



# Otter Releases

## Background

The European Otter *Lutra lutra* population across the UK has recovered over the last 3 decades and Otters are once again found across most of the country. A rapid decline from the late 1950s wiped out the population across most of the country, with remnant populations persisting mainly in the western and northern highlands of England, although the species remained more widespread in Wales and Scotland.

In Somerset the species had virtually disappeared by 1972 and from the mid 1970s to mid 1980s only a few individuals persisted on Exmoor. From the late 1980s, we documented a relatively rapid natural recolonisation of the Otter across Somerset and by the late 1990s the species was once again distributed across the county. No formal reintroduction was undertaken in Somerset.

At a national level there were reintroduction programmes, primarily those run by the Otter Trust and these seem to have accelerated recolonisation of the species at a local level, especially in East Anglia. Exact numbers and release sites are not fully known, and neither is the impact of these releases on the speed of the recovery of the population. Although, it now seems obvious that the species would have recolonised the whole country naturally in due course.

## The Current Status of the Otter in Somerset

Otters are found across the county in all aquatic habitats. Although, exact numbers are unknown, the population seems to be stable based on the annual 2 day surveys undertaken by Somerset Otter Group volunteers. The principal recorded mortality of otters in Somerset is road-killed animals. SOG has recorded mortality details for over 500 Otters since 1999. Despite a mortality of 28 per year (mean from recent years), the population is apparently stable, indicating that this mortality is not limiting population. Although we know, neither the size of the population in Somerset, nor the carry-capacity of the species, there is no reason to think that the two are far apart. We consider Otters to be at or very near to carrying capacity in Somerset, given the current habitat and state of the rivers.

## Origins of Otter for release

There is no longer a formal Otter captive-breeding programme in the UK, since the Otter Trust's captive breeding and reintroduction programme closed down. All otters that are now released are those that have been rescued and taken into temporary captivity at animal rescue centres. The vast majority of these are cubs. In some instances these are cubs that have been orphaned after their mother has been killed, but others are taken into captivity by well-meaning people when they have not been abandoned by the mother. Rescued cubs are generally kept in captivity for 1 year to 18 months before they are considered apt for release.

## Release or Reintroduction?

It is important to differentiate between a reintroduction programme and releases. Reintroduction programmes are well-planned integrated projects to repopulate an area where a species has been extirpated and where the factors that caused its demise have been addressed. The IUCN Reintroduction Specialist Group has excellent guidance on criteria for such projects. It is clear that any further releases in the UK can not be considered as reintroductions, as there is already a natural population of otters across the country and as such any release does not fulfil the IUCN criteria. Thus, any release can not validly be considered to be a contribution towards the

conservation of the Otter in the UK, but is rather an act of animal welfare aimed to benefit the individual Otter being released.

### **Potential Issues and Problems when Releasing Otters**

There are a number of important considerations to be taken into account when considering releasing an otter in the UK. These can be grouped according to the potential negative impact that could occur. It is important to recognise the differences in ecology and behaviour of Otters compared with our other larger carnivores (Badgers and Foxes). In the main otters live on and defend large linear territories along rivers. Their primarily nocturnal and aquatic habits, mean that they defend territories via scent-marking through spraints, but also that when they meet an intruder they do so at very close range and aggressive fighting is a normal behaviour. They breed in holts (dens) along waterways and these are usually easily found by other otters. Many road-killed otters show significant bite wounds from fighting.

#### **A. Impacts on Wild Otters**

- I. Otters that have been in captivity could potentially carry a disease that could impact wild otters.
- II. Male otters are known to kill cubs that are not their own and could potentially do so after being released.
- III. Males and females, to a lesser extent, could compete with existing otters for territory, food or holts.
- IV. Released Otters, especially males, may fight with wild Otters and cause them injury or even kill them.

#### **B. Welfare of the Released Otter**

- I. Otters, especially males, defend territories aggressively and will fight with intruders. Releasing a young male otter into an established territory of a male may well result in harm and even death of the released otter.
- II. It is illegal to feed animals in captivity live vertebrate prey. This means captive-raised otters are not usually as proficient hunters as wild otters.

