

EUROPEAN OTTER

Lutra lutra

Hampshire Biodiversity Partnership

1 INTRODUCTION

The European otter is listed in the UK Biodiversity Steering Group report as a priority species for conservation action. A Species Action Plan for otter was published as part of Tranche 1 of UK action plans in *Biodiversity: The UK Steering Group Report* (Volume 2, page 84).

Hampshire lies at the edge of naturally expanding populations of otters from the west and north-west, but populations in the county are fragmented, isolated and vulnerable. The otter is a 'Flagship Species' for wetland habitats, and has a high public profile. Action for the otter will benefit many other wetland species.

2 CURRENT STATUS

2.1 Ecology and Habitat Requirements

Otters favour a range of wetland habitats including rivers, marshes, lakes and coastal fringes. An individual may seek up to 30 secure 'lying-up' sites, as well as many temporary resting places (hovers), within a possible 40 km linear section of home range. These may take the form of natural hollows (holts) amongst mature bankside tree roots, dense areas of scrub, cavities within natural rock formations or man-made structures. The most undisturbed and secure of these may constitute breeding sites.

Clean and abundant water supply together with sympathetic bankside management should provide a plentiful natural food supply throughout an otter's range. Otters take a wide variety of prey including fish, small mammals, amphibians and birds. Eels are greatly favoured where available. The 'fatty' nature of the otter's diet makes them highly susceptible to bioaccumulation of fat soluble pesticides, and toxic effects can include reduced breeding success and vitality. An unpolluted environment is essential for the maintenance of stable populations.

Otters can breed in their second year and produce up to four cubs in a litter. Mortality can be up to 50% in the first year and average life span is 3-4 years.

2.2 Population and Distribution

National: Formerly widespread throughout the UK, the otter underwent a rapid decline between the 1950s and 1970s and was considered absent from most of England in the 1980s. Viable populations remained in south-west England, Wales and Scotland, from where natural recovery and expansion is now occurring². These nuclei regions, in addition to Northern Ireland, comprise some of the largest otter populations remaining in Europe.

Local: Before 1960, otters utilised most river catchments in Hampshire. Yet a comprehensive survey in 1989/90¹ revealed the presence of otters on only three river catchments in the county. Additional surveys and monitoring have identified otters on the River Avon, scant evidence within the New Forest – particularly the lower Lymington River and Keyhaven Marshes – and a breeding population in the River Itchen catchment.

Otters are successfully and gradually re-colonising Dorset, west of Hampshire. Small populations to the east in Sussex and Kent remain very fragmented and isolated⁷. Positive otter signs were recently recorded in the Isle of Wight (IoW), and signs of very gradual and sporadic recovery in the Upper Thames should benefit north Hampshire in the long-term.

2.3 Important Sites

Hampshire's chalk streams, particularly the Rivers Test, Avon, Itchen and Meon, could potentially support viable otter populations in their current condition. Following the release of three captive-bred animals in 1993 to the River Itchen to boost its natural and isolated remnant population, this catchment continues to support the strongest otter population in Hampshire.

Many rivers in the New Forest, particularly the estuaries and adjoining coastline, could provide important re-colonisation areas. The Rivers Hamble and Wallington and many of the IoW rivers have suffered considerably from the impacts of low flows, urban encroachment, pollution, agricultural

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practices and channel modification. These rivers will require improvement if they are to be suitable for otters. The Western Rother in east Hampshire has extensive habitat suitable for otter re-colonisation and may benefit from natural recovery of otters in the adjoining Wey and Arun catchments.

2.4 Protection

The European otter is a highly protected mammal listed on Appendix 1 of CITES, Appendix II of the Bern Convention and Annexes II and IV of the EC Habitats and Species Directive. It is protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The otter is also listed as 'globally threatened' on the IUCN Red Data list.

Through the Natura 2000 moderation process, it is likely that the otter will be added to the features of existing candidate Special Areas of Conservation (cSACs) and new cSACs in England and Wales in 2000.

