

Otters in captivity as ambassadors for wetland conservation

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In the 20th century, the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) became extinct in large areas of central Europe. Several factors contributed to this dramatic decline, as for instance hunting, accidental mortality, pollution and habitat destruction. Even if some public opinion states that following this decline wild animals should not be held in captivity, it has been advisable to hold otters in captivity for possible reintroduction projects.

As a matter of fact, some studies have shown that reintroduced animals have high mortality rates because they are poorly adapted and lack the skills needed to survive in the wild. It has been argued that zoos do not provide natural habitats, and that zoos put unnecessary stress on animals. Since an animal's well-being is dependent on their environment, some people contend that zoos do not provide healthy habitats for animals.

These arguments are partially correct, but it is possible to offer species-specific design to satisfy different behavioural demands.

Public education may have strong support from wildlife parks and zoos with safe and healthy enclosures, and it should be the main scope of any parks with animals in captivity: these facilities can support conservation efforts by educating people.

Otters are one of the most attractive mammals in zoos and wildlife parks, and this species may sustain the campaigns of habitat conservation and actions against the main habitat's threats.

The IUCN Otter Specialist Group recommend using otter species as ambassadors or flagships to promote conservation of otters and wetlands (IUCN, 2004). The Eurasian otter is already widely considered a flagship species, because it is a charismatic species which serves as a symbol to stimulate conservation awareness and actions, able to change the attitudes of people, a key factor in otter conservation. In fact, realization of many conservation measures would be much easier if people would have the right attitude to the problem which has to be solved. Therefore, public relations and education measures are sometimes much more effective for conservation than legal or technical measures. By keeping and

presenting otters in zoos, wildlife parks and research stations, it is possible to bring people into contact with an animal rarely observed in the wild.

In case people cannot spot an otter during their visit, due to resting hours or the difficulty of observing them in a semi-natural enclosure, the visit will anyway help them to take a step further to understanding nature and the importance of nature conservation. This is especially true if these institutions are run as environmental education centres which use the live otters to engender a personal emotion for the otter and nature through direct contact.

This type of otter keeping can result in an increase of attraction of the region for tourists, and an increase of economic opportunities for the region as a result of a higher number of tourists. The local people will understand nature conservation as a basis of economic welfare and the future of the region. Conservation may no longer be perceived as an obstacle but as an impulse for regional development.

In this way, the otter could be an ideal species to show to the local people the importance of their wetlands and may encourage them to become more proud of their local landscape and natural heritage.

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