

## SHORT NOTE

# STRONGER INTERNATIONAL REGULATIONS AND INCREASED ENFORCEMENT EFFORT IS NEEDED TO END THE ILLEGAL TRADE IN OTTERS IN ASIA

Lalita GOMEZ\* and Chris R. SHEPHERD

Monitor Conservation Research Society, PO Box 200, Big Lake Ranch, BC, V0L 1G0, Canada

\*Corresponding author: e-mail: <mailto:lalita.gomez@mcrsociety.org>

(Received 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2019, accepted 24<sup>th</sup> April 2019)

**Abstract:** The international trade in otters to supply a growing demand from the pet industry is an increasing threat to the conservation of Asia's wild otters. Current use of CITES II is proving inadequate and as such, listing Asian otter species in Appendix I is considered as a solution to allow CITES Parties to more effectively combat this illegal trade. Indonesia and Thailand, as important source countries of otters are urged to increase efforts to crack down on illegal trade. Japan as a major market for otters and other wildlife is encouraged to amend current legislation to prevent illicit trade in illegally-sourced species listed in Appendix II.

**Keywords:** Indonesia, Japan, Thailand, otters, international trade

**Citation:** Gomez, L and Shepherd, CR (2019). Stronger International Regulations and Increased Enforcement Effort is needed to end the Illegal Trade in Otters in Asia. *IUCN Otter Spec. Group Bull.* 36 (2): 71 - 76

## INTRODUCTION

Asia is home to five species of otters, Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra*, Hairy-nosed Otter *Lutra sumatrana*, Small-clawed Otter *Aonyx cinereus*, Smooth-coated Otter *Lutragale perspicillata* and the Sea Otter *Enhydra lutris* (although this species occurrence in Asia is limited, found only in some of the eastern coastal areas of the Russian Federation and northern Japan based on incidental observations and as such excluded from further mention in this paper). The four remaining Asian otter species are facing a perilous future due to the increasing loss of suitable habitat, the impact of pesticides on their wetland biomes and human-otter conflicts. This is exacerbated by an even more pressing and growing threat, the illegal wildlife trade. Hunting for commercial trade is considered to be one of the key reasons for the depletion of otter species across much of Asia (Duckworth and Hills, 2008; Duplaix and Savage, 2018). In the Asian region, otters are primarily traded live for the rapidly growing pet trade, for their skins coveted for a variety of reasons i.e. made into fur coats and hats and as embellishments on traditional garments, and their parts are used in traditional medicines.

Wild populations of the four above mentioned Asian otter species are in decline across their range. The IUCN Red List has assessed the Eurasian Otter listed as Near-threatened, the Hairy-nosed Otter as Endangered and the Small-clawed and Smooth-coated Otters as Vulnerable (Aadreaan et al., 2015; De Silva et al., 2015; Roos et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2015). All four species are also listed in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) Appendices which regulates international commercial trade. Currently, only the Eurasian Otter is listed in CITES Appendix I, prohibiting international commercial

trade in wild-caught animals and the remaining three species are listed in CITES Appendix II which allows for international commercial trade of wild animals with a valid permit, and providing the trade is carried out, or not, in accordance with national legislation. Proposals to up-list the Small-clawed Otter and Smooth-coated Otter to Appendix I are currently up for consideration at the next CITES Conference of the Parties P (CoP18) in Sri Lanka in May 2019, as recent studies have shown that commercial exploitation in Asia is on the rise, in violation of national laws and CITES regulations.

The recent emergence of the illegal trade in otters as pets in Asia has become a major cause for concern, with Indonesia, Japan and Thailand standing out as key players in this trade (Aadreaan, 2013; Shepherd and Tansom, 2013; Gomez et al., 2016; Gomez and Bouhuys, 2018; Kitade and Naruse, 2018; Siriwat and Nijman, 2018). To assess the current status of the trade, in light of the coming CITES CoP 18, an online survey spanning a four-month period was initiated and revealed approximately 710 otters for sale in Indonesia and 202 otters for sale in Thailand. While much of the trade in otters, especially in Indonesia, serves a domestic demand, there was also plenty of evidence linking these two countries in the trafficking of otters to Japan. Trafficking was found to be enabled by well-known loopholes in national legislation and poor law enforcement action. The Small-clawed Otter is particularly coveted for the pet trade, but the Smooth-coated Otter has also been observed in trade and in one case, even the little-known Hairy-nosed Otter.

