds of a working dock. But, for some reason, this otter chose to raise her pup where I could watch. It was a rare and wonderful experience.



Otter Updates

By Diane Tomecek

- ▲ Jamie Crait, from the Ecology program at the University of Wyoming, is testing Yellowstone river otter samples to define genotypes of those otters. He is hoping to have results in late spring or early summer.
- ▲ In December 2007, the Monterey Bay Aquarium held a contest to name the African spotted-necked otter pup born behind the scenes at the *Wild About Otters* exhibit in September 2007. Over 5,000 votes were submitted during the contest. The final selection, Shani, meaning "curiosity" or "adventure", received 62% of the votes cast.
- ▲ The River Otter Alliance grant committee met during the fall of 2007 and awarded the following grants:
 - ↳ **The New Mexico Friend of the River Otter:** \$500 grant awarded for on-site training for volunteer monitoring of released animals and monitoring kits if or when reintroduction takes place. *Note: Release has not taken place and no funds have been awarded to date. See article on page 6 for an update on the New Mexico Reintroduction program.*
 - ↳ **Jyoti Bhandari and Dhruba Bijaya, University of Pokhara, Nepal:** \$500 grant awarded for a collaborative otter research project.
- ↳ **The Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe:** \$542.91 awarded to "purchase hair-snagging equipment to conduct surveys of river otter latrines and to collect hair and feces along the Elwha River" in Washington State.
- ▲ The new income tax checkoff in California raised over \$250,000 for sea otter research in 2007. We hope the 2008 tax season will be as productive! Learn more at www.SaveSeaOtters.org.
- ▲ The 26th Mustelid Colloquium is being held in Budapest, Hungary from August 28-31, 2008. For more information on this event go to: <http://mustelid2008.elte.hu/index.php>.
- ▲ The Spring 2007 edition of the *The River Otter Journal* reported on the international fur trade problem. The issue is of escalating concern to animal activist organizations and the impact to otter species throughout the world is becoming especially disturbing. Please visit the International Otter Survival Fund website at www.otter.org to learn more about the Furget-Me-Not campaign begun to raise funds and awareness regarding the fur trade issue.



SPECIAL POINT OF INTEREST

AS PART OF THEIR OTTER RESEARCH, JYOTI AND DHRUBA PLAN TO SURVEY THE NARAYANI RIVER IN NEPAL NEXT MONTH.



Grant Awardees:
Jyoti Bhandari & Dhruba Bijaya

Abandoned sea otter regains health [at SeaWorld]

A baby California sea otter found weak and starving on a remote beach in Santa Barbara County has been nursed back to health at SeaWorld.

The orphaned otter was about 5 days old and still had her umbilical cord attached when she came ashore July 21 [2007] at Jalama Beach. Wildlife officials don't know why the pup was abandoned by her mother.

Animal care specialists at SeaWorld, a marine-themed park in San Diego, are nurturing the female pup 24 hours a day. They're bottle-feeding her a rich, milk-based formula.

The pup has gained about a pound since she arrived at SeaWorld. She now weighs 3.85 pounds and measures 19 inches long.

Yesterday the pup seemed alert and playful as Bressler fluffed her fur after a bath.

"She gains about a tenth of a pound a day," said Mark Bressler, a member of the caretaking team.

When the pup first reached SeaWorld, she was dehydrated and had to be fed through a tube. Yesterday, the otter seemed alert and playful as Bressler fluffed her fur after a bath. The pup vocalized with a hoarse, high-pitched mew.

While Bressler can mimic certain otter behaviors, such as grooming, he said no human can "teach her to be a wild otter." The cross-species interaction has sealed the newborn's fate in the sense that she almost certainly

*By Terry Rodgers
San Diego Union-Tribune
(article reprinted from August 2007 with permission)*

will spend the rest of her life in captivity.

Usually, sick or abandoned sea otters found along the state's coast are taken to the Monterey Bay Aquarium. That institution, which takes in about 40 injured or sick otters each year, runs a rehabilitation program that allows the animals to be returned to the wild.

Baby otters are paired with adult females, who teach the pups natural behaviors. The process takes place in a non-exhibit area to avoid "imprinting" the pups and erasing their instinctive wariness of people.

Last week, the aquarium's officials didn't have room to house the newborn otter. Their behind-the-scenes otter tanks used for rehabilitation are undergoing renovation, said Karl Mayer, coordinator of animal care for the aquarium's Sea Otter Research and Conservation Program.

SeaWorld was a logical second choice because it has the staff and facilities to raise the pup, Mayer said. The theme park is a member of the state's Marine Mammal Stranding Network.

The final decision on the newborn's permanent home will

be made within a month by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in Ventura, said Lilian Carswell, a sea otter biologist for the agency.

