

## **Discovery of Eurasian Otter, one of the rarest Indian mammals, from the Satpura Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh and Kanha-Pench Corridor**

Details emerging from extensive camera trapping in the State of Madhya Pradesh has revealed a spectacular discovery of a rare mammal species, the Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*) in the Central Indian Highlands. The Madhya Pradesh Forest Department in collaboration with Wildlife Conservation Trust (WCT) were, for the first time ever, conducting camera trapping over a vast area of 5800 sq. km., in extremely rugged terrain of the Satpura Hill Range and the Kanha-Pench Corridor when this fascinating discovery came about. WCT scientists discovered and confirmed the presence of Eurasian Otter in the undisturbed highland streams.

Three species of otters are known to be present in India- the smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*), Asian small-clawed otter (*Aonyx cinerea*) and the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*). Out of these three, the smooth-coated otter is the most widely distributed in India, with several well-documented records. While the Asian small-clawed is patchily distributed; found in the Himalayan foot hills in northern India, parts of the Eastern Ghats and in the southern Western Ghats.

Except for the smooth-coated otter, there is no evidence of the other two otter species from central India.

Based on indirect evidences and ancient records the Eurasian otter is believed to be found in the Himalayas and in some parts of the Western Ghats, however, there is no substantial evidence to confirm their presence since several decades. In other words, the presence of the Eurasian Otter in India is not yet known from any confirmed direct evidence till date. Additionally, based on all the published literature, the species has never been recorded from central India.

**During this year's camera trapping exercise conducted by WCT and the MPFD, two species of otters, namely Smooth-coated otter and Eurasian otter were photo-captured at various locations within the Satpura Tiger Reserve and in the Kanha-Pench Corridor. All the sites in the Satpura Tiger Reserve were undisturbed areas due to the relocation of villages. The Satpura Tiger Reserve management has over the last 4 years relocated 35 villages in a planned manner creating vast inviolate spaces for wildlife.**

The Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) has a wide distribution covering Europe, Africa and Asia. The species is listed as Near Threatened as per the IUCN Red List (2004, 2008). Throughout its historic range, this species has either gone extinct from several regions or reduced to small isolated populations. Except for Europe, there is lack of data on population status and distribution of this species from the rest of the world.

**These new photo-records of the Eurasian otter from the Satpura Tiger Reserve and Kanha-Pench Corridor not only extends their geographical range to central India but also provides the first ever photographic evidence of the species from India.**

**The field work by the Wildlife Conservation Trust in Madhya Pradesh was supported by the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department, the H.T. Parekh Foundation - a CSR initiative of the Housing Development Finance Corporation Limited (HDFC), USAID and Panthera.**

India's flagship conservation programme Project Tiger has always aimed to preserve entire ecosystems and other forms of bio-diversity. Towards this endeavour of further improving the core areas, the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department has won multiple awards and recognition for the excellent implementation of the voluntary relocation of villages from STR under the leadership of the previous Field Director Shri R. P. Singh and the

current Field Director Shri A.K. Nagar and Deputy Director A.K. Mishra. **In recognition of the excellent work, the Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi recently presented an award to STR.**

**The discovery of the Eurasian otter in the Satpura Tiger Reserve proves the value of large inviolate protected areas in conserving bio-diversity. The presence of the rare species in the Kanha Pench corridor also proves the value of connected landscapes for highly endangered species such as gaur, wild dogs, leopards and now the Eurasian Otter.**

**In STR, apart from otters, several other species like the Indian skimmer, Black-bellied tern, Curlew sandpiper, Marsh crocodile and a variety of fishes are dependent on these forest streams and rivers.**

**About Satpura Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh:** Satpura Tiger Reserve was established in 1999. The reserve is located in Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh with an area of 2133.30 km<sup>2</sup> (core tiger habitat - 1339.26 km<sup>2</sup>, buffer - 794.04 km<sup>2</sup>). Satpura Tiger Reserve comprises of Pachmarhi Wildlife Sanctuary, Satpura National Park and Bori Wildlife Sanctuary. It supports a large number of ethno-medicinal flora and faunal diversity. There are 48 species of mammals, 258 species of avian fauna and 31 species of reptiles. The vegetation of the reserve is mainly categorized as moist deciduous forest. The southern part of basaltic form supports teak (*Tectona grandis*) and mixed forest, whereas north-eastern sandstone, basalt have sal (*Shorea robusta*) and also few representatives of northern Himalayan genera such as *Hypericum*, *Rubus*, *Berberis* and *Pteridium*.

**Large carnivores such as tiger, leopard, wild dog and jackal and small carnivores like smooth coated otter and pangolin are found here. Among the arboreal mammals, Indian Giant squirrel (*Ratufa indica*) and Indian Flying squirrel (*Petaurista petaurista*) are also present. Major ungulates and primates consist of sambar, chital, gaur and langur.** Satpura is one of the most rugged landscapes in central India, with steep mountains and deep gorges, these are some of the less explored tiger reserves in the country harbouring several rare bird species as well.

**About Kanha Pench Corridor:** The corridor spans from Pench TR in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra to the Kanha Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh. The corridor spreads across the districts of Nagpur, Seoni, Balaghat and Mandla. The corridor has been described as best landscapes that exists today (over 16,000km<sup>2</sup>) with two source populations of tigers connected as a potential meta-population by the National Tiger Conservation Authority. Incidentally, the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department has taken up a pioneering initiative of preparing management plans for the Kanha Pench corridor, a first in the country. The corridor offers genetic connectivity to populations of gaur, wild dogs, wolves, tigers and leopards and is now home to another rare species, the Eurasian Otter.

**Photo credit:** WCT/MPFD/Panthera

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