On numerous occasions, Japanese nationals have been apprehended at Thailand's international airports trying to smuggle otter pups in their luggage to Japan (Table 1). Currently there are no legal captive-breeding facilities in Thailand and only zoos are permitted to keep otters (Gomez and Bouhuys, 2018) and therefore such smuggling attempts are a concern for wild populations of otters in Thailand. Additionally, seizures of live otters near the Malaysian-Thai border suggests a potential link between these two countries in the smuggling of otters but this as yet unverified and requires further investigation. Similarly, Thailand is also linked to the smuggling of live otters into Viet Nam for the pet trade with one seizure record that took place in 2015. All four otter species are completely protected in Malaysia and Thailand and cannot be hunted, traded, owned, bred, imported or exported.

**Table 1** International trade in Asian otter species, particularly involving Indonesia, Japan and Thailand based on known seizure records

Date	Seizure Location	Destination (Origin)	Species (#)	Source	Description
Oct 2018	Thailand	Thailand (Malaysian/ Thai Border)	<i>Aonyx cinereus</i> (2)	<a href="http://www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/breakingnews/30357139">http://www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/breakingnews/30357139</a>	Thai officials seized otters from a tour company, Asia Travel, in Phatthalung province. Suspect arrested admitted that all wildlife were sourced from the southern provinces of Thailand to be traded in the central Thailand region.
Oct 2018	Japan	Japan (unknown)	<i>Aonyx cinereus</i> (5)	<a href="https://headlines.yahoo.co.jp/videonews/jnn?a=20181128-00000078-jnn-soci">https://headlines.yahoo.co.jp/videonews/jnn?a=20181128-00000078-jnn-soci</a>	Otter pups seized in Haneda airport, Tokyo. Two were dead and two other died soon after being found by custom officers. Origin of otters not known.
Oct 2018	Japan	Japan (Thailand)	<i>Aonyx cinereus</i> (3)	<a href="https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASLCW4TYDLCWUTIL003.html?ir ef=pc_extlink">https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASLCW4TYDLCWUTIL003.html?ir ef=pc_extlink</a>	Two men arrested for smuggling otters into Japan i.e. from Thailand into Narita airport and trying to sell them to an otter café owner in Tokyo. The otter café owner thought it was illegal and called the police,

