



Trending: Otters as exotic pets in Southeast Asia

and the online activity fueling their demise



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An otter in captivity at a cafe in Tokyo, Japan. Visitors pay to interact, feed, and pet otters. These environments are detrimental to the otters physical and mental wellbeing.

Opposite page:

Wild smooth-coated otters in Singapore. Photo credit: World Animal Protection/ Aaron Gekoski

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Executive summary

Pet ownership dates back centuries, and the domestication of a few once-wild species has taken place over hundreds of years.

In recent decades, however, there has been a dramatic and troubling surge in “exotic” pets – which involves taking animals from the wild and trading them with those who want to keep them as pets. Parrots, turtles, lizards, snakes, fish, even primates and ‘big’ cats and otters have all been subjected to this abuse, and social media depicts a false narrative of the ease of keeping them as pets, rather than a realistic view. It can also connect buyers and sellers almost instantaneously.

Southeast Asia has seen a massive rise in the popularity of otters as pets.¹ But not only is it cruel and potentially dangerous to keep an otter as a pet, this trend is putting the very future of some otter species at risk.

There are four species of otter in the region: the small-clawed, the hairy-nosed, the smooth-coated and the Eurasian. Before the pet trade became a threat, their viability was already threatened by trapping for fur and traditional medicine, pollution and habitat loss.

The welfare of otters as pets is a huge concern. Our investigations show that many of these animals are suffering in captive environments. Otters spend their lives in and around water, but can rarely be provided that degree of access by a pet owner, who is more likely to give little more than some time spent in a bathtub, paddling pool or bucket, if at all. In the wild they live in large groups but as pets they tend to live largely in isolation. And their owners run the risk of encountering some less desirable behaviours: to humans species like small-clawed otters² can be loud, destructive and can inflict nasty bites. A lack of space and stimulation can also lead to abnormal repetitive behaviours.³

Additionally, all have seen significant population declines, and all continue to face significant threats to their viability. It is World Animal Protection’s view that three are in urgent need of greater legal protection – the small-clawed, smooth-coated and hairy-nosed.⁴

There can be no doubt as to the significance of the online trade: a recent study of online sales of pet otters in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam uncovered hundreds of separate advertisements and an estimated average of almost one thousand otters for sale over the 19-week study.⁵

In 2018 World Animal Protection began investigating the scope and extent of the otter pet trade and the online activity that fuels it. Our work, focused on YouTube videos as an indicator of social media activity, using both English and local language search terms, found that not only had the number of videos depicting otters increased in the past two to three years but that their engagement (likes and comments) and overall popularity (daily views) had also increased.

Additionally, we launched an investigation to look online and on the ground in three trade hotspots: Japan, Indonesia, and Thailand.

Japan is currently undergoing an ‘otter craze’ fueled primarily by ‘Instagram-famous’ pet otters who are shown off on television and social media. Otter and other wild animal cafés – coffee shops that have otters on display and in some cases available for holding or petting by customers – are also fueling the craze. Our investigators found that the otters in these cafés were often kept in cruel conditions – lacking proper nutrition, access to water and enrichment – and were sometimes seen in clear distress. There is a huge gap between numbers of otters in Japan and the numbers officially imported,⁶ and questions around “legal routes” in which fraudulent paper work is used and takes advantage of minimal oversight.

Otter and other wild animal cafés – coffee shops that have otters on display and in some cases available for holding or petting by customers – are fueling the craze.

In Indonesia, online pet stores and Facebook buy/sell groups exist in abundance. Some with between 3,000 and 16,000 members and more than 10 posts a day. Our investigations found that the otters being sold in Indonesia are either wild caught or bred by local amateur breeders. Our team was told that hunters will use dogs to smell out otter dens (known as holts), then kill the parents and freely take the young.

It is prohibited to hunt, keep or trade otters in Thailand. Captive-breeding is also illegal. Which is why it is concerning that our investigations found that trade is ongoing with baby otters readily available. Sellers are extremely secretive, not disclosing their locations, and not allowing purchasers to see the otters in advance – though video or photo is sometimes offered to interested buyers. At the time of writing, there are at least 10 large Facebook groups dedicated to pet otters in Thailand, that either share cute videos and images, facilitate networking among owners, or explicitly facilitate buying and selling.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) lists the Asian small-clawed, hairy-nosed, and smooth-coated otters on Appendix II. While this provides some protection, it is insufficient because the trade is mostly illegal, including from unverified and likely-fraudulent captive breeding sources.

At the upcoming CITES 18th Conference of Parties (CoP18) proposals have been submitted to transfer the small-clawed and smooth-coated otters to Appendix I. An up-listing to Appendix I is warranted not only because they meet the criteria, but because it will send the necessary market signals, add further trade controls, and enhance scrutiny of captive-breeding operations. Both species have suffered marked declines in range, habitat loss, decline in habitat quality, high levels of exploitation, and more, not to mention the animal welfare issues associated with inadequate care as pets.⁷

World Animal Protection supports these proposals and calls for both species to be transferred to Appendix I at the CoP18.

Indonesia and Japan are experiencing an 'otter craze' that is driving illegal hunting, illegal trafficking, and unregulated captive breeding of otters, including new-borns.