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3 CURRENT FACTORS AFFECTING EUROPEAN OTTER

- Isolation. Otter populations have only recently begun to recover in Dorset and the upper Thames, so it may be some years before they reach Hampshire through natural migration and colonisation.
- Prey availability. The lack of suitable prey, particularly within the headwaters of the New Forest and the rivers east of Hampshire, may mean that these areas can support only a low density population. This may impede re-colonisation of some catchments.
- Accidental persecution. The extensive and deliberate control of mink, stoats, foxes and pike currently practised on or near many of Hampshire's chalk rivers, may pose threats to otters through snares, cages and traps.
- Mink hunting with hounds. Although fairly restricted, this activity could have a detrimental effect on otter recovery through disturbance or accidental mortality.
- Impoverished and degraded bankside habitat. Intensive agricultural practices, inappropriate fisheries management and unsympathetic flood defence operations in the past have led to poor bankside habitat.
- Pollution of watercourses can have detrimental effects on otters, particularly where fish populations are adversely

affected. Urban run-off, waste-water discharges, cress beds, fish farm discharges and farming activities (particularly the use of synthetic pyrethroids) are all sources of pollution.

- Accidental deaths, primarily from road and rail crossings. An increase in incidents is very likely with a recovering otter population and high traffic flows.
- Increased disturbance due to escalating public access and the impact of development in floodplains.
- Risk of death from entrapment in eel fyke nets/fixed fishing gear, particularly in estuaries.

4 CURRENT ACTION

4.1 National

- The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) have published a 'Framework for Otter Conservation in the UK 1995 - 2000'⁴. This comprehensive document highlights the work needed to achieve otter conservation.
- A river in the south-west is currently being assessed to determine if its otter population is strong enough for it to be proposed under the EC Habitats Directive as a candidate SAC.
- National otter surveys have been carried out every 5-7 years since the otter became legally protected in 1978. The most recent survey was undertaken between 1991-1994 by the Vincent Wildlife Trust², and the next will begin in 2000.
- A national network of 'Otter and Rivers Projects' is run by the Wildlife Trusts. A costed 'Otter Wildlife Action Plan' for 13 priority regional projects has been produced⁵.
- The Wildlife Trusts and Environment Agency are joint lead partners for delivering the national BAP for otters.
- The Environment Agency is the principal funder of county-based otter projects and continues to initiate and fund both habitat enhancement works and research and development projects.
- The Environment Agency has published a technical handbook to promote otters and appropriate habitat management techniques. A revised edition was produced in 1998³.

- The Highways Agency have produced national guidelines for 'Otters and Roads'⁶ and are conducting research into effective mitigation measures through the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit based at Oxford University⁸.
- Leaflets have been produced to address issues and concerns and give advice on the impact of otters on fish farms and fisheries.

4.2 Local

The South East Otters and Rivers Project (SEORP) was formed in 1989 as a collaborative project between the Environment Agency and the Wildlife Trusts of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, Sussex and Kent. SEORP co-ordinates most otter related work in Hampshire in collaboration with the Environment Agency.

Comprehensive surveys of all the main rivers in the four SEORP counties have been carried out. Otter awareness events have been held and many talks to local organisations given. SEORP have established contacts with many organisations and countryside projects, and instigated many habitat enhancement projects. A regional forum meets once a year to disseminate information to partners. A larger regional group to cover strategic adjoining counties has been proposed.

SEORP work also includes:

- Ongoing river catchment surveys for signs of otters.
- Intensive monitoring of the River Itchen's population through regular survey and a DNA fingerprinting research project⁷.
- Fish tissue analysis for determining the level of accumulated toxins.
- Liaison with landowners or their managers to promote agri-environment schemes such as ESAs and Countryside Stewardship.
- Input to Local Environment Action Plans (LEAPs), relevant planning issues, BAPs and various strategies.
- Carrying out habitat improvement schemes and artificial holt construction.
- Carrying out a systematic survey of all road crossings over rivers in Hampshire. Implementing and experimenting with mitigation techniques^{9,10}.
- Maintaining a high profile for otters through numerous presentations, media articles, radio and TV appearances.
- Training days for development of an 'Otter Task Force' for survey and artificial holt building, and increasing awareness and promoting best practice for relevant partners.
- Radio tracking of released captive-bred otters.