"Animals that imprint on humans are generally not good candidates for reintroduction into the wild," she said.



Photo © Nancee Lewis
Union Tribune

SeaWorld has three adult sea otters of the same southern subspecies as the pup. All of them are females, and each came to San Diego after being rescued in Central California.

Most of the state's roughly 3,000 sea otters live along the coast between Half Moon Bay and Point Conception. These animals have been listed as threatened on the federal endangered species list since 1977.

California's sea otters are vulnerable to sharks and are frequently killed by boat propellers.

They also are susceptible to a fatal illness that researchers have traced to microbial parasites found in the feces of domestic cats. The disease may be entering the sea as a result of cat owners flushing cat litter down the toilet.

ROA BOARD MEMBERS GET "WILD ABOUT OTTERS"

By Carol Peterson and John Mulvihill

My husband John and I were privileged to tour the *Wild About Otters* exhibit at the Monterey Bay Aquarium in September 2007 with Karen Jeffries, the aquarium's public relations manager. The exhibit, featuring all 13 otter species found throughout the world, adds an exciting new dimension to the aquarium's previous emphasis on their cousins, the sea otters. Karen and the staff have become captivated by the river otters on display and are already aware that they will miss them when the exhibition closes in September 2010. The staff, caretakers and visitors, young and old alike are enamored by the river otters' energy and crowd pleasing antics. The interactive educational panels emphasize the conservation message of preserving otter habitat and the importance of clean water in lakes, rivers and oceans.

The exhibit begins with a dynamic display on the similarities and differences between river otter and sea otter. Visitors wind through five special connected galleries, encompassing over 7,000 square feet, featuring the African Spotted-necked otter and the Asian Small-clawed otter habitats. We watched the pair of African Spotted-necked otters, Denny and Neema, with their two pups, play with plant fronds and folic in the water – all racing around their enclosure at amazing speed.



Photo © Randy Wilder
Monterey Bay Aquarium

Unfortunately for us, the Asian Small-clawed otters were napping during our visit. We learned that these otters are particularly vulnerable to habitat destruction leading this species to be classified as near threatened. Each of the otter species' personal stories are told

through caretakers journals, studies in their native countries, still images and video clips and touchable models. Also, the exhibit showcases over 30 species of tropical freshwater fishes and reptiles, along with native plants that share habitat with the freshwater otter in the wild.

The aquarium acquired the adult Asian Small-clawed and African Spotted-necked otters for the

exhibit as part of the Association of Zoo and Aquariums (AZA) Species Survival Plan program (SSP). This program is a cooperative effort among AZA accredited zoos and aquariums to insure the survival of threatened and endangered species through breeding programs, research, public education, reintroductions and field projects.

We highly recommend a visit before the closing in 2010 and hope you will spread the word about this excellent special exhibit highlighting the world population of river otter. The Monterey Bay Aquarium is located in Cannery Row and is open daily. For more information: (831) 648-4888 or www.montereybayaquarium.org.

AFTER 60-YEAR ABSENCE RIVER OTTERS WILL RETURN IN 2008

For more information please contact: Dan Williams (505) 476-8004, Hans Stuart, (505) 438-7510 or Rachel Conn (505) 770-8327

Editor's note: You may remember an article in the Spring 2007 *ROJ* stating that New Mexico was due to restore river otters to the state in 2007. This press release provides an update on the status of that reintroduction program.

A native New Mexican, once found in streams and rivers throughout the state will have to wait one more year before returning to New Mexico's rivers.

This Fall, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and the New Mexico Friends of River Otters, a coalition of citizens, agencies and conservation organizations dedicated to restoring otters to the state, had been working with the state of Oregon to obtain otters for release in New Mexico. Unfortunately efforts to trap otters in Oregon were unsuccessful, and the reintroduction has been postponed until next year....

...The State Game Commission directed the Department of Game and Fish in 2006 to initiate efforts to restore otters

to state waters. A Department study identified several rivers as suitable restoration sites, including the Upper Rio Grande, White Rock Canyon, and Middle Rio Chama in the Rio Grande Basin; and the Upper Gila, Lower Gila and Lower San Francisco rivers in the Gila River Basin.

2008 efforts will be focused on reintroducing otters in the Upper Rio Grande and Gila river systems.

Funding for the reintroduction effort is being provided by the generous contributions of many New Mexican citizens, agencies and foundations, including the Thaw Trust and Earth Friends Wildlife Foundation.

NEBRASKA REINTRODUCTION EFFORTS

By Craig R. Allen
Leader and Associate Professor

River otters have become reestablished in Nebraska after their reintroduction in the mid 1980s and early 1990s. The species is currently listed as threatened in Nebraska. Despite the high profile of the reintroduction and the otters' role as a flagship species, relatively little is known about river otter ecology in Nebraska. The Nebraska Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission initiated this project in October 2006 with the objective of collecting home range and habitat use information on river otters along the big bend area of the Platte River using remote sensing (radio telemetry).