					then they were arrested after half-year investigation.
<b>Jan 2018</b>	Thailand	Thailand (Malaysian/Thai Border)	<i>Aonyx cinereus</i> (3)	The Wild Hawk Unit	A suspect was arrested during a Wild Hawk Unit sting operation and charged with illegal trading and illegal possession of protected wildlife including three otters. It was reported that the otters were received from wildlife traders near the Malaysian - Thai border in Narathiwat and Yala provinces.
<b>Feb 2017</b>	Thailand	Japan (Thailand)	<i>Aonyx cinereus</i> (12)	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=720294961485016&amp;id=379162215598294">https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=720294961485016&amp;id=379162215598294</a>	On February 26, 2017 the Don Mueang Airport Animal Quarantine Station officials at the Departure Building of Don Mueang Airport, along with officers from Don Mueang Wildlife Checkpoint (Department of National Parks, Plant and Conservation: DNP), were successful in rescuing and seizing 12 otters, five owls, and three falcons from passenger bags bound for Japan.
<b>Jun 2017</b>	Thailand	Japan (Thailand)	<i>Unknown</i> (10)	<a href="https://coconuts.co/bangkok/news/japanese-man-arrested-smuggling-10-baby-otters-suvarnabhumi/">https://coconuts.co/bangkok/news/japanese-man-arrested-smuggling-10-baby-otters-suvarnabhumi/</a>	Suvarnabhumi Airport officials arrested a Japanese man for attempting to depart Bangkok with 10 live baby otters in his suitcase and charged with illegally exporting a protected species without permission as well as avoiding the Custom procedures to declare the pups.
<b>Oct 2017</b>	Thailand	Japan (Thailand)	<i>Aonyx cinereus</i> (10)	<a href="https://www.thephuketnews.com/japanese-woman-arrested-for-baby-otter-smuggling-64534.php#yZDxylmFmlwwhLA2.97">https://www.thephuketnews.com/japanese-woman-arrested-for-baby-otter-smuggling-64534.php#yZDxylmFmlwwhLA2.97</a>	Don Muang Police arrested a Japanese woman with the animals in her suitcase in the departure terminal of Don Mueang airport. The arrest followed her request at an AirAsia X check-in counter to load a black suitcase aboard flight XJ600 destined for Narita. Wildlife officials at the airport found the 10 otters in a basket hidden in the suitcase.
<b>Dec 2015</b>	Viet Nam	Viet Nam (Thailand)	<i>Aonyx cinereus</i> (9)	<a href="http://www.thanhnie news.com/society/h o-chi-minh-city-pet-shop-owner-arrested-for-wildlife-smuggling-55571.html">http://www.thanhnie news.com/society/h o-chi-minh-city-pet-shop-owner-arrested-for-wildlife-smuggling-55571.html</a>	Police arrested a 22-year-old man in Ho Chi Minh City for smuggling wild animals including otters from Thailand for sale in Vietnam. He confessed to buying the wild animals in Thailand to sell as pets in Vietnam.
<b>Jan 2013</b>	Thailand	Japan (Thailand)	<i>Lutrogale perspicillata</i> (6) <i>Aonyx cinereus</i> (5)	Shepherd and Tansom 2013	This was the first known case of international smuggling of otters from Thailand. The Royal Thai Customs officers working at the Wildlife Checkpoint of Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport discovered 11 live otters when they scanned a bag that had been left at the oversized luggage area of the airport. The otters were all juveniles and are suspected to have been smuggled out of Thailand, bound for Japan to be sold as exotic pets.
<b>Jun 2007</b>	Japan	Japan (Indonesia)	<i>Unknown</i> (2)	Kitade and Naruse 2018	No details on species, location, arrests, etc

There has been a significant boom in the otter pet trade in Japan (Kitade and Naruse, 2018). A pet café in Tokyo claimed to import otter pups from Indonesia and it is unknown whether these pups are bred in captivity or taken from the wild. In any event, all otter species are protected in Indonesia with the exception of the Small-clawed

Otter, for which harvest and trade is only regulated by a quota system (Gomez and Shepherd, 2018). No harvest quotas currently exist for this species which in essence protects it from being hunted, owned, bred or traded, etc. That said, the law makes no provisions (i.e. penalties or fines, etc) related to transgressions of the quota system. This leaves the Small-clawed Otter particularly vulnerable to over-exploitation. Claims of commercial captive-breeding in Indonesia are unverified, and as Indonesia has a history of laundering wild-caught animals through captive-breeding facilities (e.g. Nijman and Shepherd, 2009; Nijman and Shepherd, 2015; Janssen and Chng, 2018), such claims should be treated with suspicion. Furthermore, successful breeding and husbandry of otters requires suitable facilities and expertise, especially to second generation (F2), and therefore again, claims of captive-breeding should be further investigated.

Despite protections in place for otters, both Indonesia and Thailand have a thriving trade in otters, and both continue to be a key source of otters to Japan. This is not surprising considering an otter pup in Japan can be sold for as much as USD7200 and a pair of adults for USD13,000 in comparison to an average price of USD40/otter pup in Indonesia and US120/otter pup in Thailand. Currently there is little local authorities in Japan can do to curb the trade within the country due to loopholes in Japan's wildlife law i.e. there are no provisions to take action against traders who illegally import and subsequently trade in CITES Appendix II species once in the country. There are, however, provisions to take action against traders illegally importing species listed in CITES Appendix I.