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5 OBJECTIVES

The overall aim of this Plan is to protect and increase the distribution and population of the European otter in Hampshire. This broad aim translates into the specific objectives set out below. Where feasible, objectives have been allocated targets against which achievement can be measured. The 'Proposed Action' table in section 6 identifies the action to be taken to meet these objectives.

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	OBJECTIVES	PROPOSED ACTIONS
A	Maintain existing populations and range of otters in Hampshire, ensuring no further loss or fragmentation.	1-16, 18-20, 23, 28, 32, 33, 37
B	Enhance the status of otters in Hampshire by increasing population strength at existing sites, and seeking to restore otters to all main river catchments and the coastal strip between Christchurch and Beaulieu through natural colonisation, by 2005.	1-20, 23-25, 27, 28, 32, 33, 37
C	Establish and maintain a comprehensive understanding of otter distribution, status and ecological requirements in Hampshire through appropriate research, survey and monitoring programmes.	2, 8, 9, 18, 19, 21-30, 38
D	Promote communication, education and awareness of the status and needs of the otter.	1, 2, 4-8, 13-16, 18, 20, 29-39

6 PROPOSED ACTION

The following table lists the actions required to achieve the objectives set out in this Plan. Each action has been assigned to one or more 'Key Partners'. Key Partners are those organisations that are expected to take responsibility for the delivery of the actions assigned to them, according to the targets set in this Plan. Other organisations may also be involved in the delivery of action, and they have been indicated in the 'Others' column.

Key to symbols in Action Table:

- ◆ To be completed by the indicated year. Work can commence at any time before the due date, at the discretion of the Key Partner.
- ◆⇄ Design or production of a plan/strategy to be completed by this year and then followed by its implementation.
- ➡ To start by the indicated year and usually followed by ongoing work. A start arrow in year 2000 can indicate a new action or a new impetus to existing work.
- ⇄ Work that has already begun and is ongoing

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	ACTION	DELIVERY BY		YEAR						MEETS OBJ.	
		Key Partner	Others	◆=complete by	◆⇄=design by and implement	➡=start by	⇄=ongoing	2000	2001		2002
Site and Species Policy and Protection											
1	Where appropriate, seek to ensure that management agreements through agri-environment schemes (e.g. Countryside Stewardship and ESA) incorporate and promote the requirements of otters.	MAFF/FRCA	SEORP, HWT, EA, EN, LAs	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	A, B, D
2	Endorse the UK Framework for Otter Conservation (1995-2000) and National BAP for Otters.	EN	EA, LAs	◆⇄							A, B, C, D
3	Ensure that high 'Statutory Water Quality Objectives' are achieved for all running waters in Hampshire that can sustain viable otter populations.	EA		⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	A, B
4	Ensure that the Forestry Authority promotes and incorporates the requirements of otters through appropriate management and Woodland Grant Schemes.	FA	SEORP, FE	➡							A, B, D
5	Ensure that future development, drainage or hydrological activities do not affect the integrity of existing sites important to otters, and that the needs of the species are properly recognised in County, Local and Strategic Plans and Catchment Management Plans.	LAs, EN, EA	SEORP, HWT	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	A, B, D

	ACTION	DELIVERY BY		YEAR						MEETS OBJ.
		Key Partner	Others	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2010	
				◆=complete by ◆⇄=design by and implement ▶=start by ⇄=ongoing						
Site and Species Policy and Protection (continued)										
6	Identify any sites occupied by otters that are not currently SSSI's and seek to designate them as SINC's in the first instance.	HWT, HCC	SEORP, DCs	▶						A, B, D
Site and Species Management										
7	Ensure that dialogue is maintained with Statutory Bodies, riparian landowners and others to encourage appropriate river management for otters.	EA	SEORP, EN, EA, LAs, FRCA/MAFF FWAG	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	A, B, D
8	Implement actions from the UK Framework for Otter Conservation	EN	EA, LAs	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	A, B, C, D
9	Evaluate the habitat resource on a catchment-wide basis, and identify areas of ecologically valuable, poor and degraded habitats for otters. Prioritise appropriate areas for conservation enhancement, restoration or possible protection.	SEORP		⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	A, B, C
10	Implement appropriate management of strategic sites identified to provide at least one main refuge site every 5 km of main river and a lying up site every 1 km. Implement a minimum 20 schemes per year.	EA, SEORP	FWAG, MAFF, LAs, HWT	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	A, B
11	Seek to encourage long-term bankside tree planting schemes at appropriate sites with trees of local provenance.	FA, SEORP	EA, LAs, MAFF/FRCA		◆⇄					A, B
12	Identify strategic pond and wetland restoration or creation schemes and prioritise for implementation.	EA	LAs, SEORP, HWT, MAFF/FRCA		◆⇄					A, B
13	Ensure issues concerning the requirements of otters and their management are incorporated into the New Forest cSAC Management Plan, LEAPs, and other nature reserve management plans as appropriate.	EN	SEORP, EA, HMAP, HCC	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	A, B, D
14	Promote Countryside Stewardship (CS) to landowners for the New Forest catchments, and ESA agreements for the Avon	MAFF/FRCA,	SEORP, FWAG, EA,	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	A, B, D