GOALS: We plan to capture and radio-tag approximately twenty northern river otters on and near the Platte River, a core component of the species' distribution in Nebraska. During the approximately one year long monitoring portion of the pilot project, we will

collect data on daily and seasonal movements, home range, habitat use, survival, response to hydrological changes in the Platte, and relationship to abundance data from bridge surveys. These data, in conjunction with the results of an ongoing river otter health and reproductive survey and results from NGPC's annual otter bridge survey, will help to close existing information gaps and contribute to the creation of the Nebraska River Otter Management Plan and the State-wide Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

CURRENT STATUS: Tracking of the five river otters implanted with telemetry [in the fall of 2006] continues. The two females set up natal dens [in the] spring [2007] and are presently moving about again, presumably with young. One otter was found to have traveled about sixty miles downstream. An additional eight river otters were implanted with transmitters in [the] fall/winter 2007 for a total of thirteen implanted otters. Tracking continues.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE (CONTINUED)

(Continued from page 2)

protection of environmental quality. The problem is that, along with this authority, these laws also give those agencies discretion to permit the very environmental degradation that the statutes were designed to prevent. Agency discretion has bred institutionalized permissiveness. And now, the overarching mindset of nearly all agencies is that permits are there to be granted until they have the sense that the next one would break the camel's back. The problem with that approach is you are left with a very diminished camel. That is why we have desertification, deforestation, a hole in the ozone layer, dead zones in our oceans, and an atmosphere dangerously heating up.

The paradigm of Nature's Trust is based on public trust doctrine, the premise of which is that there exist natural resources that so serve the greater good, they should be retained in trust by the sovereign for the continued welfare of present and future generations. The corpus of Nature's Trust encompasses the natural resources vital to society's welfare and human survival.

In Illinois Central Railroad v. Illinois (1892), the Supreme Court issued a landmark decision regarding the public trust of navigable waterways that set a precedent for future judgments, opining, "The state can no more

abdicate its trust over property in which the whole people are interested ... than it can abdicate its powers in ... the preservation of the peace." In Geer v. Connecticut (1896), detailing common law principles of sovereign trust ownership of air, water, sea, shores, and wildlife, the Court judged, "The power or control pledged in the State, resulting from this common ownership, is to be exercised ... as a trust for the benefit of the people."

The Doctrine of Nature's Trust essentially reframes administrative law to be a vehicle for environmental protection rather than environmental destruction based on these decisions and calls upon the people to enact it. "We need a vision 'so compelling and inclusive that masses of people will wind up fighting to protect our planet without remembering when or why they even started along the path' (Al Gore, 2007). This is the moment to be resolute and clearly frame government's trustee duty to protect generational inheritance of natural assets. It embraces, in exactly the same way, the outer limits of our atmosphere and the smallest cluster of trilliums at the edge of a wetland – because this way of thinking is reflected in the web of life itself. This is Humankind's historic moment to claim Nature's Trust, Earth's Endowment, for our descendants."

David

NOT GONE...JUST GONE AHEAD...IN MEMORY OF DAVID HAMILTON

By Dr. Jo Thompson

In the spring of 1999, I had the pleasure of accompanying Dave Hamilton, Resource Biologist for the Missouri Department of Conservation since 1984, into the byways and wetlands of Missouri. For several days, we trekked around northwest Missouri conducting part of the annual intensive monitoring of river otter populations across the state. That was the start of a long and rewarding friendship. Then, like so many, I was devastated to hear of his sudden and unexpected death from cardiac arrest on September 8, 2007. Words are woefully insufficient to express the loss.



Photo courtesy of
Jo Thompson

My early impressions of Dave held true throughout all our years as friends and colleagues. He was a man generous with his time, his knowledge, his enthusiasm for life and nature. Dave was also a highly respected member of the national and international conservation community. He specialized in furbearer biology but had a deep appreciation for the natural world and life, as well. He was an avid outdoorsman and hunter. Among the many species of wildlife on which Dave led research and

management activities, he was the national authority on river otter status, population management and restoration. His expertise was instrumental in the development of best management practices for humane trapping methods. He was an accomplished professional, scientist, and devoted family man. Part of his role working for river otter conservation included ongoing research, interfacing with sportsmen and hunters, participation in developing the federal regulation and oversight of the international trade of river otters, responding to otter damage control, and education. His work was crucial to the State of Missouri's river otter restoration project.

See Dave's article in the Spring 2006 issue of the ROA Newsletter, "From Near Zero to Fifteen Thousand – in 20 Years! Missouri's River Otter Saga."

