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STILL ON THE TRACKS OF THE CONGO CLAWLESS OTTER (*Aonyx congicus*): FIRST MISSION IN CAMEROON

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Abstract: A 15 day first-step mission was undertaken in Cameroon during February 2002. The purpose of this prospective trip was, first of all, to raise interest amongst wildlife institutions (Governmental and NGOs) concerning the 3 species of otters supposed to inhabit this country. The same kind of work has been initiated in Western African countries such as Togo, Burkina-Faso, Benin and Niger. This will allow the institution of a network around the French speaking part of Africa, in order to collect information on distribution, status and threats as regards otters.

INTRODUCTION

A 15 day first-step mission was undertaken in Cameroon during February 2002. The purpose of this prospective trip was, first of all, to raise interest amongst wildlife institutions (Governmental and NGOs) concerning the 3 species of otters supposed to inhabit this country. The same kind of work has been initiated in Western African countries such as Togo, Burkina-Faso, Benin and Niger.

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WHY CAMEROON?

Cameroon is located on the geographical transition zone between the tropical forest present in the South, and the savannah biome in the North (IUCN, 1996). The spotted-necked otter (*Lutra maculicollis*), Cape clawless otter (*Aonyx capensis*) and Congo clawless otter (*A. congicus*) are all said to be present in Cameroon (DORST and DANDELLOT, 1972; EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 1999; ESTES, 1991; KINGDON, 1997; ROSEVEAR, 1974) and their distribution is likely to overlap in several areas.

IMPORTANCE FOR THE CONGO CLAWLESS OTTER

Concerning the Congo clawless otter, sometimes called the swamp otter, the most interesting parts of the country seem to be the Congo lowland forest blocks in the South-East (VIVIEN, 1991; VIVIEN and DEPIERRE, 1992). Therefore, contacts have now been made with the WWF, which is in charge of the 'Lobéké area' management, and with the European Community, which runs several projects in buffer zones of the Dja National Park. The Dja National Park, managed by ECOFAC, has been visited as well as the swamp area of Nyong, North of Dja.

In addition, we visited the IUCN representatives in Yaoundé. The Limbe Wildlife Centre (on the coast, close to mount Cameroon) and the Yaoundé Zoo were also visited but, unfortunately, none of these institutions kept otter specimens.

Semi-structured interviews were held with locals and, particularly, as far as they were cooperative, with hunters and fishermen.

The first results confirm the existence of the species in the Dja surroundings (BERGMANS, 1994; ECOFAC, 2001) and a day of prospecting on the Dja River was enough to find several indicators of its presence. It was also possible to confirm the presence of threats in this area. These include hunting for bushmeat, which is very common in this area (DELVINGT et al., 1994), as it is on the other side of the border in Northeastern Gabon (LAHM, 2001). The locals also use part of the body as a witchcraft material and as an aphrodisiac, as well as the skin for drums (hunters, pers. comm.). We received or took ourselves several pictures of killed animals sold along the road or in villages (4 different sites in this region between 1992 and the present: Somalomo (Franck Alary), Abong-Mbang (Mark van der Wal), North of Dja (Hubert Planton), Doume (Jean-François Noblet). Moreover, destruction of habitat in this area represents a serious problem for wildlife (WCI, 2000), otter populations included.