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	Valley and Test Valley. Other catchments ongoing for CS and Woodland Grant Schemes where appropriate.	FA	HWT, FE							
15	Ensure new bylaws with regard to otter guards on fyke nets are enforced to reduce the risk of accidental drowning.	EA			◆					A, B, D
16	Ensure no otter releases are carried out within the county unless deemed appropriate and then only under the guidelines set out in the UK BAP. Lobby for a licensing requirement under the Wildlife & Countryside Act.	EN	EA, SEORP, HWT		◆					A, B, D
17	Review progress towards the restoration of otters to all catchments by 2005. Consider re-introductions in situations where they are 'deemed appropriate' to speed up recolonisation.	SEORP	OTF					◆ (2005)		B
18	Set up and train an otter volunteer task force (OTF) to carry out practical habitat improvement schemes and survey work.	SEORP	OTF	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	A, B, C, D
19	Identify and map existing road crossings in each river catchment. Prioritise and implement mitigation measures to reduce otter kills. Target order: River Itchen; New Forest catchments; Hampshire Avon tributaries; Test; Hamble; Meon and Wallington.	SEORP LAs	EN, EA, HA	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	A, B, C
20	Ensure otter mitigation measures are incorporated into all future road schemes and when existing roads are upgraded or maintained.	LAs, HA	SEORP, EA, EN	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	A, B, D
Research, Survey and Monitoring										
21	Ensure a detailed countywide survey is carried out within first year of this Plan and subsequently every 3 years to monitor progress of otter distribution.	SEORP	OTF, EN, HWT, EA	◆⇔						C
22	Ensure that all survey data collected is included in appropriate national and local biological databases.	SEORP	HCC, HWT, JNCC, TWT	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	C
23	Identify the best habitats for otters at a strategic level to predict the likely areas of recovery in order to prioritise habitat enhancement, monitoring and appraisal.	SEORP	OTF, EN, HWT, EA		◆⇔					A, B, C
24	Identify all potential barriers – e.g. roads, railways, development areas – that restrict natural movement of otters either between or within strategic catchments.	SEORP	EA, OTF	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	B, C
25	Investigate potential factors limiting further expansion of otters within the county such as prey availability, habitat management, and accidental persecution.	SEORP	EA, EN, HWT	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	B, C
26	Continue DNA research work to determine current population and the level of migration from the west.	EA	SEORP, OTF	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	⇔	C

