



ASIAN SMALL-CLAWED AND SMOOTH-COATED OTTERS AND THE CRITERIA FOR LISTING IN CITES APPENDIX 1



Wildlife Reserves Singapore Group





Cover photo and photo above: World Animal Protection

BACKGROUND

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) seeks to ensure that international trade does not threaten the survival of wild plants and animals. Both *Aonyx cinereus* (Asian small-clawed otter) and *Lutrogale perspicillata* (smooth-coated otter) are currently listed in Appendix II of CITES. While an Appendix II listing provides some protection, it is insufficient in the case of small-clawed and smooth-coated otters because the trade is mostly illegal, including from unverified and likely-fraudulent captive breeding sources.

An Appendix I listing is warranted for these species because the species meet the criteria, first and foremost, but also because an Appendix I listing will send the necessary market signals, add further trade controls, and enhance scrutiny of captive-breeding operations. As explained below, according to the best available information, the wild populations of both species meet Criterion C in Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP17) because they have suffered marked declines inferred on the basis of reductions in range, habitat loss, decline in habitat quality, high levels of exploitation, and vulnerability to extrinsic factors, including habitat loss and degradation.

Both species should be transferred to Appendix I at the 8th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES (CoP18).

THE CRITERIA FOR LISTING ON CITES APPENDIX I

Article II, paragraph 1, of CITES states: "Appendix I shall include all species threatened with extinction, which are or may be affected by trade."

AFFECTED BY TRADE

A species “is or may be affected by trade” if it is known to be in trade and that trade has or may have a detrimental impact on the status of the species or it is suspected to be in trade, or there is demonstrable potential international demand for the species, that may be detrimental to its survival in the wild.ⁱ

For both *Aonyx cinereus* and *Lutrogale perspicillata*, evidence exists that the species are in trade, that trade is having a detrimental impact, and that international demand is growing, primarily for live otters to be used as pets. These otters are also traded for their pelts and less so for traditional medicine purposes. Information on the overall scale of the illegal trade in tropical Asian otter species is scarce, due in part to relatively little attention having been paid to enforcement of national laws and international trade restrictions for these species. Thus, the seizures that have been reported likely represent only a small fraction of the overall illegal trade in otters. Between 1980 and 2018, there were over 250 seizuresⁱⁱ that included Asian otter specimens recorded in the CITES Trade database and other seizure databases representing a total of 6,010 individual otters. Though identified as Asian otters, few of these were identified down to the species level. When they were, the species most often represented were *Lutra lutra* (Eurasian otters, Appendix I), *Aonyx cinereus* (Asian small-clawed otters), and *Lutrogale perspicillata* (smooth-coated otters).

Smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*)

Between 1980 and 2015, 2,949 otter pelts were seized in India. In Nepal, seizures of otter pelts summed up to 755 within the period 1989-2017ⁱⁱⁱ. Although few are identified down to the species level, a significant number were likely smooth-coated otters given their desirability. The trade in live otters for pets is an emerging threat to smooth-coated otters, and they are increasingly found advertised for sale online. Over just a four-month period, between 734 and 1189 otters were advertised for sale online in 560 advertisements in Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia, according to a 2018 TRAFFIC study.^{iv} Although small-clawed otters appeared in online advertisements most frequently, smooth-coated otters were also found for sale during the study.

Asian small-clawed otters (*Aonyx cinereus*)

The illegal pet trade is a growing threat to Asian small-clawed otters, which are popular for private ownership and increasingly in pet shops, pet fairs, and even in coffee shops. They are popular in Thailand, but the greatest demand seems to be in Japan. Much of the trade in Asian otters has moved online, making it difficult to control. As noted above, small-clawed otters appear in online advertisements most frequently in Southeast Asia, according to recent studies. In 2015, 20 small-clawed otters were registered for sale online in Germany, according to another study.^v



Between 1980 and 2018, there were more than 250 seizures representing a total of 6,010 individual otters.

