

SYMPOSIUM REPORT

IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW MANDATORY REGISTRATION SYSTEM FOR CAPTIVE ASIAN SMALL-CLAWED OTTERS (*Aonyx cinereus*) IN JAPAN

Yumiko OKAMOTO^{1,2}, Hiroshi SASAKI^{1,3}

¹ Asian Otter Conservation Society of Japan, 1-12-2, Ishizaka, Dazaifu 818-0192, Japan, e-mail: yumikohaku88@gmail.com

² Hsinchu Zoo, 279, Kung-Yung Rd, Hsinchu City, Taiwan 300

³ Department of Contemporary Social Studies, Chikushi Jogakuen University

Abstract: The Asian Otter Conservation Society of Japan (AOCSJ) was established by Japanese otter researchers on October 1st, 2019 to boost conservation activities affecting otters. Illegal trade of captive Asian small-clawed otters is one of the most serious animal welfare problems in Japan and a new regulation system for this species started on November 26th, as a result of the change in CITES Appendices rank from II to I in August, 2019. To educate the public about this, and to discuss it with them, a symposium was held by the AOCSJ on November 3rd, 2019. At this symposium, four presentations and a panel discussion were shared with an audience of 55 people, including several media journalists. Important points from these presentations were 1) several behaviors of owners including renting, borrowing, giving and receiving otters will be regulated under the Law for the Conservation of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (LCES), not only buying and selling; 2) the registration number, registration date and expired date will be needed when selling Asian small-clawed otters based on LCES; 3) stricter rules and publicity should be applied to this registration, and clear rules are necessary to make sure only legally held individual otters can be registered in the future. AOCSJ will continue working to raise awareness and facilitate public behavior changes with regard to otters, to support more effective conservation of wild populations by reducing, and we hope to remove the pressure from the Japanese pet trade on Asian small-clawed otters.

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INTRODUCTION

On October 1st, 2019, the Asian Otter Conservation Society of Japan (AOCSJ) was established by Japanese otter researchers to boost conservation activities on otters. Among several otter-related problems, illegal trade of the Asian small-clawed otter (*Aonyx cinereus*) is one of the most serious one in Japan. To protect this species, its CITES Appendices rank was changed from II to I in August, 2019. Therefore, a new mandatory registration system for captive Asian small-clawed otters was started on November 26th in Japan under the LCES that protects all species listed on Appendix I of CITES. Hence, the AOCSJ has decided to hold a symposium on November 3rd to educate and discuss with the public about this new regulation system.

CONTENTS OF THE SYMPOSIUM

In this symposium, four presentations relating to the law and situation of captive Asian small-clawed otters in Japan were given by speakers and several topics were discussed during panel discussion time. The first talk, “*New regulations by the LCES on Asian small-clawed otters in Japan*” was presented by Hiroki Sato, Ministry of Environment. After a quick introduction on what CITES is, he explained what kind of regulations are going to be applied to living Asian small-clawed otters and Smooth-

coated otters after the quick introduction of CITES. Important points are that more activities including renting, borrowing, giving and receiving otters will be regulated under the LCES in addition to buying and selling, which was not previously regulated at all. People will therefore need to register their otter before putting it into a pet hotel, as well as when advertising or exhibiting otters to sell. However, it should be remembered that no registration is necessary if people just keep otters privately without any commercial activity before these regulations came into force. Mr. Sato also explained what is needed to register an otter; the otter must have a microchip, and should be re-registered every five years. Registration date and expired date will therefore be needed when selling Asian small-clawed otters based on LCES. Lastly, punishment for illegal trading has been introduced.

