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THE OTTER - AMBASSADOR OF PEACE

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Abstract: Following a visit to Hwacheon, this is a review of the location of the Xth Otter Colloquium in Korea, and the importance of the otter as a symbol of peace between North and South Korea. The Demilitarized Zone Otter Project and other peace projects are reviewed. The meeting will be not only an otter occasion but a cultural event.



**THE OTTER – AMBASSADOR OF PEACE
The 10th International Otter Colloquium
Hwacheon, Korea
10-16th October 2007**

I have recently returned from a week in Korea visiting Hwacheon, the location for next year's Otter Colloquium. It was an opportunity for me to meet with Professor Sung-Yong Han, the Director of the Korean Otter Research Centre and organiser of the meeting, see the conference facilities and discuss the event with the mayor of the city.

Hwacheon County lies in the north east of the country. It is close to the border with North Korea, the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) being about half an hour from the city itself. The countryside is very beautiful – a land of lakes, mountains and woodlands. The dates of the colloquium next year will coincide with autumn – a time when the leaves on the trees will be turning to red, gold and browns, giving a colourful vista. The temperature too is very pleasant, in the mid twenties and the humidity is low. To see more of the area visit www.ihc.go.kr/English/html/main.html.

Plans for the conference are well in hand. The building where the meeting will take place is large and modern. The main lecture theatre will easily accommodate all our delegates, while there are a number of smaller rooms which can be used for smaller meetings and workshops. It is planned that all the meals will be served here. Final details of the programmes will be produced early in the New Year, when the call for papers will be opened.

Hwacheon city and county play a leading role in efforts to achieve peace, reconciliation and harmony with their North Korean neighbours. In this the Mayor has been one of the principal instigators. He has been most supportive of the conference. I spent a couple of hours with him discussing the event – his enthusiasm for both the colloquium and otters were very obvious. In fact such is the importance placed on the otters, it has been declared the *Ambassador of Peace* for the country.

This important role for the species is reflected in the work of Professor Han and his colleagues. They have instigated the DMZ Otter Project – an attempt to bring together scientists in both North and South Korea in a joint study in monitoring the otter. This is currently one of the only species which by travelling along the river can cross the border between the two countries. No doubt Professor Han will give more details of this important project at the colloquium and there will be an opportunity to visit some of the study area.

As part of the plans to foster peace with North Korea, the country has set aside an area on Lake Paroho the scene of some of the fiercest fighting in the Korean War as a peace park. The Peace Dam has already been built. It is also planned to construct a peace bell from the shells of the war and to create peace sculptures using tanks and/or other weapons. Delegates will have an opportunity to visit this during the Colloquium. Further information about the Peace Bell project will be found on www.peacebell.or.kr - this, however, has yet to be opened.

While in Korea, the County inaugurated the DMZ Society, the aim of which is to foster peace. Because of the role the otter is playing in this, as Chair of the IUCN OSG, I was honoured to be asked to be one of the founding signatories of the Society.

So really the Xth International Otter Colloquium is more than just another meeting, it will be very much a cultural event. It gives on a chance to meet with old and make new friends, discover more about otters, particularly in south east Asia and exchange ideas. The country is a 'hidden gem' with its delightful people, delicious food and really interesting culture that we have little opportunity to experience.

While attending the conference you should also take the opportunity to visit other parts of this fascinating country. It has a heritage going back for many centuries. Seoul, itself, is a vibrant 21st century city with much to offer the tourist/delegate.

I am sure that if you come you will leave with a memory of a well-organised meeting and a land of friendly people, temples, lakes and mountains, as well as a sense of history.

I would urge as many of you who can to make every effort to attend the Colloquium next year. Regular newsletters about the meeting will be produced by the organisers, these will appear in the Colloquium website (www.otter2007.org) and be copied on the OSG Library webpage.