THREATENED WITH EXTINCTION

Both *Lutrogale perspicillata* and *Aonyx cinereus* are clearly threatened with extinction. They are classified on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as facing a “high risk of extinction in the wild”^{vi} and are listed as “vulnerable.” The criteria-based analysis that led IUCN to declare that the species faces a high risk of extinction in the wild is similar to the analysis necessary to determine if the species is threatened with extinction under CITES, namely whether the species meets, or is likely to meet, at least one of the criteria found in Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP17). Both *Lutrogale perspicillata* and *Aonyx cinereus* meet these criteria.

Lutrogale perspicillata and *Aonyx cinereus* are inferred to have suffered a “marked decline” in their population sizes in the wild due to high levels of exploitation, decreases in area and quality of habitat, and a high vulnerability to intrinsic factors (low density and low fecundity) and extrinsic factors (high levels of habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation). CITES Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP17) does not define a “marked decline” specifically, but rather states: “The judgment that a decline is marked is taxon-specific and can be justified by a number of considerations, for example the population dynamics of a related taxonomic group” and that “[A] general guideline for a marked recent rate of decline is a percentage decline of 50% or more in the last 10 years or three generations, whichever is the longer,” noting, however, that those “figures are presented only as examples, since it is impossible to give numerical values that are applicable to all taxa because of differences in their biology.” Importantly, the Resolution also states: “the assessment of decline by reference to area of habitat may be more appropriate where there are intrinsic difficulties in measuring the number of individuals,” which is the case for smooth-coated and Asian small-clawed otters.^{vii}

Smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*)

The population of *L. perspicillata* is inferred to have declined by at least 30% in the last 30 years^{viii}, though some estimate that the decline has been more precipitous, approaching at least 30% over just two generations or about 20 years.^{ix} No current population estimates for *L. perspicillata* are available. One study noted that otters live at low densities and are shy and often nocturnal or crepuscular and hence are difficult to track and to make direct estimates of population size.^x

However, given their low density and continuing decreases in area and quality of habitat, the decline should be considered “marked.” In the last decade, loss of mangroves to aquaculture, reclamation of wetlands for settlements and aquaculture, stone quarrying and sand mining, large-scale hydroelectric projects, and other habitat alterations have increased, leading to reduced habitat for smooth-coated otters. *L. perspicillata* is found in Java, Sumatra and Borneo, northward to southwestern China, and west through Nepal and Bhutan and India to Pakistan, excluding the Indus Valley. There is an isolated population in the marshes of Iraq (*L. p. maxwelli*) suggesting significant loss of historical range. In northern Southeast Asia, *Lutrogale perspicillata* is restricted and occurs mainly in protected areas. In other parts of South-east Asia, *Lutrogale perspicillata* populations are present in significantly modified environments, most notably Thailand and Singapore.^{xi} A related taxonomic group, *Lutra sumatrana* (hairy-nosed otter), shares parts of its range with *L. perspicillata*, and is classified by IUCN Red List of Species as “endangered.” *L. sumatrana* was thought to be extinct as recently as the 1990s. Since then, however, a few populations have been rediscovered in Malaysia, along with Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Those populations are very small and isolated, and the total population of hairy-nosed otters may number only a few hundred at most.

Asian small-clawed otters (*Aonyx cinereus*)

Like *L. perspicillata*, population estimates are difficult for *A. cinereus*; however, it is inferred that the global population of the small-clawed otter has declined by at least 30% over the past 30 years (three generations),^{xii} with some estimates suggesting that populations have suffered declines of at least 30% over just two generations or about 20 years^{xiii}. Given their low density and continuing decreases in area and quality of habitat, the decline should be considered “marked.”

Asian small-clawed otters have disappeared or declined in many parts of their range. They are believed to be extirpated or extremely rare throughout much of their range in southern China, with only three records from 2006 to the present.^{xiv} recent surveys suggest that small-clawed otters have disappeared from the western Himalayan foothills and perhaps the Indian part of the Sundarban^{xv}. *A. cinereus* is now considered to be extremely rare in Myanmar. In Cambodia, it is only found near Virachey National Park.^{xvi} Massive destruction of wetland forests in Indonesia has reduced the species’ habitat^{xvii}, as has habitat conversion to oil palm plantations in Sabah. The species is classified as “vulnerable” due to an inferred past population decline because of habitat loss and exploitation. A related taxonomic group, *Lutra sumatrana* (hairy-nosed otter), which was thought to be extinct as recently as the 1990s, also shares parts of its range with *A. cinereus*, and is classified by IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as “endangered” with only small, isolated populations remaining.