#### **C. Impacts of River Users and Public Perception**

- I. Some fishermen believe that there are continuing releases of otters that are negatively impacting their fisheries, and some believe “hundreds” of otters are being released. Any releases can contribute to reinforce this unfounded belief.
- II. Released otters, possibly with a lower aversion to humans, could impact fisheries.

### **Releasing Otters**

There are two main scenarios where one might wish to release a rescued or rehabilitated otter:

1. An adult or independent sub-adult that has been injured in some way and that has recovered in a quick period of time (ideally less than a month). In this case we recommend that the otter be released as soon as possible and as close as possible to the location at which it was found. This animal should be able to survive on its own and will need no supplementary feeding etc. and a “hard release” is appropriate. We recommend a full health check, micro-chipping and that a reference DNA sample is taken. The risks to wild otters are minimal, if the period in captivity has been short.
2. A rescued cub that has been raised in captivity for an extended period of time. This is considerably more complicated and presents significantly greater risks to wild otters and welfare issues for the released otter. This release needs more thorough planning and evaluation of potential impacts. A ‘soft-release’ from a specially constructed temporary enclosure after a period of familiarisation, and supplementary feeding for a period post-release, is recommended.

**SOG recommends that prior to a release in Somerset the Otter should be:**

1. Be checked for disease.
2. Be microchipped with details passed to Somerset Otter Group and Cardiff University Otter Project.
3. Have a DNA sample taken and passed to Somerset Otter Group or Cardiff University Otter Project.

**Release Sites**

When selecting a potential release site for rescued Otters that have been in captivity for an extended period it is important to consider the following:

- The site should be within the same catchment from where the Otter was rescued.
- No otter should be released within 5 miles of an unfenced commercial fishery.
- Prior to the release of any male otters, a thorough survey of main river and all tributaries within 2 miles should be undertaken to search for signs of any cubs. If cubs are present, the Otter should not be released.
- The release site should be safe, with access to relatively slow-flowing water with good densities of prey.

**Post-release Monitoring**

We recommend that trail cameras be installed at and near the release site, ideally both upstream and downstream of the site. These cameras should be maintained for at least a month.

**Conclusions**

1. There is not a conservation justification for releasing Otters in Somerset, or across most of the UK. Releases are not reintroduction as we understand it from a conservation perspective.
2. Rescue, rehabilitation and release of otters is an animal welfare action for the benefit of the individual Otter, rather than the species.
3. Somerset Otter Group recognises the hard-work of animal welfare groups, such as RSPCA and Secret World, and appreciates that they wish to see recovered animals returned to the wild. We share that hope, but also wish to minimise potential negative impacts on wild Otter populations in Somerset. We also recognise that our shared concern for the conservation of Otters and the welfare of individuals, creates a dilemma for rescue centres that have otters.
4. Adult and sub-adult Otters that have only been held briefly in captivity should be released back to their finding location as quickly as possible.
5. If cubs are to be released a release plan should be developed and additional steps taken to ensure that the site is suitable, that risks to wild otters are minimised, and that the chances for the released otter are maximised.
6. Transparency about releases is important for monitoring of their effectiveness and impact and also for public perception.

*Somerset Otter Group is a loose association of volunteers that monitor otters in Somerset and advocates for their conservation and protection. We undertake an annual 2-day survey of the entire county, coordinate collection of dead otters for autopsy, and collate information on breeding. We advise and collaborate with government agencies in order to reduce otter mortality on roads. We advise and support fishery managers to minimise conflict with Otters, including supporting applications for fencing. We collaborate with: other county's otter groups or equivalent, conservation organisations including RSPB, SWT, and WWT, protected area authorities including Exmoor National Park and the Blackdown Hills AONB, animal rescue centres including Secret World and RSPCA, and with Cardiff University Otter Project.*