

Otter Culling in Lower Austria

Lower Austria in international Focus - organizations from Italy, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, the Netherlands, Great Britain, France, the USA and Singapore are positioning against the planned otter killings in Lower Austria – the WWF calls for a new, acceptable management plan

Vienna, April 21, 2017 - Lower Austria attracts attention of European countries. With the decision authorizing the culling of 40 otters, the Lower Austrian provincial government is increasingly attracting more attention from neighbouring Austrian states.

The otter is a native species in Europe, it is a part of our natural heritage. Due to pollution, systematic persecution and destruction of the water habitat, significant reduction and in some countries even complete extinction came in the 20th century. Thanks to the improvement of water habitat and legal protection, in the last decades otter populations have started to recover and naturally recolonize parts of Europe. However, as a predator of fish, the otter naturally represents a competitor for fishermen who therefore immediately asked to reduce the number of otters. *“The killing of animals is definitely not a solution and does not represent a practicable approach to the protection of species. An increasing number of environmental organizations from the neighbouring countries support our request for a halt to killing”*, says Christian Pichler, WWF conservation expert.

The WWF is currently submitting a complaint to the Provincial Administrative Court of Lower Austria (Landesverwaltungsgericht Niederösterreich). *“We are convinced that the decision to allow the culling of otters should have never been issued because of incomplete and doubtful data”* Pichler says. The WWF is also supported in its opinion by environmental organizations from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Germany, Italy, Slovenia, Switzerland, UK and as far as the US and Singapore - this sends a strong signal to Lower Austria. Otters don't know any national borders and interventions in cross-border populations can have adverse effects not only on the population but also its natural dispersal. Otters still haven't repopulated parts of Austria or, for example, regions of Italy and the whole of Switzerland that is anxiously waiting for the species to return to its former habitat. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) also enforces the position of the NGOs: *“The international professional world is here united in a strong alliance against the decisions of the Lower Austrian regional government”* says Pichler.

For the WWF and other environmental organizations it is clear that a good and effective management of a species should never start with the last stage — the culling of animals. *“Instead of culling the animals with long rifles and not solving a single problem, an acceptable management plan is needed that is developed with the involvement of relevant stakeholders”* says Pichler, pointing out that *“the otter is a protected species according to the FFH Guidelines. The WWF, in an alliance with other environmental organizations, will use all legal means (including Complaint to EC) to ensure the best possible protection for otters.”*

“In the Czech Republic the otter population had a similar recovery development as in Lower Austria, therefore we have to deal with different opinions on otter being present in our country. And despite the fact that our otter population is several times higher than in Lower Austria, other measures are put in force to mitigate the conflict with emphasis to find the solution which corresponds to advanced society of 21th century. Very detailed scientific data clearly show that culling is not the solution” says Katerina Polednikova from ALKA Wildlife.

Dr Paul Yoxon of the International Otter Survival Fund says *“Otters have been given strong legal protection in Europe for a reason. They almost disappeared in the middle of the 20th century largely due to pollution and hunting. They are recovering but the expansion is not as quick as is suggested. Many fisheries were established when there were few otters and so they took no steps to keep them out. Now they must be encouraged and helped to do so. Otters and fisheries CAN coexist and there is a lot of information available. A cull is not the answer. Protection of fish stocks and keeping otters out is the answer.”*

“All of us, non-governmental as well as some public scientific and research organizations taking care of nature conservation in Slovenia are watching what is happening in Lower Austria carefully and with great concern. Culling of otters, animal species protected with European legislation, would be an unacceptable decision from legal, ethical and also from scientific point of view. Just killing the animals will not solve the problem — if there is any at all — but make new ones” says Marjana Hönigsfeld Adamič from LUTRA, the Institute for Conservation of Natural Heritage. This was expressed directly also to Landesrat Pernkopf in an open letter signed by 12 NGOs from Slovenia.

A letter was also sent to the Austrian environmental minister from Germany (Aktion Fischotterschutz), but did not trigger any reaction.

“The otter is only just recovering from a century-long decrease in many European countries, and Switzerland and central and northern Italy are still almost devoid of otters. Otters were recently spotted in the Italian South Tyrol following expansion from Austria, confirming Austria as a key hotspot for the otter recolonization of Northern Italy. Otter culling in lower Austria will seriously threaten this process” says Anna Loy, chair of the Italian Mammal Society (Associazione Teriologica Italiana) and member of the Italian Otter Network (Lontra Italia).

Although there are excellent examples of best practice from other countries, Lower Austria still insists that culling is the best solution.

“The proposed cull of otters in lower Austria will have a detrimental impact on otters throughout Europe. The cull is technically flawed and in our experience of working with fishermen in the United Kingdom on otter predation, we find that the biggest percentage of fishermen do not support a cull. What they need is support to prevent predation by otters in the first place and by doing this, by working with fishermen we have demonstrated that many lives of otters can be saved and more importantly, that a cull is not required — prevention in the first place rather than cure is the only way” says Dave Webb of the UK Wild Otter Trust (UKWOT)

“In the Sacramento Valley in California, USA, otters and anglers coexist peacefully when otters are excluded from aquicultural ponds. Culling is not an effective means of predator control and we feel strongly that Austria's decision to allow culling of otters will heavily affect neighbouring populations of this wide-ranging species. We anglers are proud of our otters, a sign of the clean and healthy aquatic ecosystems that fish depend on.” says Alana Chin of The Sacramento Valley Otter Project.

*“Conflicts arising from the competition of humans and wildlife for biological resources are as old as humankind. However, in the 21st century, science and policy should attempt to provide effective and widely agreed solutions. Numerous projects at the national and international scale have shown that appropriate policies can provide smart solutions. Such solutions are already available and working well for the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) in various parts of its range”* says Dr. Reinhard Klenke, an independent expert working at the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research in Leipzig and editor of the Book “Human — Wildlife Conflicts in Europe: Fisheries and Fish-eating Vertebrates as a Model Case”.

Here is a list of organizations supporting our press release:

- IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group
- ALKA Wildlife (Czech Republic)
- Stiftung Pro Lutra (Switzerland)
- Lutra, Institute for Conservation of Natural Heritage (Slovenia)
- Grupo Nutria (Spain)
- Büro Wildforschung & Artenschutz (Germany)
- Otters and Butterflies Buckfastleigh (UK)
- WWF Italy (Italy)
- Stichting Vrienden van de Otter (The Netherlands)
- Italian Otter Network – Lontra Italia (Italy)
- International Otter Survival Fund (Scotland)
- UK Wild Otter Trusts (UK)
- Otter Watch (Singapore)
- Cochrane Ecological Institute (Canada)
- Sacramento Valley Otter Project (USA)
- African Otter Network (African Continent)
- Otters of Asia (Asian Continent)
- River Otter Ecology Project (USA)
- Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre in Cornwall (UK)
- Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle (France)
- International Wildlife Services (The Netherlands)
- Stichting Otterstation Nederland (The Netherlands)
- Aktion Fischotterschutz (Germany)
- Otter Network (UK)
- Hnutí DUHA - Friends of the Earth Czech Republic (Czech Republic)
- “Somogy” Provincial Association for Nature Conservation (SPANC) – Somogy Természetvédelmi Szervezet (HU)
- National Society of Conservationists (NSC) – Magyar Természetvédők Szövetsége (Umbrella for 100 environmental NGOs of Hungary) (HU)
- Grupo Asesor de la Nutria Neotropical en México.