



Best Practice Guidelines for Responsible Images of Otters

Lizzy Humphries

with the collaboration of Margherita Bandini, Lauren Harrington, Jason Palmer

1. Introduction

- Of the 14 extant species of otter, only the North American river otter (*Lontra canadensis*) is considered not at risk of extinction. Both the Asian short-clawed otter (*Aonyx cinereus*, hereafter ASCO) and smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) populations are thought to have declined by at least 30% in the last 30 years, with an expected continuation of this over the next 30 years (Wright *et al.*, 2021), (Khoo *et al.*, 2021). A TRAFFIC report in 2018 highlighted the serious threat of the illegal wildlife trade to wild ASCOs, recording over 900 individuals being advertised for the pet trade within only 4 months. Smooth-coated, and to a lesser extent, Eurasian and hairy-nosed otters are also involved in the trade, though it is unknown whether these are intentionally caught for the trade or simply mistaken for other species (Gomez and Bouhuys, 2018).
- 66.2% of the global human population has access to the internet (as of January 2024, wearesocial.com), meaning that photos and/or videos (hereafter images or imagery) on the internet have a potential exposure of 5.35 billion people, or 5.04 billion social media identities. It is well known that social media influences human behaviour, attitudes and lifestyle choices (Nekaris *et al.*, 2013 and references therein). That influence might be positive (e.g. by raising awareness about threats to otters and encouraging support for conservation actions) or negative.
- The trend in pet otters appears to be increasing, and their popularity on social media may be contributing to this. Otters in domestic settings are often portrayed on social media as easy to handle, and are perceived by viewers as “cute” and “affectionate” (Harrington *et al.*, 2019). This imagery warps the perspective of the true behaviour of an otter. In fact, any image of an otter in close contact with people (even when the animal is not a pet) can be misinterpreted, and this is especially the case when imagery is shared by viewers without context. There is a clear risk that these images (regardless of the intention of the original poster) may encourage their popularity as a potential and sought-after pet.

- While there is some evidence of captive breeding for the exotic pet trade, it is not known on what scale this occurs, or to what extent it is regulated. In many countries, possession and captive breeding of ASCOs is illegal, and there is some evidence of young otters being illegally taken from the wild to be bred or sold as exotic pets (Gomez and Bouhuys, 2018). The age of many otters sold into the pet trade online is 3 months, far earlier than maturity (Gomez and Bouhuys, 2018) and too early to be without the guidance of adults or their mother (Heap *et al.*, 2008). Weight loss and malnutrition are problems commonly seen in pet otters when they arrive in wildlife rescue centres (Harrington *et al.* 2019). Furthermore, live-trapping poses a significant risk to otters in the wild. Studies researching the legal trapping of North American river otters (*Lontra canadensis*) and Eurasian otters (*Lutra lutra*) for conservation and research show that even when trapping is conducted by experienced and skilled trappers, it still carried an otter injury rate of 78%-80% (Lavollo *et al.*, 2021; Fernandez-Moran *et al.*, 2002). The growth in popularity of otter cafes also increases the number of public spaces where otters and humans interact in unsuitable environments, where health regulations and safety precautions are often lacking (Sigaud *et al.*, 2023). In these cafes, otters live in areas too small to express their natural behaviours, with loud music, inappropriate lighting and constant handling that can cause further stress (Sigaud *et al.*, 2023).
- While most sharing of, and responding to, images of otters is likely well-intentioned, it is how the message is received (or how the image is perceived) that affects the actual success and outcome of the information relayed (Waters *et al.*, 2021). Those who work directly with otters (such as staff and volunteers in zoos, sanctuaries and rescue centres), conservationists, government agency employees and tour guides must take the utmost care when liking, commenting on, sharing (and especially posting) images in close contact with otters. Although historically it was commonplace to share images of people working in close contact with otters, particularly in captive environments, the way in which information is shared has changed with the rapid development of the internet and social media. Consequently, we must alter how we disseminate information to protect the conservation and welfare of otters worldwide.

2. Why are images of people close to otters problematic?

They distort public understanding of the species

- In many countries, otters are included in the “dangerous animal” list and cannot legally be kept as pets by the general population. Bites are severe and can pierce through boots and gloves (Heap *et al.*, 2008). They also carry a biosecurity risk with potential zoonotic disease transmission (Myers, 2011). Otters are wild animals with complex environmental and dietary needs, but images of people holding, touching, swimming or interacting with otters can give the false impression that none of these concerns apply and that they may make suitable pets (Harrington *et al.* 2019).

