
Report on Smooth-coated otters in urban Kochi



Otters are carnivorous mammals adapted for a semi-aquatic lifestyle. Being a piscivore, they mostly depend on aquatic habitats for their dietary requirements and normally rely on uncontaminated food sources which allow for considering them as one of the key indicator species of wetland habitats (Theng *et al.*, 2016; Hussain *et al.*, 2018; Wright *et al.*, 2020). Habitat destruction, pollution, depletion of prey items, poaching, etc. are reported to be

the major threats. Thirteen species of otters are found globally, of which three are reported from India, which includes the smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*), Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) and small-clawed otter (*Aonyx cinereus*).

The presence of Smooth-coated otters from the coastal waters of Kochi was confirmed from their colour patterns and body shape. They primarily inhabit

freshwater systems but can thrive in estuarine environments characterized by mangroves and high salinity levels. The species is listed under Schedule II of the Wildlife Protection Act of India and classified as vulnerable on the IUCN Red List. The group of comprising six individuals, three of them being pups, were sighted in a freshwater pond close to a sewage channel near Queen's Walkway, Kochi on 13th June 2024. The availability of

sufficient prey base for otters in the sighted waterbody is indicated. The water quality of the pond measured using an in-situ multiparameter probe, indicated 27°C, salinity was 2.34 PSU while the turbidity and TDS were 17.39 NTU and 2.81 PPT respectively. The length of the sewage channel was approximately 1.8 km, which is located near 'Mangalavanam Bird Sanctuary' and connected to the Kochi backwaters. The otters were sighted foraging and feeding fishes including Pearl spots and eels from the pond and escaping through the sewage channel. The observation lasted for more than 95 minutes. While observing they exhibited parental behavior where one adult was leading the way for the pups, towards the foraging pond. The observed sighting is the first photographic record of smooth-coated otters from the area and indicates its potential to thrive in the urban environment. While their occurrence in such areas indicates a degree of tolerance to pollution, it also



indicated water and prey availability for their survival. The otters might have been confined to that region due to the heavy urbanization of the surrounding areas, limiting their ability to explore new habitats. The smooth-coated otter is a social species that requires large stretches of river and estuarine

ecosystems for their survival. Measures to protect the otters and their habitat to ensure their subsistence in the region is desirable.

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