The global community of wildlife managers and conservationists has lost an irreplaceable leader. Humanity has lost a hero. Wildlife and wild places have lost a champion. I have lost a very dear friend.



Photo courtesy of the Missouri Department of Conservation

BY GLENN D. CHAMBERS

It was the beginning of a normal, busy day for David Arthur Hamilton on September 8, 2007. September had been an unseasonably warm month. As usual, on that morning, David and his 13 year old son Kyle went for their early morning jog. Upon return, David collapsed and died immediately of a heart attack.

The whole world lost a good friend and heaven gained a premiere biologist. Through the years David's life had touched so many people.

David was a "man's man" and one terrific furbearer biologist. He lived and breathed OTTERS. He championed the cause of Missouri's latest and most successful re-introduction program, the return of the North American river otter to our state.

I was fortunate to have worked with David for fifteen years on otter-related projects. He was dealing with the animals in the wild and I had a handle on captive-held animals. We often "picked each other's brain" about problems that confronted each of us. He was always so upbeat and faced every challenge with a big smile and that "can do" attitude.

I can well remember when the otter controversy seemed overwhelming, and David was faced with the task of appearing on National Television to face off with the animal rights activists over the issue of otter trapping in Missouri.

He very precisely handled the debate with passion for the animals and for the premise that using trapping as a method for helping to control an otter population (an estimated 18,000 animals) was wreaking havoc with farm pond owners whose ponds were stocked with bass, bluegill and channel catfish, crayfish farmers, catfish farmers, and fish hatchery owners. He was unwavering in his belief that we could have reasonable numbers of otters in the state for the enjoyment of people who just liked otters, and that by using best management practices, keep the population numbers at acceptable levels for most people. Just before David passed away, I was visiting with him in his office about our state-wide otter population and he felt that our population numbered about 12,000 animals.

David has gone to be with his Creator. He will be missed by all who knew him, and especially his wife Sue, and their two children, Whitney and Kyle.

“I have taken a few pictures of [river] otters on Burton pond in Harbeson Delaware. I have been living on [the] pond for close to five years and this is the first time I have seen them. I just happened to look out at the pond and there were three of them playing on the ice. I was able to get pictures of two of them.”

-Local Harbeson resident Fred Gentry



Photos © Fred Gentry



Photos © Brett Cole



“These photos were taken in the Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge in California, which is a big area for migratory birds. The important story there is the degradation of the refuges by diversion of water from the wetlands for agriculture.”

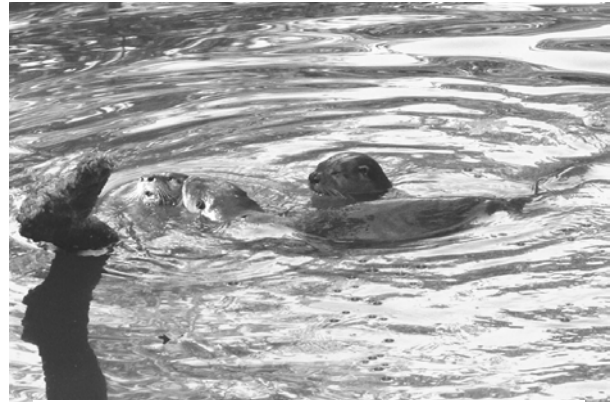
-photographer Brett Cole

Thanks for sharing these great photographs with us Fred, Brett and Steve (see page 10)!



“I found this guy at E.E. Wilson Wildlife Area [in Monmouth, Oregon] north of Corvallis. I’ve only seen [otters] out there once [to date]. Notice the Crappie hanging out of the mouth. I was close enough to hear the crunching as [the otter] feasted on fish.”

-photographer Steve Reed



“I found these three as they swam under the Muddy Creek Bridge where Finley Refuge Road crosses the creek. They made two passes while I stood on the bridge.”

-photographer Steve Reed

Photos © Steve Reed



“This [photo] was taken at the north end of McFadden Marsh [in Finley National Wildlife Refuge, Corvallis, Oregon]. This guy did [not] know I was anywhere around even though [in this] photo [it] seemed like [the otter was] looking at me.”

-photographer Steve Reed



“I photographed [another] otter [recently] in E.E. Wilson. It seems to be very long.”

-photographer Steve Reed

Research and Enjoy the North American River Otter with these book selections

Compiled by Carol Peterson, Diane Tomecek, David and Judy Berg and Jan Reed-Smith

**Please note that this is not a comprehensive list.
Please refer to our website at www.otternet.com/ROA for updates.**

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- \$50 Sustaining
- \$100 Sponsoring

Complete and return this form with your Membership check to:

The River Otter Alliance
6733 S. Locust Court
Centennial, CO 80112

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Visit the River Otter Alliance Web Page at www.otternet.com/ROA
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6733 South Locust Court
Centennial, Colorado 80112

