

Reintroduction of the otter in the Netherlands: implementation of international guidelines in the pre-release phase

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General comments

Van Liere and Van Liere (2005) claim in their reaction to our article (van 't Hof & van Langevelde 2004), that the reintroduction project of the otter (*Lutra lutra*) into the Netherlands violated IUCN requirements. Subsequently, they assert that, under these guidelines, the reintroduction programme should be considered for immediate abandonment.

In our opinion, this conclusion seems to be largely based on the implementation phase of the reintroduction process. Van 't Hof and Van Langevelde (2004) assessed the reintroduction process in the light of the IUCN guidelines, with emphasis on the pre-release phases in the proposed area. Hence, Van Liere and Van Liere (2005) seem to draw conclusions that extend beyond the intention of our article.

subject of our research. Habitat quality and pollution are crucial factors within IUCN guidelines. Niewold et al. (2003) state that PCB contents of the sediments in the release area were acceptable and that they should not limit otter growth.

Van Liere and Van Liere (2005) do not specifically refer to sediment pollution levels within the release area, but instead they emphasise the large range of otters and their wandering behaviour, claiming that these factors place the otters at risk, as sediments in other wetland areas in the Netherlands still have high PCB levels (van Liere & van Liere 2005, p. 132). In our opinion, the water quality of future possible otter habitats is an important additional factor for the follow-up phase of a successful reintroduction but is one that runs beyond the intended scope of our initial article.

Water quality

Model studies calculated that the wetland areas along the border of Overijssel and Friesland Provinces could provide a home to a sustainable population of at least 22 individual otters (Niewold et al. 2003). This area has been the main focus of the reintroduction of the otter within the Netherlands and is consequently, the

Origin and age of the introduced otters

'IUCN guidelines recommend the release of wild-caught otters because of their higher ability to adapt to natural situations' (van 't Hof & van Langevelde 2004, p. 130). In 2002, the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (formerly known as Ministry of Agricul-

ture, Nature Management and Fisheries) commissioned Stichting Otterstation Nederland to deliver at least twelve sub-adult otters caught from the wild in either Belarus or Latvia. Otters from captivity could be used as a back up if there were any unforeseen problems with the introduction of the wild caught otters (Niewold et al. 2003). Thus in this respect, the reintroduction proposal did, in principal, follow IUCN guidelines.

To discuss the actual release of otters in the release area and the following-up phase in accordance to the IUCN guidelines was not part of our article. Van Liere and Van Liere (2005) state that eight out of 15 released otters in the first phase of the project were adults and the majority of these adults left the introduction area. A previous otter reintroduction project in Sweden experienced similar problems with adult animals (Sjöåsen 1996). Despite knowledge of this, adult otters were released in the Netherlands with the same negative results. This notwithstanding, the settlement rate in the first phase of the release process is similar to the starting phase of the reintroduction process of the otter in Spain and within the boundaries of the pre-release calculations for the Dutch project (Niewold et al. 2003). The latter study recommends future release of more otters from out of captivity, because of possible difficulties catching wild otters. Strictly speaking, this approach would be questionable according to the IUCN guidelines.

Social acceptance

'There is no reference of actual acceptance and support, or even understanding, within the local communities' (van Liere & van Liere 2005). Niewold et al. (2003) refer to the high level of involvement of people within the surrounding communities. They even propose spending additional time in the following stage of the project to improve communication with different groups and working more closely with local volunteers who have knowledge of, and interest, in the project.

Ethical aspects

Van Liere and Van Liere (2005) stress the importance of ethical aspects in the decision-making process of reintroducing otters in the Netherlands. The research proposal for reintroducing the otter in the Netherlands was examined by the Dier Experimenten Commissie (Animal Experiments Commission) at Alterra, which reviewed the ethical aspects of the protocol and concluded that it was acceptable (Niewold et al. 2003). Van Liere and Van Liere themselves state that some ethical aspects were discussed during the process, but that these have not yet been published (p. 133). We are in agreement with them regarding the importance of moral and ethical aspects, during all phases of a reintroduction.

The advantages and drawbacks of this reintroduction project were extensively discussed beforehand and this discussion led to an objective evaluation of the pre-release stage that used IUCN guidelines as a protocol. Although Van Liere and Van Liere (2005) are correct in stating that IUCN guidelines are *not obligatory* (p. 133), these guidelines have been successfully applied to other reintroduction programmes and were important benchmarks within the official reintroduction process in the Netherlands (Niewold et al. 2003). This was the reason why these internationally recognized guidelines were applied, to provide an objective evaluation of the complete pre-release process. By adopting the IUCN guidelines, the reintroduction team also followed IUCN criteria, which state that *animal welfare should be of paramount concern through all stages* (IUCN 1998). In our opinion, this also incorporates the well-being of individual animals.

IUCN guidelines can provide important objectives for the reintroduction of the otter, but they could have different levels of importance (IUCN 1998). Van Liere and Van Liere (2005) seem to be of the opinion that all IUCN guidelines have to be met and, if not then immediate abandonment of the reintroduction project should be considered. We concur with the importance of the IUCN objectives, but believe that these should

be carefully evaluated. An ideal reintroduction should prioritise the most important objectives. If these are met, the complete project is still in line with IUCN recommendations.

Conclusions

The reaction of Van Liere and Van Liere (2005) in questioning whether or not the reintroduction of the otter in the Netherlands met IUCN guidelines, is largely based on considerations regarding the post-release phase of the process, which was beyond the intention of our original article. We still believe that the pre-release phase of the project was in line with IUCN objectives, but we underline the need for a critical and objective evaluation of the implementation phase of the reintroduction of the otter in the Netherlands.

References

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Samenvatting

Herintroductie van de otter in Nederland: implementatie van internationale richtlijnen in de voorbereidingsfase

Lutra publiceert in dit nummer een forum-bijdrage over het wel of niet voldoen van de Nederlandse herintroductie van de otter (*Lutra lutra*) aan de IUCN richtlijnen. Volgens de auteurs is het herintroductieproject om meerdere redenen niet volgens het stelsel richtlijnen van de IUCN uitgevoerd. Argumenten zijn echter voornamelijk gebaseerd op de fase na het uitzetten van otters, in tegenstelling tot het oorspronkelijke artikel van Van 't Hof en Van Langevelde (2004). Wij baseerden onze conclusies op basis van het proces tot aan de uiteindelijke uitzet. De conclusies van Van Liere en Van Liere gaan ons inziens verder dan de intentie van ons artikel. Wij zijn van mening dat het voortraject van de herintroductie van de otter in Nederland volgens de IUCN richtlijnen is uitgevoerd, maar we benadrukken het pleidooi van Van Liere & Van Liere (2005) voor een objectieve en kritische evaluatie van de uiteindelijke uitvoering na de uitzetting van de otters.

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