They may drive desire among the general public for images of themselves close to otters

- The public’s perception of wild species, such as otters, is influenced by the way in which they are portrayed, regardless of whether that is in the media, the wild, or in captive settings, such as zoos, aquariums, rescue centres, sanctuaries or exotic animal cafes (Liska, 1999). Some of these facilities do not house otters to the minimum recommended standards, with studies researching otter cafes finding a lack of appropriate aquatic conditions, otters experiencing an increased number of health conditions (Ushine *et al.*, 2024), as well as restricted space, inappropriate physical interactions and lighting (Sigaud *et al.*, 2023). Opportunities to have direct physical contact with an otter such as in otter cafes or experiences offered by zoos and sanctuaries often result in photos shared online, which validate tourist travel experiences as well as the establishment’s welfare conditions. This may encourage others to visit the same facilities in order to gain their own images (Shutt, 2014).

They may drive demand among the general public and especially exotic pet owners for otter pets

- Due to the lack of ability to control the audience of a social media post, it is impossible to prevent viewing from geographically higher risk locations. In some areas, culturally, there is reduced concern towards the impact of poaching otters for the pet trade, particularly in regard to its legality (Siriwat and Nijman, 2018). Furthermore, in countries which were not traditionally considered to be “pet keeping”, pet ownership is growing, partially due to increased opportunity for close contact with unusual animals in captivity, such as otters (McMillan *et al.*, 2020). This can mean that some cultures do not perceive animals as being ‘wild’ (Aldrich, 2018). Since perception can be interpreted in such a varied way, it is important that this is considered before sharing any higher risk imagery.

3. What problems are associated with professional images?

Professionals in the industry, such as veterinarians, carers, wildlife presenters or celebrities can be seen as trusted figures. Their online posts can reach a large number of viewers, encouraging the public to mimic the behaviour of those they idolise online. Misleading posts can modify public beliefs and potentially dilute the perception of the severity of conservation issues faced by wild animals (Nekaris *et al.* 2013).

The environment in which the otter is being physically handled is unlikely to be differentiated by the audience, regardless of the intended message, so an otter being held or handled in a conservation setting is unlikely to promote a different response to one being held in a domestic or cafe setting. The otter is the focal point of the image, not the environment, which can often be cropped out of a photo. This distracts the viewer from the environment the otter is in, which could be harmful, and has the potential to reduce the impact of conservation efforts. Moreover, this imagery can negatively change the public perception of an endangered species (McMillan, 2018).

4. Does providing context help in the case of professional images?

Recent studies in human-primate interactions have shown that the comments and captions on images posted by those professionally working with primates can result in an increased public interest in pet primates. Previously, it was thought that direct contact with a primate could be contextualised within a caption and could lessen the chances of misinterpretation, however recent studies show that the caption did not decrease the likelihood of the viewer wishing to interact with or keep the primate as a pet (Freund *et al.*, 2023).

It has to be assumed that the difference in species will have no impact on the effect attempted contextualisation will have on the interpretation of a post, and it is important to get ahead of a trend which may have a hugely detrimental impact on the wild populations. Regardless of species, while it can be tempting to provide people with written information justifying close-contact imagery, studies have shown that this can often backfire, as it may challenge the reader's beliefs, and be seen as unreasonable (Miller and Prentice, 2016; White *et al.*, 2019). Naito *et al.*, (2024) demonstrated this when none of the conservational messages used in their study resulted in more favourable attitudes towards the exotic pet trade and demand for exotic pet ownership. Consequently, they advised that more targeted behaviour change initiatives, with actions promoting new norms, would more likely shift attitudes and increase the effectiveness of conservation intentions.

5. Best Practice Guidelines for Responsible Images of Otters

It is in the best interest of those who are concerned and involved with otter conservation and welfare to lead a general perception change towards otters. In particular, those who work closely with otters must take extra care not to post imagery of otters which could be recirculated out of context and then misconstrued.

The following guidelines aim to reduce the risk of images of otters being harmfully perceived. This is in order to protect the welfare of captive otters globally, as well as to protect the greater conservation of wild otters.

