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**AN ITALIAN ACTION PLAN FOR THE EURASIAN OTTER (*Lutra lutra*):
PRELIMINARY CONTENTS**

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Abstract: Only a few populations of otters survive in the southern regions of the Italian peninsula. Following the decisions taken at the European Otter Workshop, the Italian Ministry for the Environment established a technical and institutional team tasked with the production and application of an Italian National Action Plan for *Lutra lutra*. The Ministry promoted a first meeting of the technical commission in June 2006 to define the structure of a technical report containing a proposal for the contents of the action plan and collections of all data and information available on different topics related to otter biology, status, conservation and threats. Two workshops will be specifically organised to discuss the priority areas for conservation actions and the threats for otter population in Italy.



Following the decisions taken at the European Otter Workshop (Padula, 20-23 October 2005), the Italian Ministry for the Environment established a technical and institutional team tasked with the production and application of an Italian National Action Plan for the otter *Lutra lutra*. Despite its global status having recently been reclassified from LR to NT (IUCN, 2004), the species is still classified as critically endangered in Italy. Few populations only survive in the southern regions of the Italian peninsula, namely Campania, Calabria, Basilicata, Puglia, and, recently, Molise. The core population is concentrated mainly in the National Parks of Cilento and Vallo di Diano (Campania) and in the National Park of Pollino (Calabria and Basilicata). The two teams were established to respectively be responsible for the collection of data and the production of the action plan, and for promoting a large participation and involvement of all institutions having territorial authority within the current range of the otter. The technical team is coordinated by the government agency Istituto Nazionale per la Fauna Selvatica (I.N.F.S.), the institutional team by the National Park of Cilento and Vallo di Diano, one of the leading institutions in otter conservation in Italy.

The Italian Ministry for the Environment promoted a first meeting of the technical commission in June 2006 at Ozzano Emilia, (Headquarter of INFS). The meeting was attended by many public institutions involved in otter research and conservation projects across Italy (Università di Roma 'La Sapienza', Università di Pavia, Università di Trieste, Università del Molise), together with representatives of government and public agencies for wildlife conservation and management (Italian Ministry of Environment, Corpo Forestale dello Stato, Istituto Nazionale della Fauna Selvatica).

The aim of the meeting was to define the structure of a technical report, to be compiled by May 2007, containing a proposal for the contents of the action plan and collections of all data and information available on different topics related to otter biology, status, conservation and threats.

Specifically, the wide ranging discussions resulted in the decision to produce a technical document that will include the following topics:

- List of international directives and national laws concerning the protection of the otter, the protection of fresh waters and riparian habitats and fishing regulations. In this the role of the otter as a flag, umbrella and a key species for the river and riparian ecosystems was stressed.
- Production of an updated map of the area of occupancy and extent of occurrence of the otter in Italy, taking into consideration the regions in which is actually recognised the otter presence, i.e. Campania, Basilicata, Puglia, Calabria, and Molise. The map will contain all records collected in the years 2000-2006. It will be GIS based, to allow continuous monitoring and to support the international efforts to develop an Internet and GIS based worldwide databank system to store, process, and present distribution data for all otter species, as recommended by the OSG at the last International Otter Colloquium (Frostburg 2004).
- Tentative evaluation of range size and population trend.
- Collection of all information available on the biology of Italian otters, including recent data on the feeding habits, spatial and territorial behaviour collected in south central Italy.
- Identification of priority areas where research on the distribution, biology and/or on threats to otters should be carried out if and when financial and personnel resources are available.
- Genetic structure of the Italian otter population, including mtDNA characterisation, degree of isolation, heterozygosity and degree of inbreeding. The genetic information will be complementary to the guidelines for the non invasive genetic survey of Italian carnivores that will be produced by the Italian Ministry for the Environment
- Collection of data on all captive breeding centres still active in Italy, including the studbook of specimens. Proposal for the transformation of these structures in Otter Recovery Centres.
- Database of dead specimens recovered in the last ten years, possibly including geographic coordinates of each locality, date, causes of decease, measurements and the eventual place of storage of the specimen.
- List of threats and factors affecting the survival of otters in Italy, including water pollution, habitat destruction and fragmentation, water catchments, genetic and demographic factors, direct persecution, human disturbance, and road casualties.
- Updated information on habitat suitability for otters in Italy. These data will be specifically useful to develop an ecological network for the species in Italy. The network will allow an evaluation of the degree of isolation of peripheral populations, and to identify the most important actions and areas of interventions to promote the future expansion of the otter and connectivity among populations.
- The role of nature reserves and national parks in otter conservation

Finally, special protocols will be compiled for the following topics:

- Injured or sick specimens, including the designation on official institutions for their recovery.
- Live capture for research purpose or release programmes, including to make the use of trap transmitters mandatory.
- Standard survey at regional or national level, based on the Standard Survey Method recommended by the OSG
- Necropsies, possibly in accordance with the protocol that will be compiled and adopted by the OSG

Two workshops will be specifically organised to discuss the priority areas for conservation actions and the threats for otter population in Italy.

All people interested in contributing to the action plan have been formally invited through an open call made to the Italian otter newsletter LONTRA-list@yahoo.com managed by Maurizio Marrese. They will be included by the INFS in a mailing list and will receive all documents produced by the committee for comments and suggestions.