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Recent Otter Records From Central Morocco

M.R. Jacoby¹ and James L.R. Williams²

¹San Pablo de Buceite, 11320 Cadiz, SPAIN

²Stoford Manor, West Buckland, Wellington, ENGLAND

MASON and MACDONALD give an abundance of positive sites in Morocco, recorded 1982-5, but give very little description of the country. Central Morocco is an arid, degraded area with a few isolated forests in the Middle Atlas, and some blocks of eucalypts and some scrubby Cork Oak along the Atlantic coast. Farmable land is exploited inefficiently, with heavy winter loss of top soil. Steep or stoney land is grazed to destruction by goats and sheep. The population of Morocco is 26 million, and doubles in 29 years.

Winter rainfall is critical to river flows and has been as follows: 1989/90, heavy all over; 1990/1,1991/2,1992/3, little; 1993/4, heavy in the north; 1994/5, little in north, heavy in south. (in this context 'north' refers to the country north of the High Atlas and west of the Rif; 'south' refers to the area between the High Atlas and the Oued Draa).

In six years of travelling there, progressive deforestation and degradation of the land have become very noticeable. It is now rare to see donkey loads of wood being brought into the villages for fuel; small bushes are being torn up by the roots, and one often sees bundles of leaves being carried for this purpose.

Yet, evidence of otters has still been found quite regularly on some of the rivers of this region.

AOULUOZ a reservoir on the Oued Sous, 85km east of Taroudant. The dam, built in 1988-92, fills only in wet winters; the surrounding country consists of arid hills thinly set with Argan trees.

8/10/93 dense padding over an extensive area of mud; two distinct foot sizes; plenty of spraints, and some anal jelly: possibly a dog and a bitch. 22/10/93 previous padding still clear; distinctly fresher were a set of larger tracks, and spraints with jelly.

26/02/95 recent padding and spraints under bridge.

ASIF IRIRI where it is crossed by the P 32, 35km west of Ouarzazate. This stream flows only in wet winters, and is bordered by simple agriculture. It flows into the Asif Imini which joins the confluence of the Dades and Draa at Ouarzazate.

11/10/90 padding

UPPER DADES 35-40 km north of Boumalne du Dades. The Oued Dades rises on the high steppe of the High Atlas and flows through the Gorges du Dades 30km from Boumalne. This river flows all year through a narrow strip of irrigated agriculture in mountainous semi-desert.

16/03/95 spraints at most sites checked

DRAA VALLEY: A major river, often 50 meters across, which drains the south side of the eastern end of the High Atlas. It is bordered by a narrow strip of intensive, animal-powered agriculture.

By road P31, 23km southeast of Agdz:

24/02/94 two spraints and broad padding

10/03/94 one old spraint

02/03/95 heavily worked ledges and rocks above and below the ford; 20+ spraints on three ledges. Large padding, mostly downstream and fresh

ZAGORA, 27/02/95, searched one mile of the left bank upstream from the ruined bridge: no evidence, despite good rocks and boulders.

Road bridge on P 6958, northeast of Anagam: 28/02/95, no evidence despite good rocks over the kilometer searched.

OUED TENSIFT where it is crossed by the S511, 23 km north of Chichaoua.

19/02/95 padding and fresh and old spraint

P8 bridge, at head of estuary, 22/02/95, no evidence

Estuary of OUED TENSIFT, 22/02/95, no evidence

OUED MASSA, estuary and marshes, 24/02/95, no evidence

As this country is increasingly being visited by tourists, many of them on botanical or ornithological trips, it would be interesting to get further information of this kind. Is this population really restricted to the inland areas near the mountains? I was surprised to find no evidence near the cover and fish-rich estuaries which are so well-known for their abundant bird life. If there are in fact otters there do they meet the other ones from inland during the winter flows? There has been talk of recognising the otters of this region as a subspecies; it would be helpful for conservation strategies elsewhere to know more about how they cope with what seems to be such an unpromising environment.