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Comments on the Action Plan for Eurasian otter *Lutra lutra* Conservation

Background and Aim

I was invited by the Latvian State Forest Research Institute SILAVA to assist as an external expert within the process of developing the otter action plan for the period 2018 to 2028. In this context I was able to visit once again Latvia in July 2017, to experience different otter habitats with a focus on fish farms and to discuss otter conservation and fish farming with various stake holders and experts of Latvia. As a final step of the collaboration I was asked in January 2018 to comment on the action plan.

The comments are given within the following context and emphasis:

- special expertise in otter conservation in Europe (AKranz is IUCN otter specialist group (OSG) representative of Austria and member of the world-wide management team of OSG),
- experience with the otter situation in Latvia (halve a dozen visits to the country since the late 1990s in order to understand otter ecology and conservation in Latvia);
- consideration within the legal framework of the Fauna Flora Habitat Directive (EC Dir. 92/43/EEC).

General comments

The provided document provides a good overview of the species ecology, distribution, population size as well as threats, conservation status and previous research. In addition, it provides sound insights into the present conservation of the species and the effectiveness of present actions (legislation, the role of specially protected areas, previous conservation actions and measures).

In front of that background detailed recommendations are outlined for the species conservation. It is remarkable that the planned actions and events provide detailed information on the following aspects:

- priority (scored in I, II, III),
- necessary time needed (months),
- estimated costs (1.000s of €),
- involved institutions and the form of cooperation.

This provides a general structure to easily understand and implement the action plan.

The action plan was translated in English and this makes it available for a European wide audience. This is great, because this action plan may well serve a good example for other countries to structure their otter conservation needs and process of achieving it.

Another advantage of this action plan is that it will be adopted by the relevant Minister of Latvia. This is crucial, because it provides the guarantee that it will be put in action and the administration involved has the duty to implement it. Such an approach is not standard in many European countries; in other countries of EU, management plans, if developed at all, are often just a compilation of facts and conservation needs from an expert opinion without any guarantee to be implemented.

In some countries otter action plans are primarily a guideline for administration how to deal with the otter, if some conflicts or problems with stakeholders do appear. In contrast, the Latvian action plan provides a pro-active approach seeking to address problems and activities necessary for otter conservation within the coming decade. The approach is in particular pro-active, because the current conservation status of otters in Latvia is considered “favourable” within the last reporting under article 17 of FFH-Directive.

Specific comments

There were significant changes in Latvia in respect to ecology (factors affecting otter numbers and in some future maybe also the distribution) and economy: the most relevant changes refer to a significant increase of traffic on roads, this might have a major impact especially in a flat country with otters crossing on land between rivers, streams, channels, ponds and natural lakes. The economic changes refer to the transformation from communism to capitalism. In that process economic losses due to a fish predator like the otter may gain significant weight.

Another striking aspect of otter ecology is the current beaver management which is carried out not only because of farmers´ and foresters´ interests to protect their land respectively crop, but also because of conservation needs of freshwater mussels (*Unio crassus* and *Margaritifera margaritifera*). Hundreds of beavers are killed every year and many beaver dams and ponds are destroyed, both have a straight forward effect on otter numbers due to deliberate killing and reduction of food supply.

The population size of otters (approx. 4.000 individuals) in Latvia is estimated on the current distribution and an assessment from 1999 (Ozoliņš 1999). The distribution is based on signs found at four points within each 10 x 10 km grid-cell covering the territory of the country. Such a survey is excellent to provide data on the distribution, but may be insensitive for detecting population decreases. At present it is unknown how strong a decline has to be, in order to be detected merely by absence / presence data such as spraints found in four survey points per sampling unit.

Under the prevailing conditions in Latvia which are:

a) significantly increased risk of road mortalities,
b) significant mortality due to by-catch in beaver trapping,
c) potentially increased risk of intentional killings at fish farms and
d) decrease of food availability due to destruction of beaver dams and beaver ponds

Latvia´s otter population is under strong direct anthropogenic influence. The conditions a) – c) may well have a positive effect on reproduction since the effect of these conditions equals some kind of population culling. Condition d) is acting in the other direction and may negatively affect reproduction success and general survival of otters, subadults in particular.

From a European wide perspective, the beaver management carried out in Latvia as well as the other Baltic States may have the most significant effect on otter numbers and once maybe also on the status of otters in these countries. Nowhere else in an EU member state, otter populations are facing such a strong anthropogenic impact like here.

I would like to emphasize this in order to support all actions within the management plan which are designed elucidating this situation. In order to make it very specific, I would like to address the following actions and activities:

a) reinforce the monitoring of undeliberate killings of otters, both due to road mortality and beaver by-catch mortality: in this context a lot of effort has to go into establishing a network which collect such information on number, sex and age of killed otters,

b) analyse the data collected within the monitoring of killed otters in order to understand its effect on the population and in a next step model these effects with concrete population data, collected from case studies (research).

The systematic collection of undeliberate killed otters is an obligation under article 14 of FFH Directive and will be of crucial importance both to understand otter population dynamics in Latvia and to alarm population trends which may run the population status into “unfavourable” or even “bad”.

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Dr. Andreas Kranz