

OTTER POST MORTEM AND TOXICOLOGICAL ANALYSIS IN SCOTLAND



The Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) is classed as “Near Threatened” in the IUCN Red Data List, which means it is near to facing a high risk of extinction in the wild. The otter was once widespread throughout the UK and Europe. Several factors contributed to the decline but the major cause was pollution. In the 1950s and 1960s otters disappeared from much of the UK largely due to pesticides (organochlorines) which accumulated in their tissue. Since these chemicals were banned the population has been recovering but in spite of what we read in the media it is a slow process. The previous decline went largely undetected and the need for monitoring was not understood. Otters are a Schedule V species and there is a duty under European legislation to monitor their health and status.

In the UK, people are always saying that otters are everywhere and there are now records from every county. But many otters die on the roads and events like the flooding in the south are going to have a serious effect. Of course, they can swim but they are semi-aquatic and need to come on to land as well, and of course, small cubs are very vulnerable. Otters breed slowly and so recovery from any population loss will take some time.

Post mortems on otters are carried out to monitor the health of the population but this was not done in Scotland from the late 1990s until the start of 2014, when IOSF managed to get some seed funding to start work on this. Such research was carried out routinely at Cardiff University for otters in England and Wales throughout this time. This research is necessary to determine pollution levels and other potential threats not only to otters but to the environment as a whole. As otters live on land and in water they require both habitats to be of optimum quality, which is essential to all species including our own.



In 2013 researchers at Cardiff University found a new pollution threat from chemicals affecting the male reproductive organs of otters. In 2014 these nonylphenol chemicals were found in 20 rivers in Scotland. Cardiff also found that of the 110 otters aged only 10 were more than four years old and the oldest was only eight. Similar studies in the Czech Republic and Germany have found otters as old as 16 living in the wild. This is clearly very worrying as we don't know the reason, but without data we have no idea if this also is happening in Scotland.

The seed funding obtained has enabled IOSF to start a collaborative project with Cardiff University to obtain this data but further funds are needed to keep this vital project going.



Wildlife Conservation Award Winner,
British Animal Honours 2013



IFAW Animal Action Award Winner 2012