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27	Support national work in carrying out further fish tissue analysis for each catchment to ensure bioaccumulation of toxins will not be a limiting factor for otter recovery in the county.	EA	SEORP		◆↔					B, C
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	ACTION	DELIVERY BY		YEAR						MEETS OBJ.
		Key Partner	Others	◆=complete by	◆⇄=design by and implement	⇄=ongoing	⇄=ongoing	⇄=ongoing	⇄=ongoing	
				2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2010	
Research, Survey and Monitoring (continued)										
28	Develop methodology to prioritise the mitigation measures needed on roads or railway lines crossing over or near to rivers, particularly during maintenance or upgrading as well as new schemes.	DETR, SEORP	EA	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	A, B, C
29	Support the development of a national standard methodology for assessing various habitats and potential lying up or breeding sites for otters.	SEORP	TWT, EA	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	C, D
30	Carry out a comprehensive post-project appraisal of all habitat enhancement schemes carried out on the River Itchen since the start of the SEORP.	SEORP	EA	◆						C, D
Communication, Awareness and Promotion										
31	Ensure that there is representation from the South-east Region on Regional BAP Group reports to National BAP Group.	EN	EA, HWT, SEORP	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	D
32	Continue to maintain the high profile 'flagship species' status of the otter as a means of promoting good management of water resources and riparian habitat.	EA	SEORP, HWT	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	A, B, D
33	Ensure that the requirements of the otter are considered during the production and implementation of action plans for relevant wetland habitats and other riparian species.	SEORP	HWT, EA, HCC	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	A, B, D
34	Continue to raise awareness of otters and their needs through: i. public presentations such as slide shows and talks ii. training days to statutory bodies and volunteers iii. county shows iv. media articles in newspapers, wildlife magazines v. radio and TV participation vi. produce updated otter leaflet	SEORP /EA	HWT, LAs	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	D
35	Maintain links with national network of Otters and Rivers Projects and ensure adjoining regions are working to similar targets where required.	SEORP	TWT, EA	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	⇄	D

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36	Provide information on otter requirements and conservation to key groups such as DETR, riparian landowners, fishing interests, fish farms. Promote through leaflets, presentations, consultations, media opportunities and training.	SEORP	EA, FWAG, MAFF/FRCA	↔	↔	↔	↔	↔	↔	D
37	Ensure agricultural colleges across the south-east promote methods of game management and predator control sympathetic to the welfare of otters and other wildlife.	SEORP		◆↔						A, B, D
38	Disseminate all information gathered through surveys and monitoring to appropriate bodies (e.g. Otters and Rivers Project; national office of the Wildlife Trusts; local EA and EN offices).	SEORP		↔	↔	↔	↔	↔	↔	C, D
39	Ensure that all legislation applicable to otters is disseminated to all statutory bodies, riparian landowners, their managers and advisors.	EN	SEORP	◆↔						D

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KEY TO ORGANISATIONS

DCs District Councils
 DETR Department of Environment, Transport and Regions
 EA Environment Agency
 EN English Nature
 FA Forestry Authority
 FE Forest Enterprise
 FRCA Farming and Rural Conservation Agency
 LAs Local Authorities
 HA Highways Agency

HCC Hampshire County Council
 HMAP Habitat Management Advisory Project
 HWT Hampshire Wildlife Trust
 JNCC Joint Nature Conservation Committee
 MAFF Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
 OTF Otter Task Force
 SEORP South East Otters and Rivers Project
 TWT The Wildlife Trusts

REFERENCES

- 1 **South East Otter Survey 1989/90**, G Roberts for National Rivers Authority / Hampshire & IOW Naturalist Trust.
- 2 **Otter Survey of England 1991-1994**, R Strachen & D J Jefferies, The Vincent Wildlife Trust, 1996.
- 3 **Otters & River Habitat Management Conservation Technical Handbook 3**, The Environment Agency, 1998.
- 4 **A Framework for Otter Conservation in the UK 1995-2000**, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, 1994.
- 5 **South East Otters and Rivers Project Strategy**, G. Roberts for Hampshire Wildlife Trust / Environment Agency, 1996.
- 6 **National Guidelines on 'Otters and Roads'**, HMSO, 1998.
- 7 **The Use of DNA Fingerprinting to Study the Population Dynamics of Otters in Southern Britain: A feasibility study**, Technical Report W202, Environment Agency Research and Development Department, 1999.
- 8 **Volume 10 Environmental Design Section 1, Part 9**, HA81/99, Highways Agency, 1999.
- 9 **New Forest Report**, EA/SEORP, 1998.
- 10 **River Test Report**, EA/SEORP, 1999.

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This is one of many Habitat, Species and Topic Plans being prepared by the Hampshire Biodiversity Partnership. It will be monitored by the Partnership and fully reviewed in 2004.

This species action plan has been prepared by Graham Roberts and the European Otter SAP Working Group on behalf of the Hampshire Biodiversity Partnership.

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