Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra* in Algeria: fragmentation of the populations, deficit of knowledge and absence of an action plan

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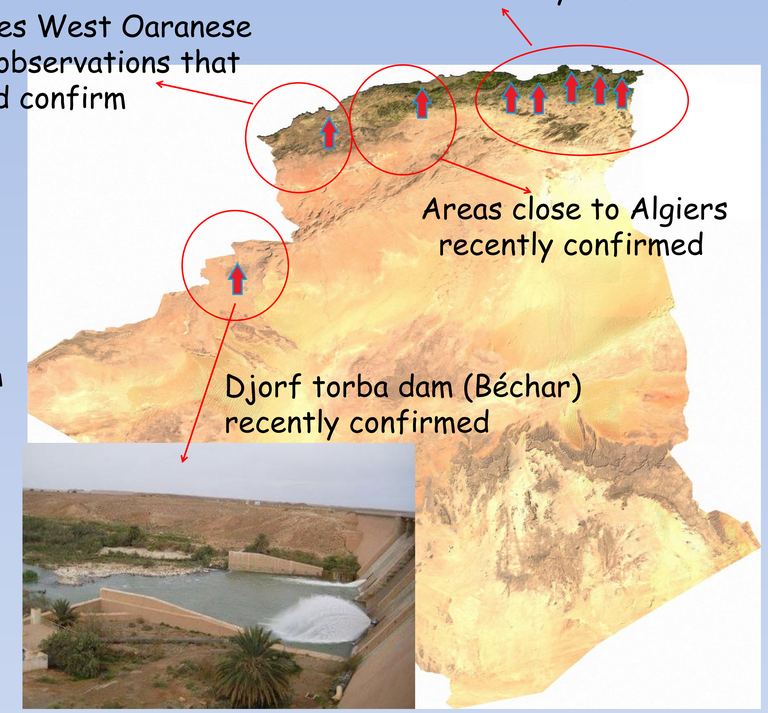
Algeria covers an area of extreme importance for the last North African populations of the European otter. Its continental waters are biotopes of great biogeographical interest, as well as migratory stopover and host an important biodiversity.

The pressure on these environments is increasing exponentially putting the survival of the mustelid at risk. Up to now the species unfortunately received very little attention and information are available only for the northeastern sites (Libois et al. 2015) or about the confirmation of its presence at the southwestern limits of its range (Bakhouche et al 2015).

The research group is increasing the collection of distribution evidence, status, feeding habits and conservation problem in different Algerian biotopes.



The research group have collected presence data through direct sightings, footprints and faeces surveys, in 15 sites. The complex network of wetlands that characterizes the entire Mediterranean belt has given the greatest evidence, from the well-known sites in the north-east (El Kala National Park) to the areas of Oran even if it appears fragmented into most likely isolated populations. Even more isolated appears the only Sahara station near Bechar, of great biogeographical importance. A first series of observations on prey remains and scat analysis show the importance of fishes but also the strong decline of the resource in most of the sites.

Actually all the populations present severe conservation problems. A general lack of knowledge regarding their actual presence, distribution and status effectively prevents the organization of an adequate action plan. Furthermore, the conservation of inland water sites is eminently based on the presence of rare birds, but this is a case where the umbrella species prevent us from seeing the problems concerning the other species present. The destruction of these habitats continues, with the removal of ever greater quantities of water, the use of large parts of the territory for agricultural purposes, the loss of many individuals, of already small populations, in fishing tools and also due to the presence of many stray dogs.
Lack of funding and the pandemic slowed down our study, but the research is continuing, searching for other sites and conservation data.