Secondly, *“Otter trade and management system in Japan”* was presented by Tomomi Kitade from TRAFFIC, Head of Japan Office. In this presentation, Tomomi Kitade shared the current otter trade situation and management system in Japan. First, she showed that 47 otters were confiscated in smuggling incidents during 2016–2018, and six Japanese people were arrested. The urgent report published by TRAFFIC on October 2018 says over 90% of the otters commercially traded are Asian small-clawed otters, of which 25 were imported during 2016–2017 from Asian countries. Also, 19 individuals were imported for zoos or aquariums during 2000 and 2017. It was revealed that people normally sell otters online for USD 7,200–14,580. The number of otter cafes is increasing, and there have been some incidents where a couple of zoos have sold otters to animal dealers. The huge popularity of otters in Japanese society has occurred mainly because of the social media. Lastly, she pointed out several problems in this new legal regulation on captive otters. For example, stricter rules, such as DNA parentage testing, are needed to avoid smuggled otters being registered as legally imported or domestically bred in Japan. In conclusion, stricter rules and more publicity about them is needed, and the rules should be clarified so that it becomes very difficult to keep illegally acquired animals.

In the third talk, Sachiko Azuma from PEACE which is the animal advocacy NGO in Japan gave a presentation on *“Efforts for improvement on Act on Welfare and Management of Animals, and exhibited animals”*. Sachiko Azuma explained about efforts being made to improve the “Act on Welfare and Management of Animals”, and to improve husbandry standards for captive animals. First of all, video of some captive Asian small-clawed otters kept in a poor environment was shown. Local governments can urge the owners to improve the animals’ environment, based on this law, which was changed June, 2019 for the 4th times, and which will come into force; however, there is still no mandatory requirement to do so. Also, the “Act on Welfare and Management of Animals” relates to LCES: if a dealer is arrested based on LCES, then this person is not allowed to trade for five years, according to the new rules of the “Act on Welfare and Management of Animals”. In addition to that, stricter rules will be applied to “First-class animal handling businesses” (animal dealers) after this change. However, it is not clear at present how this rule will work for captive animals other than dogs and cats. An additional resolution was also suggested when this law was changed, saying that establishment of captivity husbandry standards should be considered and some measures be taken to restrict the keeping of wild animals in captivity. Lastly, Ms. Azuma said that illegal trade has taken place leading to very poor animal welfare in Japan; we need far stricter rules to close down cafes or petting places that increase demand for private ownership of wild animals.

The last talk was, *“Management system and situation of captive Asian small-clawed otters in JAZA”*, given by Sakura Ito, Yokohama Zoological Gardens ZOORASIA. Sakura Ito explained about the management system and situation of captive Asian small-clawed otters at members of the Japanese Association of Zoos

and Aquariums (JAZA). Firstly, the Asian small-clawed otter is designated as a “managed species”, which means that pedigree registration and managed breeding are governed for this species by the person in charge of making domestic guidelines, husbandry instructions or research plans at the zoo or aquarium. Then, Ms. Ito indicated the approximate number of captive Asian small-clawed otters currently kept in JAZA institutions, and explained the process needed to transfer species designated as CITES I between holding institutions. Most of these individuals were born in Japan in captivity. In the future, JAZA has these goals; 1) to create a stable population of this species with good genetic diversity; 2) to carry out researches on reproductive physiology; and 3) to build a cooperative support and advice system with zoos, aquariums and rescue centers in South East Asia.

At the end of the symposium, a panel discussion was conducted by all speakers to explain further and reply to questions from the audience. Sample questions: 1) Permission from the prime minister is necessary for the transfer of an Asian small-clawed otter kept in zoos or aquariums? Answer was yes, people need the government permission in advance when transferring CITES I species. 2) Regarding to the additional resolution for improvement of animal welfare introduced in the third presentation, will it really come into force in the future? Answer was no, there is no guarantee this suggestion will be came into force because it has no legal power. 3) What kind of materials can be used for the DNA parentage test? Mr. Waku, one of the directors of our society, replied and said blood samples or hair roots can be used for this test.

CONCLUSION

The main theme of the symposium was very specialized, but we were able to discuss the law changes in the broad view because of variety of topics in each presentation. We hope this symposium will have a positive effect on the situation of captive Asian small-clawed otters in Japan.

In total, 55 people including several media journalists attended this symposium, and many questions were asked by the audience (Fig. 1). To solve the captive Asian small-clawed otter problem in Japan, public awareness and behavioral change is very important. The AOCSJ will continue its efforts for the conservation of otters, in and ex situ.