1. Do not post images of otters being **held by, hand-fed by, or interacting directly** with carers, volunteers or donors unless as part of an essential veterinary procedure and only if the human is wearing appropriate protective personal equipment, which includes, but is not limited to:
 - a. **Gloves**
 - b. **Facemask**
 - c. Uniform depicting a clear **logo** visible in the image
2. Where the handling of otters is essential for veterinary purposes, only images depicting **gentle restraint** should be shared
3. Where the handling of otters is essential for veterinary purposes, a **clear explanation** should be provided which explains what the image shows and the reason for the sharing (please see section 4. of this document)
4. Where the handling of otters is essential for veterinary purposes, the **attention of the handler** should be focussed on the otter or the procedure and not on the camera.
5. In captive settings, ensure that pictures of the public are taken where it is clear **the public is outside** the otter enclosure, rather than inside. This includes during advertised 'otter experiences'.
6. Imagery of otters should **not include the public in direct contact** with otters in any way. Should an organisation wish to involve otters as part of a public educational experience, feeding should always be across a **fence line or barrier using PPE and tongs**, under the supervision of a uniformed keeper. This is to demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of the risk otters pose to humans, and to avoid the circulation of hand feeding imagery.
7. Ensure that images of otters **avoid mimicking social media trends** (clothes, baby toys, improper food types etc) which could remove or dilute the wider context of otter conservation.
8. Ensure that there is a **minimum distance of 15 meters** between the person and otter in images of humans and wild/non-captive otters. If this image is portraying wild conservation/scientific studies, there should be clear context contained in the image. This could include the presence of facemasks, binoculars, notepad or similar equipment, with an appropriate caption.
9. Ensure that you and/or your organisation have a **code of conduct** regarding the dissemination of imagery by all those involved within the organisation.
10. **Promote education** by explaining issues related to images of people close to otters. Ensure that this information is available on your organisation's website, publications, programmes, signage, presentations, experiences and tours.
11. Where necessary, **substitute historic images** used by you and/or your organisation which may now be deemed inappropriate. Essential historic images should be shared with a suitable caption to help with contextualisation.

6. Examples of Appropriate Images of Otters with Both Otters and Humans in the Same Shot (no contact)



Figure 1: Battersea Park Children's Zoo.

Otter talks and feeds including those carried out for advertised "otter experiences" are performed from outside animal enclosures, enabling the public to see natural behaviours and highlighting their dangerous nature.



Figure 2: Battersea Park Children's Zoo.

Positioning of keeper and otters during daily husbandry is important as it enables the public to take images which align with the imagery guidelines.



Figure 3: New Forest Wildlife Park.

Advertised "otter experiences" are carried out through a safe and obvious barrier. The use of tongs, gloves and (if the experience is held indoors) face mask, ensures there is no direct hand feeding by the public, while maintaining the educational value of an otter experience. Experiences are accompanied by an experienced and uniformed keeper, and the focus of those in the image is on the otter, not the camera. It is clear that the animal is able to choose to leave the experience at any time.

Figure 4: When observing/photographing non-captive otters or photographing those conducting research/taking imagery there should be at least 15 meters between the person and otter, as well as clear context such as binoculars, clipboards, PPE, cameras etc. An appropriate caption may help contextualise this imagery.



15m



7. Examples of Appropriate Images of Otters without Humans in the Shot



*Figure 5: Battersea Park Children's Zoo.
Imagery of captive animals which is interchangeable with non-captive animals is highly effective.*



*Figure 6: New Forest Wildlife Park.
Imagery of captive animals carrying out natural behaviours can be useful as an educational resource.*



*Figure 7. Battersea Park Children's Zoo.
Captive ASCOs engaging in species specific enrichment. Care should be taken to ensure that any imagery of otters engaging with enrichment does not mimic social media trends. A caption may be used to contextualise the images as well as provide an educational opportunity.*



*Figure 8. New Forest Wildlife Park.
A clear image of a veterinary procedure on an ASCO with veterinary equipment visible. A caption to outline positive welfare practices may be used to contextualise the image as well as provide an educational opportunity.*



*Figure 9. Tan Yong Lin.
Images of non-captive otters behaving naturally in areas in which they are known to inhabit, such as Singapore, are effective.*

8. Examples of Appropriate Images of Otters in Direct Contact with Humans



Figure 10. New Forest Wildlife Park.

Clear veterinary imagery with gloved hands can be understood by the observer without a description, however a caption to outline positive welfare practices is an opportunity for education.



Figure 11. New Forest Wildlife Park.

Giant otter pup health check. Keepers are wearing uniform with logos as well as appropriate PPE (gloves, face mask etc.) and are focussed on the task at hand. The image is unlikely to be cropped in a way that may remove its context, although a caption to outline positive conservation and/or welfare practices is an opportunity for education.



Figure 12. RSZZ Edinburgh Zoo.

ASCO health check. Keepers are wearing uniform with logos as well as appropriate PPE (gloves, face mask etc.) and are focussed on the task at hand. Veterinary equipment is clearly visible. A caption to outline positive conservation and/or welfare practices is an opportunity for education.

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