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A NOTE ON *Lutra longicaudis* IN COSTA RICA

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Abstract: During a very brief visit to Costa Rica at the end of March 1991, we took the opportunity to see if we could find signs of *Lutra longicaudis*. Spraints were used to survey for otters. In Costa Rica logging continues but there is an excellent system of national parks where otter populations might be maintained. A full field survey is urgently required combined with awareness programmes in the parks, and Costa Rica is small enough for this to be practical.

During a very brief visit to Costa Rica at the end of March 1991, we took the opportunity to see if we could find signs of *Lutra longicaudis*.

Melquist (1984) in his survey of Latin American otters, based largely on interviews and questionnaires, reported that *L. longicaudis* was found in suitable habitat throughout Costa Rica and especially in Alajuela and the San Carlos River close to the border with Nicaragua.

On the Pacific side of the country we found signs from Guancaste region (north-west) to Carara, south of the resort of Puntarenas. Signs were found in mountain rivers flowing from the Monte Verde Cloud Forest Reserve to the mangroves of Puntarenas.

The spraints resemble those of *L. lutra* and the smell is almost identical. They were deposited on rocks, logs and broken masonry with accumulations of up to 15 found especially on boulders overhung with riparian vegetation. All sprainting sites were reminiscent of those used by *L. lutra*. Most spraints contained fish remains but crustaceans and amphibians had also been eaten. *L. longicaudis* is not confined to areas away from human populations. Spraints were found in the town of Canas next to the Inter-American Highway and in highly disturbed mangroves. On the Caribbean side there were signs at the Selva Verde Reserve where an American entomologist told us that he saw otters regularly during the day.

We were in Costa Rica at the end of the dry season and the effects of severe deforestation on water flow were very clear. Many of the rivers, for example south of Puntarenas, coming off deforested hills were completely dry. The rivers around the capital, San Jose, were grossly polluted but in other areas we visited they appeared to be clean.

Chehebar (1991) points out that because of the lack of access and the enormous size of most Latin American countries, comprehensive field surveys are almost an impossibility. However, much of Costa Rica could be covered in a field survey and a better understanding of otter distribution and status could be important to the long-term survival of *L. longicaudis* in Central America. For example, Melquist (1984) considered the species widespread in Panama but according to Chehebar (in Foster-Turley et al. 1990) it is not common and deforestation is proceeding rapidly. In Nicaragua the otter occurs in rivers flowing into the Caribbean but is extinct on the Pacific coast. For El Salvador there is no information on otter status or distribution but its chances of survival seem slim since it is predicted that, in about 10 years time, El Salvador will have lost all its forests and its water supply (Simons 1991). In Costa Rica logging continues but there is an excellent system of national parks where otter populations might be maintained. A full field survey is urgently required combined with awareness programmes in the parks. Melquist (1984) suggested that if the otter proves to be common in Costa Rica "a controlled harvest may be biologically acceptable". But as Chehebar (1991) points out, illegal trapping is still a real problem in Latin America. A legal harvest in a country like Costa Rica could not only threaten *L.*

longicaudis but would greatly increase problems of controlling illegal trade in all otter species in Latin America.

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