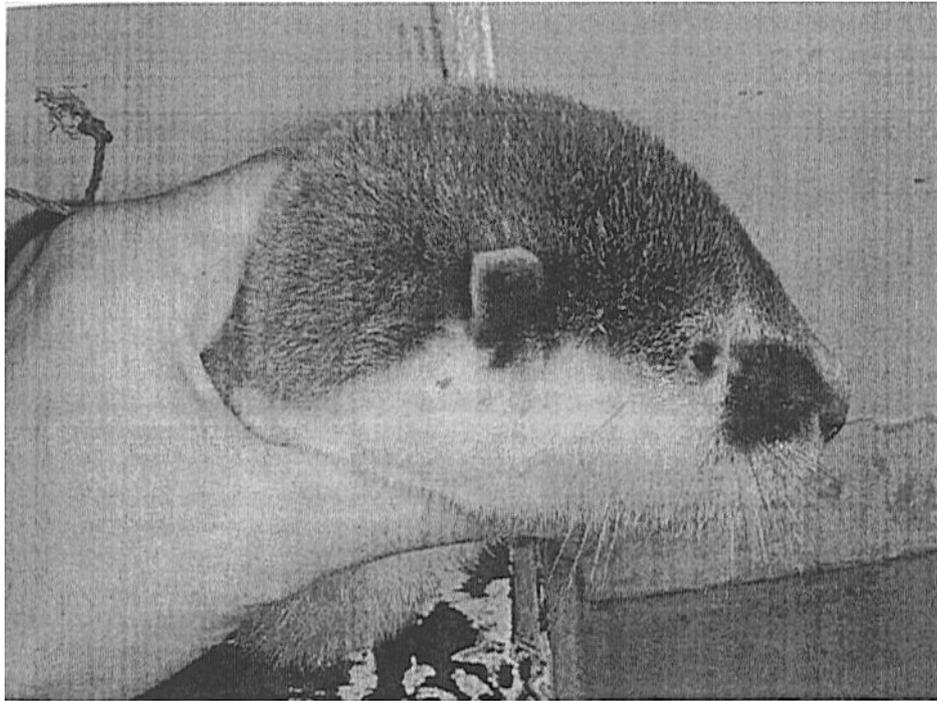


Figure 1: Congo Clawless (*Aonyx congicus*) cub

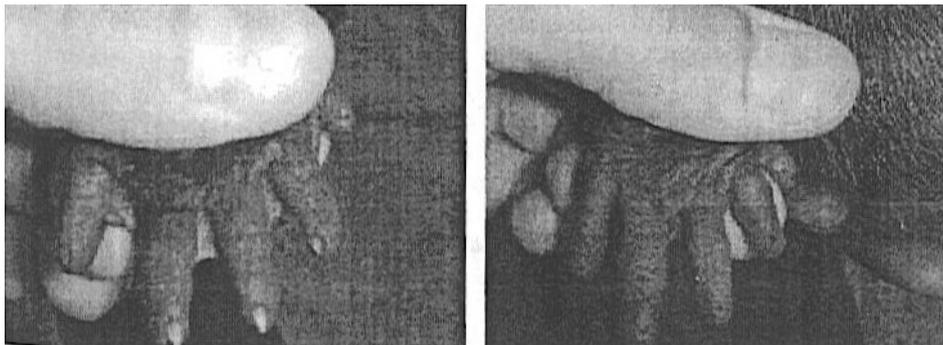


Figure 2: Forefoot (left) and hindfoot (right) of a Congo clawless otter (*Aonyx congicus*) cub

The spotted-necked otter also lives on the Dja (BERGMANS, 1994) and both species are the subject of conflicts with fishermen, related to destruction of nets, stolen fish, and disturbance (fishermen, pers. comm.).

It is important here to mention local legislation, which totally ignores the three otter species, being absent from both the list of protected mammals in Cameroon, as well as the game species list (Pelissier, pers. comm.).

One particular region, the Mbam and Djerem National Park located North-East of Yaoundé, appears to be an interesting site regarding the mixed distribution of the 3 species. This area supports both savannah and forest fauna (MAISELS et al., 2000). Prospecting here would provide an occasion to look for a possible sympatry between the Cape clawless otter and the Congo clawless otter and to address the question of possible hybridisation. Unfortunately, it wasn't possible to explore the area during this first mission. At present, this brand new park doesn't yet have a developed system of infrastructure, making future surveys difficult. However, contacts have been made with WCS Cameroon, which is conducting the mammal inventory of the park. It may be possible to plan a future mission in order to collect samples for genetic analysis and, eventually, to characterise transition forms, as has already been undertaken with forest and savannah elephants (ROCA, 2001).

CONCLUSION

This initial 15 day mission to Cameroon allowed us to rate the country, and especially the south-east, as an important area for the future study of the Congo clawless otter. However, a number of difficulties were encountered, similar to those found in neighbouring Gabon, which may hamper future studies, i.e. a lack of infrastructure, forest environment difficult to explore, and mistrust from locals. It is suggested, at this stage, that future missions to Cameroon to study otters should concentrate on the Mbam and Djerem National Park. It will also be important to continue to gather data from other parks not already visited, such as the Campo Reserve on the border with Equatorial Guinea, the Douala-Edéa reserve close to Douala, and the Korup National Park on the frontier with Nigeria.

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Résumé : Toujours sur les Traces de la Loutre du Congo (*Aonyx congicus*): Première Mission au Cameroun

Une mission initiale de 15 jours a été effectuée au Cameroun en février 2002. L'objet de ce déplacement prospectif a été, avant toute chose, de susciter l'intérêt des organismes (institutionnels ou O.N.G.) chargés de la faune sauvage, vis-à-vis des 3 espèces de loutres réputées présentes dans ce pays. Une démarche analogue a été engagée dans les pays de l'Ouest africain tels que Togo, Burkina-Faso, Bénin et Niger. Cela permettra la mise en place d'un réseau d'information sur les loutres en Afrique francophone, visant à y préciser leurs répartition, statut et menaces.