The population of *L. perspicillata* is inferred to have declined by at least 30% in the last 30 years, and some estimate that the decline has been more precipitous, approaching at least 30% over just two generations or about 20 years.



ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Precautionary Approach

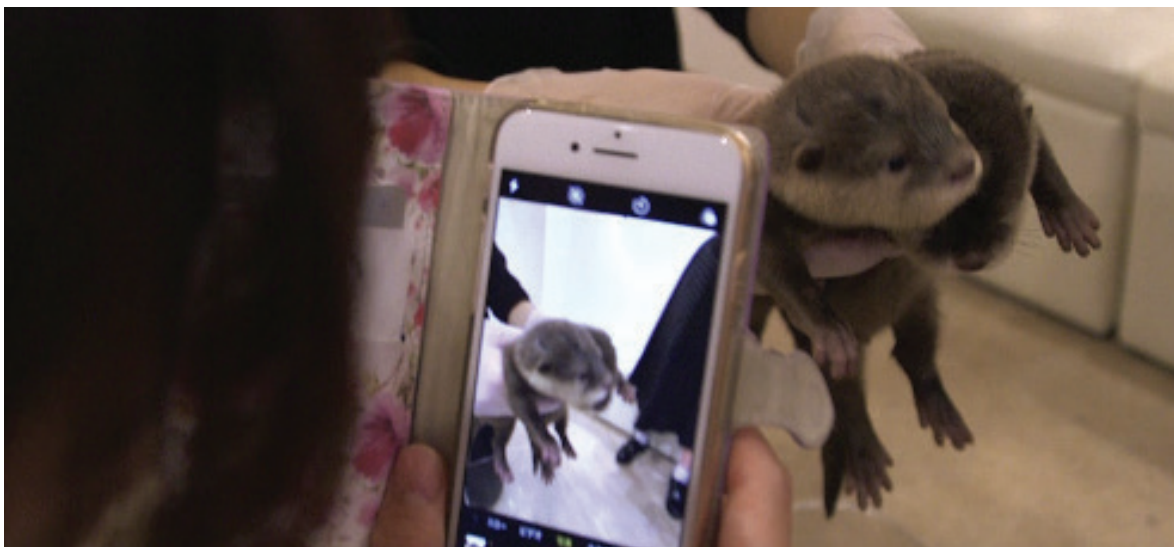
When considering proposals to amend Appendix I or II, the Parties shall, by virtue of the precautionary approach and in case of uncertainty either as regards the status of a species or the impact of trade on the conservation of a species, act in the best interest of the conservation of the species concerned and adopt measures that are proportionate to the anticipated risks to the species.^{xviii} Given the challenges associated with counting otters in the wild, estimating population sizes and collecting data on rates of the decline is virtually impossible. The IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Otter Specialist Group is concerned that the declines in *Lutrogale perspicillata* and *Aonyx cinereus* are much more precipitous than can be inferred from available population data given extreme levels of habitat loss and degradation and exploitation, along with the near extinction of a closely-related taxonomic group, *Lutra sumatrana* (hairy-nosed otter) in the region.^{xiv} For these reasons, the Parties should take a precautionary view and adopt the proposals to list *Lutrogale perspicillata* and *Aonyx cinereus* on Appendix I.