Figure 1. The scene

RESUME

CONSEQUENCES DU NOUVEAU SYSTÈME D'ENREGISTREMENT OBLIGATOIRE POUR LES LOUTRES CENDRÉES (*Aonyx cinereus*) EN CAPTIVITÉ AU JAPON

L'Asian Otter Conservation Society of Japan (AOCSJ) a été créé, le 1er octobre 2019, par des chercheurs japonais pour stimuler les activités de conservation liées aux loutres. Le commerce illégal de loutres cendrées en captivité est l'un des problèmes les plus graves pour le bien-être animal au Japon. Cette situation est due à l'entrée en vigueur du nouveau système de réglementation de l'espèce, le 26 novembre, suite au changement en août 2019 du classement des annexes I et II de la CITES. Un symposium a été organisé par l'AOCSJ le 3 novembre 2019 afin de sensibiliser le grand public et de pouvoir en débattre. Lors de ce symposium, quatre présentations et une table ronde ont été organisés avec 55 participants, dont plusieurs journalistes de différents médias. Les points importants de ces présentations étaient :

- 1) plusieurs comportements de propriétaires, en ce compris le prêt, l'emprunt, le don et la réception de loutres seront réglementés en vertu de la Loi sur la Conservation des Espèces de la faune et de la flore sauvages Menacées d'Extinction (LCEME), pas uniquement l'achat et la vente ;
- 2) le numéro d'enregistrement, la date d'enregistrement et la date d'expiration seront nécessaires lors de la vente de loutres cendrées sur la base de la LCEME ;
- 3) des règles et une publicité plus strictes devraient être appliquées à cet enregistrement, et des règles claires sont nécessaires pour garantir que seules les loutres détenues légalement puissent être enregistrées à l'avenir. L'AOCSJ continuera de travailler pour sensibiliser et faciliter les changements de comportement du public à l'égard des loutres et soutenir une conservation plus efficace des populations sauvages en réduisant, voire en éliminant, nous espérons, la pression du commerce des animaux de compagnie sur les loutres cendrées au Japon.

RESUMEN

IMPLICANCIAS DEL NUEVO SISTEMA DE REGISTRO OBLIGATORIO PARA CAUTIVERIO DE NUTRIA DE UÑAS PEQUEÑAS ASIÁTICA (*Aonyx cinereus*) EN JAPÓN

La Sociedad para la Conservación de Nutrias Asiáticas de Japón (AOCSJ) fue establecida por investigadores japoneses en nutrias, el 1º de Octubre de 2019, para reforzar las actividades de conservación relacionadas con nutrias. El comercio ilegal de nutrias de uñas pequeñas asiáticas en cautiverio es uno de los más serios problemas de bienestar animal en Japón, y el 26 de Noviembre se estableció un nuevo sistema regulatorio para esta especie, como resultado del cambio en el Apéndice CITES en el que ésta se ubica -del II al I, en Agosto de 2019. Para educar al público acerca de esto, y para discutirlo con el mismo, se realizó un simposio de AOCSJ el 3 de Noviembre de 2019. En el simposio, se compartieron cuatro presentaciones y una discusión con panelistas, con una audiencia de 55 personas, incluyendo varios periodistas. Los puntos importantes de estas presentaciones fueron: 1) varios comportamientos de los dueños, incluyendo alquiler, préstamo, donación y recepción de nutrias, van a ser regulados bajo la Ley para la Conservación de Especies Amenazadas de Fauna y Flora Silvestres (LCES), y no solamente la compra y venta; 2) para vender Nutrias de uñas pequeñas asiáticas, se va a necesitar el número de registro, fecha de registro y fecha de vencimiento, en base a la LCES; 3) deberían aplicarse reglas más estrictas y publicidad a la registración, y son necesarias reglas claras para asegurarse que en el futuro solamente se puedan registrar nutrias con tenencia legal. AOCSJ continuará trabajando para aumentar la conciencia y facilitar cambios de comportamiento del público, en lo que respecta a las nutrias, para apoyar una conservación más efectiva de las poblaciones silvestres reduciendo, y esperamos que eliminando, la presión sobre las nutrias de uñas pequeñas asiáticas generada por el comercio de mascotas Japonés.