

BANGLADESH TRAINING WORKSHOP REPORT

6-12 December 2014, Jahangirnagar University

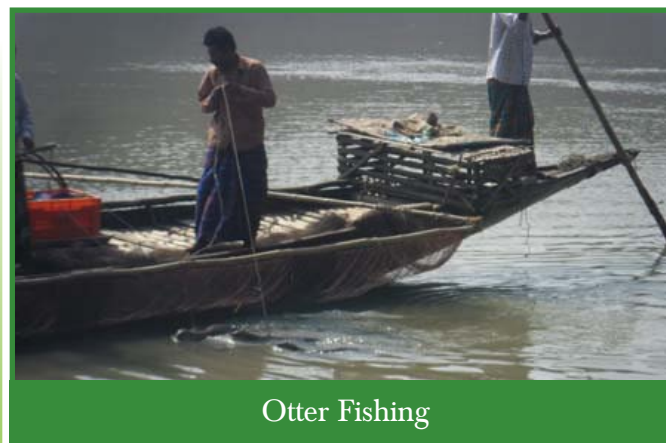


The workshop was held from 6th-12th December and prior to the opening we met with Ishtiaq Uddin Ahmad, the Bangladesh country representative of IUCN. He is very supportive of the otter work and was very enthusiastic about the event.

The workshop itself began at Jahangirnagar University near Dhaka, where we were welcomed by Professor Farzana Islam, the Vice Chancellor of the University. This was followed by introductory presentations including Paul Yoxon of IOSF, who gave the participants an insight into our work.

That evening we set off on an eight hour bus journey to Khulna, where we were to pick up the boat for the visit to the Sunderbans. Before this though we visited Narail, a village which still uses otters for fishing. This is a traditional form of fishing where the otters chase fish into the nets of the grateful fishermen. The team of otters usually consists of two adults and one young “apprentice”, who follows the others.

We were actually quite late in the day for the fishing as it is usually done first thing in the morning, but they put on a special demonstration for us. The otters are clearly well cared for, in excellent condition and are essential to these people to carry on their simple way of life.



Otter Fishing



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Narail is a very remote village and has only recently had a proper road put in. They were obviously not used to visitors and we soon acquired a following of children curious about why these people had come. So we sat down to do some education work with them. Clearly it is impossible to do anything too detailed when you don't have the language, but artwork needs no language. Soon our little group had swollen to over 150 people and young and old took part in the activities. Prof Padma de Silva, from Sri Lanka, had brought some of her education books, which she designed for Asian children and some of the Bangladeshi students read these out to the enthralled audience.



At the end the children proudly displayed their artwork and were keen to have their photos taken.



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Back to Khulna and we boarded the motorboat MV Dingy to sail into the Sundarbans. This is an amazing part of Bangladesh - the largest area of mangroves in the world, which is also home to the largest population of Bengal tigers. Even during the trip down to Kotka, where we would be based, we saw some incredible wildlife - salt water crocodiles, Brahmin kites, finless porpoise and both Ganges and Irrawaddy dolphins.

The next three days were a mixture of lectures and practical exercises to show the participants field techniques and survey methods for otters. Each morning we went out early in two small boats to look for otters. Only Asian small-clawed otters are found in this area and we were able to watch a family of five adults and a young cub, and two more small groups of two.



During our excursions we were always accompanied by armed guards to protect us from a potential tiger attack. We were never allowed to go off on our own and never far from the edge of the forest. So it was difficult to find secondary signs of otters, although we saw many tracks of otter in the mangrove mud.



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The main threat to otters and indeed all wildlife in Bangladesh is from the pressure of the vast human population. There are well over 150 million people in a land area about the same as England! Although the birth rate has gone down, the rate of human expansion is still extremely worrying. This brings all sorts of problems, including increased risk of pollution. This was brought home to us during our journey back to Khulna when we spotted an oil spill which had spread up some of



the small creeks, home to the otters. The oil spill had resulted from the collision of two ships in the main channel releasing about 350,000 litres of furnace oil. When we watched the otters feeding they were on banks of mangrove mud with many little red crabs and mudskippers - ideal prey. Now some of the creeks were covered in a fine film of oil and nothing moved - no crabs, no mudskippers.



Signs of the oil spill

The spill has been reported in the [Bangladesh press](#) and they point out the long-term effects. Plankton levels in the river have already declined with knock-on effects through the invertebrates, fish and eventually to top predators, such as the otters. We had actually discussed this during the workshop

when we looked at the risk of pollution and how oil damages the otter fur and how they will ingest it as they try to clean themselves. Sadly this was proven true when two otters were found dead in the Shela river.