Online trade in Asian otters

Multiple TRAFFIC reports have shown that seizures of live small-clawed and smooth-coated otters are increasing, and the popularity of the animals on Instagram and other social media sites is fueling demand and popularity. According to a recent study by researchers at WildCru, otter videos on YouTube have both increased in quantity and in popularity, possibly reflecting emergent growth in demand for live, juvenile otters. A study of online trade in otters via five Facebook groups in Thailand from March 2017 to April 2018 found 15 posts offering a total of 29 smooth-coated otters. In addition, 88 posts (183 individuals) were unidentifiable as the photos posted were unclear or the otter were too young to identify at the species level. In just a four-month period, between 734 and 1189 otters were advertised for sale online in 560 advertisements in Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia, according to a 2018 TRAFFIC study. Small-clawed otters appeared online the most – 98% of the advertisements were for Asian small-clawed otters. An Appendix I listing would facilitate enforcement, especially with regard to online sales, and would be helpful in preventing laundering of supposedly captive-bred small-clawed and smooth-coated otters. The IUCN/TRAFFIC analysis recognises that while online advertisements of live *A. cinereus* often describe the otters as captive-bred, it is believed that that many animals in trade are wild-caught. Similarly, it also notes that “there are reportedly otter farms in China, Pakistan and Indonesia, and although species can be bred in captivity, it is not clear how much of the trade is being met from these sources”. An Appendix I listing would mean captive breeding facilities would need to register with their respective CITES Management Authorities, allowing for greater scrutiny of captive breeding. As the IUCN/TRAFFIC analysis points out, “enhanced oversight could help allay concerns over fraudulent claims of captive breeding and wild offtake for breeding stock.”

Photo below: World Animal Protection

Image captured at an Otter "cafe" during investigation into the use of otters in the entertainment and pet trade industry



Improving enforcement and control of trade

Having *Lutra lutra* (Eurasian otter) on Appendix I and the other tropical Asian otters on Appendix II makes enforcement difficult given the similarity of appearance of the species and the difficulty in distinguishing between species once discovered in trade, especially skins, furs, and other parts and derivatives. Furthermore, the status of otter species once threatened by international trade in other parts of the world has improved after being listed on Appendix I of CITES, including *Lontra felina* (marine otter), *Lontra longicaudis* (neotropical otter), *Pteronura brasiliensis* (giant river otter) in South America and *Aonyx capensis microdon* (African clawless otter) in Cameroon and Nigeria.

Range states

Lutrogale perspicillata (smooth-coated otter) range States are Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand, and Vietnam

Aonyx cinereus (Asian small-clawed otter) range States are Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Provinces of China, Thailand, Vietnam, and the United Kingdom (introduced).



Given the challenges associated with counting otters in the wild, estimating population sizes and collecting data on rates of the decline is virtually impossible.

Photo below: World Animal Protection

Image captured at an Otter "cafe" during investigation into the use of otters in the entertainment and pet trade industry.



ENDNOTES

- i. CITES Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP17), Annex 5.
- ii. Gomez, L. et al. (2016): Illegal otter trade: An analysis of seizures in selected Asian countries (1980-2015). TRAFFIC. Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia, 36 p.

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- v. Fischer, A. et al. (2015): Final station living room. Report, Pro Wildlife, Munich, 32 p.
- vi. Guidelines for Using the IUCN Red List Categories and Criteria, page 10.
- vii. Proposal 6: Transfer of the Small-clawed Otter *Aonyx cinereus* from Appendix II to Appendix I, IUCN/TRAFFIC Analysis of Proposals to CoP18, Available at <https://citesanalyses.iucn.org/>.
- viii. Pacifici, M., Santini, L., Di Marco, M., Baisero, D., Francucci, L., Grottole Marasini, G., Visconti, P. and Rondinini, C. 2013. Generation length for mammals. *Nature Conservation* 5: 87–94.
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- xiii. Duplaix, Nicole. Co-Chair, IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group. Personal communication. 27 March 2019.
- xiv. Li, F. & Chan, B.P.L. (2017). Past and present: the status and distribution of otters (Carnivora: Lutrinae) in China. *Oryx* 1-8.
- xv. Sanyal, P. (1991). Otters of West Bengal, India, with special reference to a study area near Calcutta. *Habitat* 6.
- xvi. Heng, S., Dong, T., Hon, N. & Olsson, A. (2016). The hairy-nosed otter *Lutra sumatrana* in Cambodia: distribution and notes on ecology and conservation. *Cambodian Journal of Natural History* 2016 (2):102–110.
- xvii. Margono B.A., Potapov P.V., Turubanova S., Stolle F, Hansen M.C., 2014. Primary forest cover loss in Indonesia over 2000–2012. *Nature Climate Change*, 4, 730–735.
- xviii. CITES Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP17), paragraph 2.
- xix. See Generally Duplaix, N. and M. Savage (2018), *The Global Otter Conservation Strategy*. IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group, Salem, Oregon, USA.

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