Given the rapidly increasing demand for otters in the pet trade, despite protection at national levels in Indonesia and Thailand, stronger regulation is required if the ongoing decline in wild otter populations is to be halted, and if national efforts to protect otters are to be effective. Listing all species of Asian otters in Appendix I of CITES would provide such a tool, raising the profile and priority of the issue amongst enforcement agencies, and assisting in closing loopholes that currently enable the trade. As incidents of illegal trade in CITES I species are treated as priority in Japan, an up-listing would enable collaboration from Japan in the overall effort to prevent illegal trade in these species. Furthermore, commercial breeding of species listed in Appendix I for international trade must be registered with the national CITES authorities as well as with the CITES Secretariat, which would result in further scrutiny from both exporting and importing countries to ensure otters are obtained from certified captive-breeding facilities in accordance with national legislation and with CITES requirements.

As such, we recommend CITES Parties support the up-listing of the Small-clawed Otter from Appendix II to Appendix I. We also urge Japan to amend current legislation to ensure trade in CITES II listed species is adequately regulated. Finally, we encourage the Governments of Indonesia and Thailand to increase efforts to investigate individuals and trade networks involved in the illegal capture, trade and keeping of otters and to prosecute those found violating national legislation to the full extent of the law.

**Acknowledgements:** *We thank World Animal Protection (WAP) and the IUCN Otter Specialist Group for supporting this research. We also thank Nicole Duplax for help in improving an earlier draft of this paper.*

## REFERENCES

- Aadrean, A. (2013).** An Investigation of Otters Trading as Pet in Indonesian Online Markets. *Jurnal Biologika* **2**(1): 1–6.
- Aadrean, A., Kanchanasaka, B., Heng, S., Reza Lubis, I., de Silva, P. and Olsson, A. (2015).** *Lutra sumatrana*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2015: e.T12421A21936999. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2015-2.RLTS.T12421A21936999.en>. Downloaded on 05 March 2019.
- de Silva, P., Khan, W. A., Kanchanasaka, B., Reza Lubis, I., Feeroz, M. M. and Al-Sheikhly, O. F. (2015).** *Lutrogale perspicillata*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2015: e.T12427A21934884. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2015-2.RLTS.T12427A21934884.en>. Downloaded on 05 March 2019.
- JW Duckworth and DM Hills (2008)** A Specimen of Hairy-Nosed Otter *Lutra sumatrana* from Far Northern Myanmar. *IUCN Otter Spec. Group Bull.* **25**(1): 60 - 67  
[https://www.iucnosgbull.org/Volume25/Duckworth\\_Hills\\_2008.html](https://www.iucnosgbull.org/Volume25/Duckworth_Hills_2008.html)
- Duplaix, N. and M. Savage (2018).** The Global Otter Conservation Strategy. IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group, Salem, Oregon, USA. [https://www.otterspecialistgroup.org/osg-newsite/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/IUCN-Otter-Report-DEC%2012%20final\\_small.pdf](https://www.otterspecialistgroup.org/osg-newsite/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/IUCN-Otter-Report-DEC%2012%20final_small.pdf)
- Gomez, L., Leupen, B.T.C., Theng, M., Fernandez, K. and Savage, M. (2016).** Illegal Otter Trade: An analysis of seizures in selected Asian countries (1980–2015). TRAFFIC, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.
- Gomez, L. and Bouhuys, J. (2018).** Illegal Otter Trade in Southeast Asia. TRAFFIC, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia. <https://www.traffic.org/site/assets/files/5228/seasia-otter-report.pdf>
- Gomez, L. and Shepherd, C.R. (2018).** Smooth-coated otter *Lutrogale perspicillata* receives formal protection in Indonesia, but Small - clawed otter *Aonyx cinereus* does not. *IUCN Otter Spec. Group Bull.* **35**(2): . 128 – 130  
[https://www.iucnosgbull.org/Volume35/Gomez\\_Shepherd\\_2018.html](https://www.iucnosgbull.org/Volume35/Gomez_Shepherd_2018.html)
- Janssen, J. and Chng, S. C. (2018).** Biological parameters used in setting captive-breeding quotas for Indonesia’s breeding facilities. *Conservation Biology*, DOI: [10.1111/cobi.12978](https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.12978).
- Kitade, T. and Naruse, Y. (2018).** Otter Alert: a rapid assessment of illegal trade and booming demand in Japan, TRAFFIC, Japan. <https://www.traffic.org/site/assets/files/11196/otter-alert-vfinal-web-100.pdf>
- Nijman, V. and Shepherd, C. R. (2009).** *Wildlife trade from ASEAN to the EU: Issues with the trade in captive-bred reptiles from Indonesia*. TRAFFIC Europe report for the European Commission, Brussels, Belgium.
- Nijman, V. and Shepherd, C. R. (2015).** *Adding up the numbers: an investigation into commercial breeding of Tokay Geckos in Indonesia*. TRAFFIC. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. <https://www.traffic.org/site/assets/files/6060/adding-up-the-numbers.pdf>
- Roos, A., Loy, A., de Silva, P., Hajkova, P. and Zemanová, B. (2015).** *Lutra lutra*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2015: e.T12419A21935287. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2015-2.RLTS.T12419A21935287.en>. Downloaded on 05 March 2019.

