THE ELUSIVE OTTER

Through the writings of Gavin Maxwell and Henry Williamson the otter became known to many, yet few have seen these beautiful elusive creatures in the wild. Today a symbol of conservation, their presence in rivers is a sign of clean water.

Otters are members of the weasel family, the Mustelidae, which also includes badgers, mink, polecats and martens. Otters are semi aquatic carnivores which obtain most if not all their food in the water. In appearance they are small to medium sized animals with short legs, long slender bodies and a lengthy tapering tail. Their well developed senses make them expert hunters while their natural curiosity, sharp instincts and great versatility have enabled them to adapt to a variety of habitats.

In the 1960's concern developed about the survival of otters-over large tracts of England they had disappeared; numbers also declined in many parts of western Europe, and they became extinct in Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland.

Within the UK, surveys of otter distribution showed them to be absent from many counties of England and Wales and from the central belt of Scotland-only in much of upland Scotland and on the offshore islands did the otter remain relatively common.

What caused this decline? In the UK it probably started in the mid-1950's. It was not due to hunting, although over the preceding half-centurymany otters had been killed by hunts. Rather, it was the hunters who first became aware that something was amiss, when otters became more difficult to find. The disappearancecoincided with the advent of organochlorine pesticides, the best known being dieldrin, subsequently found to be toxic to birds and held responsible for the decline in several bird species.

Other chemicals have also been implicated, including the polychlorinated biphynels (PCB's), and heavy metals, particularly mercury. Otters, being at the top of the food chain, accumulate these contaminants, which persist in their bodies.

During the same time period there was also a change in the otter's habitat: rivers were straightened and cleared of vegetation and large areas of wetlands, important breeding and feeding areas for the species, were drained. It is likely that a combination of all these features led to the decline of the otter throughout much of it's western European range. However, recent surveys have shown that the species may be slowly extending it's range in some areas.

Today the main strongholds of the otter are in coastal regions where they are not at risk from another danger-oil. The grounding of the tanker Braer on Shetland in January 1993 highlighted this danger. Fortunately, a combination of events, wild weather and the type of crude oil involved ensured there was no major ecological disaster. However, fish collected several miles from the wreck and which otters eat, were contaminated by oil for at least the next six months. A survey in the summer of 1993 failed to find any evidence of otters along large areas of the south mainland.