

# On the status and biology of the European Otter, *Lutra lutra* (Carnivora: Mustelidae), in Iran

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**Abstract.** In their natural habitats, the Chub (*Alburnoides bipunctatus*) with 38.1% and the Carp (*Cyprinus carpio*) with 34.8% comprise the major food items of the European Otter in Iran, whereas in fish farms carps dominate with 71.3%. It is estimated that 1-3 Otters are killed annually in each fish farm in Iran. The Otter needs full protection due to the high mortality caused by fish farmers around the country. Illegal shooting, habitat degradation and river pollution have been recognised as the major factors which adversely affect the Otter population. The cranial measurements of 21 specimens are given. CBL for males and females were 118.4 mm and 111.6 mm on average, respectively. No differences could be found when compared with published results from European countries.

**Kurzfassung.** In natürlichen Habitaten des Irans stellen Schneider (*Alburnoides bipunctatus*) mit 38,1% und Karpfen (*Cyprinus carpio*) mit 34,8% die wichtigste Nahrung des Fischotters dar. In Fischfarmen dominiert dagegen mit 71,3% der Karpfen. Es wird geschätzt, dass in jeder Fischfarm des Irans jährlich 1-3 Otter getötet werden. Aufgrund dieser hohen Mortalität benötigt der Otter strengen Schutz. Illegales Töten, Habitatzerstörung und die Verschmutzung von Fließgewässern wurden als die wichtigsten Gefährungsursachen identifiziert. Es werden die Schädelmaße von 21 Ottern gegeben. Die Schädellänge (CBL) beträgt bei Männchen 118,4 mm und bei Weibchen 111,6 mm. Im Vergleich zu publizierten Angaben über Otter aus Europa konnten keine Unterschiede gefunden werden.

**Key words.** Conservation, biology, habitat, food habits, cranial measurements, morphology.

## Introduction

The European Otter, *Lutra lutra* (Linnaeus, 1758), has a wide but patchy distribution in Iran. Its potential range is confined to aquatic habitats and their surroundings, from the Caspian lowlands in the north to the southern coastal area and from the easternmost to the west (in 9 out of 12 water catchments in Iran). Altogether, there are more than 2500 streams and rivers running through Iran (JAFARI 1997). However, little is known about the current distribution, population numbers and population dynamics of the Otter. Published information includes ETEMAD (1985) with some information on the taxonomy of the Otter in Iran, KIABI (1993) and MIRZAJANI (1999) on conservation issues, ZIAIE & GUTLEB (1997) on distribution, HAMZEHPOUR (2006) on a population model in Guilan Province, and MIRZAI (2006) on food habits and habitats in Jajrud River, Tehran Province.

We give here some information on the conservation status of the Otter, based on surveys carried out between 1986 and 2004. The data were collected continuously wherever and whenever possible. The serious threats posed by fish farmers were our main reason and justification for focusing on the conservation aspects of this species.