- Siriwat, P. and Nijman, V. (2018).** Illegal pet trade on Social Media as an emerging impediment to the conservation of Asian otters species, *Journal of Asia-Pacific Biodiversity*, **11** (4): 469-475, doi: [10.1016/j.japb.2018.09.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.japb.2018.09.004).
- Shepherd, C.R. and Tansom, P. (2013).** Seizure Of Live Otters In Bangkok Airport, Thailand *IUCN Otter Spec. Group Bull.* **30** (1): 37 – 38  
[https://www.iucnosgbull.org/Volume30/Shepherd\\_Tansom\\_2013.html](https://www.iucnosgbull.org/Volume30/Shepherd_Tansom_2013.html)
- Wright, L., de Silva, P., Chan, B. and Reza Lubis, I. (2015).** *Aonyx cinereus*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2015: e.T44166A21939068.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2015-2.RLTS.T44166A21939068.en>. Downloaded on 05 March 2019.

**RÉSUMÉ : DES RÈGLEMENTS INTERNATIONAUX PLUS CONTRAIGNANTS ET UN RENFORCEMENT DES MESURES D'APPLICATION SONT INDISPENSABLES POUR METTRE FIN AU COMMERCE ILLÉGAL DES LOUTRES EN ASIE**

Le commerce international des loutres pour répondre à la demande croissante du commerce des animaux de compagnie constitue une menace croissante pour la conservation des loutres sauvages d'Asie. L'utilisation actuelle de l'annexe II de la CITES s'avère inadéquate et l'inscription des espèces de loutres d'Asie à l'Annexe I est donc considérée comme une solution permettant aux «Parties de la CITES» de lutter plus efficacement contre ce commerce illicite. L'Indonésie et la Thaïlande, en tant que pays d'origine des loutres, sont instamment priées d'intensifier leurs efforts pour lutter contre le commerce illégal. Le Japon, important marché de loutres et d'autres espèces sauvages, est exhorté à modifier sa législation en vigueur afin de prévenir le commerce illicite des espèces illégales énumérées à l'Annexe II.

**RESUMEN**

**SE NECESITAN REGULACIONES INTERNACIONALES MÁS FUERTES Y MÁS ESFUERZO DE CONTROL PARA TERMINAR CON EL COMERCIO ILEGAL DE NUTRIAS EN ASIA**

El comercio internacional en nutrias para abastecer a una demanda creciente de la industria de mascotas, es una creciente amenaza a la conservación de las nutrias silvestres de Asia. El uso actual de CITES II está probando ser inadecuado y, por lo tanto, se considera una solución para permitir a las Partes de CITES combatir más efectivamente este comercio ilegal, listar las especies de nutrias de Asia en el Apéndice I. Es urgente que Indonesia y Tailandia, como importantes países fuente de nutrias, incrementen los esfuerzos para desactivar el comercio ilegal. Japón, siendo un gran mercado para nutrias y otra fauna, debería corregir su legislación, para prevenir el comercio ilícito en especies obtenidas ilegalmente, y que están listadas en el Apéndice II.