There are three species of otter in Bangladesh - the Asian small-clawed, smooth-coated and the Eurasian. We were shown first hand some of the threats to the Asian small-clawed through the oil spill, but we were shocked by a presentation by Prof Hussain of the Wildlife Institute of India. Prof Hussain is the Assessor for the IUCN Red List for otters and in his assessment for 2012 he found that 9 of the 13 species of otter in the world are declining. Five species are classed as “Endangered” and the three African species (African clawless, Congo clawless and spotted-necked) have been upgraded from “Least Concern” to “Near Threatened”. Clearly there is an awful lot of work to do.

In the Red List both the Asian small-clawed and smooth-coated otter are classed as “Vulnerable” and the Eurasian otter is “Near Threatened”. However in Asia this species is regarded as “Critically Endangered”. The Eurasian otter is the species we know so well here in the UK and it is the only species in Europe, where it has shown some signs of recovery since the 1960s. However, there have been no sightings of this species since the early 1990s in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Vietnam and most of India, and the status in other parts of Asia are largely unknown. In the UK and



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Europe there has been a lot of publicity about how well this species is doing and yet this area makes up less than 20% of the geographical range.

The participants in the workshop were mainly a mixture of undergraduates, MSc students, and lecturers and their passion for wildlife was evident. Some of them were already working on birds or the dolphins but they have a new-found enthusiasm for otters which they will carry into their work.



Participants in the mangroves

On our return to Dhaka one lecturer asked if he could bring his students to meet with us before we left for Scotland. A group of eight of them came to where we were staying and already we have new information on otters as two of them say

they have records of Eurasian otters in the north-east of the country. This will now be investigated.

Some people have already said they will do more and one or two are considering doing a PhD on otters. As in Indonesia, a network has been formed to co-ordinate otter sightings and work and enable otter workers to share experience in their country.

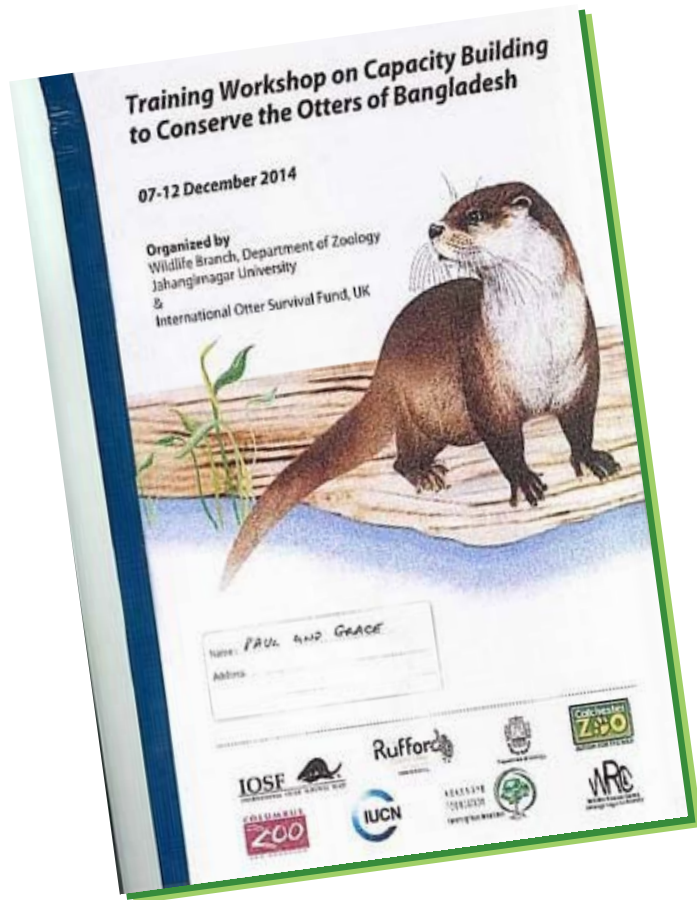
It has also been decided that the Bangladesh Otter Network will be a part of the new Asian Otter Conservation Network (AOCN), together with networks in Indonesia, India and Nepal. The effect of the AOCN will be from LOCAL TO GLOBAL as it will be administered by IOSF but will be run locally by each country network.

After the workshop we met with Prof Feeroz to discuss priorities for further work in the country and one clear issue is the status of the Eurasian otter - does it still exist in Bangladesh? The Bangladesh Otter Network may be in its infancy but with the strong positive attitude of everyone at the workshop we are confident that this will do good conservation work to the benefit of all otters in the country.



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We have to thank the following for their support of this successful workshop:

Action for the Wild (Colchester Zoo), Anderson-Rogers Foundation, Arannayk Foundation, Columbus Zoo, IUCN Bangladesh, Jahangirnagar University and its Wildlife Rescue Centre, Rufford Foundation

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IFAW Animal Action Award Winner 2012



Wildlife Conservation Award Winner, British Animal Honours 2013



Patron: Julian Pettifer. Joint Presidents: Laurence Broderick, Dennis Furnell. Head of Operations: Dr Paul Yoxon
IOSF is an international fund set up to conserve otters worldwide and is organised by SEC Ltd solely for this purpose.

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