Conclusion: What we found

1. Online activity is growing and is driving up the interest in and the trade of otters as pets.
2. Indonesia and Japan are experiencing an "otter craze" that is driving illegal hunting, illegal trafficking, and unregulated captive breeding of otters, including new-borns.
3. Despite it being illegal to hunt, trade or breed them, Thailand seems to have an abundance of new-born otters quickly and readily available for sale.
4. Due to marked declines inferred on the basis of reductions in range, habitat loss, decline in habitat quality, high levels of exploitation, and vulnerability to extrinsic factors, including habitat loss and degradation the smooth-coated otter and small-clawed otter need to be afforded greater international protections.

What can you do to help?

- Join our call and pledge to never purchasing a wild animal as a pet. Wild animals belong in the wild, not in our homes.
- Think before you click – help change the conversation online about the acceptability of owning wild animals, like otters, as pets. Every "like" leads to a lifetime of cruelty
- Proposals for the Asian small-clawed otter and smooth-coated otter to be transferred to Appendix I at CoP18 must be passed.



Introduction

Pet ownership has a long history, dating back centuries, and the domestication of a small number of once-wild species has taken place over hundreds of years of selective breeding for specific biological and behavioural characteristics, among them the ability to peacefully cohabitate with humans⁸.

In recent decades, however, there has been a dramatic and troubling surge in interest and market activity relating to new “exotic” pets – taking animals from the wild and trying to trade and keep them as domestic pets.

Today, a quick online search will lead the curious consumer or researcher to a huge range of wild animals for sale as household pets: parrots, turtles, lizards, snakes, fish, even primates and ‘big’ cats and as this paper explores, otters.⁹

Social media and online marketplaces, like those found on Facebook, play a huge role in this proliferation. First, they make the inquiries and transactions virtually instantaneous, and reduce the risk of being caught. Perhaps more worrisome is how easily and rapidly they influence public opinion regarding the acceptability and desirability of owning a wild animal as a pet, and how they can all too often perpetuate the misconception that these animals actually make good pets.

Such is the case today with otters in Southeast Asia. The past few years has seen a massive rise in the popularity of and trade in these animals as pets.

And, like many other species suffering the same abuses, the removal of an unknown, but potentially high, number of otters, from an already impoverished population is extremely alarming – considering the impacts on their population numbers, their welfare, and the welfare of the humans they come into contact with. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that owners are fully informed of critical information – nutritional needs, enrichment, environment and safety – when considering a purchase.

World Animal Protection research shows that 47% of exotic pet purchasers do little to no research before acquiring the animal.

In other words, not only is it cruel and potentially dangerous to keep an otter as a pet, it is putting the very future of some otter species at risk.

And the online trade in and social media sharing of positive images of otters as pets, is making this trend even more deadly.

How do we know this?

In 2016 the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC produced a study of the illegal otter trade based on seizures in selected Asian countries between 1980 and 2015. Among its findings, it discovered an ‘emerging trend’ of live otters being hunted and sold for pets in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam.¹⁰ At that time TRAFFIC recommended more research be done into the otter pet trade, and the online trade in particular.

In June 2018 TRAFFIC produced a follow-up study focused on Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. In this study the pet trade “emerged as the most pressing threat to the survival of otters”¹¹ and “potential threat to the long-term survival of wild otter populations.”¹²

The second TRAFFIC report concluded that “the open nature of the observed online trade clearly shows a blatant disregard for national legislation and regulations” and that the “online trade in otters is clearly considerable and appears to be the most immediate threat.”¹³

Opposite page:

Otters in the wild typically live along riverbanks like these ones in Malaysia. Photo credit: World Animal Protection/Aaron Gekoski

Otters in Southeast Asia

For the four species of otter that call Southeast Asia home, the pet trade is just the latest risk to their survival. They have been exploited historically for pelts as well as for traditional medicine. In addition, habitat loss, pollution and climate change have also taken a toll on these animal populations.¹⁴

As a result of these and other factors, one species, the Eurasian otter is currently listed on Appendix I of CITES¹⁵ and the small-clawed, smooth-coated and hairy-nosed are Appendix II and in need of further legal protection.

Asian small-clawed otter

The world's smallest otter, the Asian small-clawed is brown with a reddish tinge and a light grey face. As their name implies, they have reduced claws, but that doesn't stop them: they are extremely dexterous. In fact, unlike other species, small-clawed otters will grab food not with their mouths first but with their paws.¹⁶ They are perhaps the most charismatic of the otter species, are highly social and live in large family groups of up to 20 individuals. They form lifelong monogamous pairs. Their primary diet is crab, along with snails, molluscs, insects and small fish.¹⁷

Asian small-clawed otters have declined by more than 30 percent in the last 30 years, due in large part to significant reductions in its range and exploitation for the global trade in otter skins and live animals for the pet trade. They have disappeared or declined in many parts of their range. They are believed to be extirpated or extremely rare throughout much of their range in southern China. Recent surveys suggest that small-clawed otters have disappeared from the western Himalayan foothills and perhaps the Indian part of the Sundarbans. It is likely that the present range in India has been diminished, and the species is now considered to be extremely rare in Myanmar.¹⁸

Right:

The Asian small-clawed is brown with a reddish tinge and a light grey face. Photo credit: Adobe Stock Photography

Opposite page:

A wild smooth-coated otter feeding on fish in Singapore. Photo credit: World Animal Protection/Aaron Gekoski



Smooth-coated otter

Found in Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Sumatra, Java, Borneo, Indonesia and southern Iraq, these otters are also a social species, living in groups that vary seasonally and hunt together, the largest groups forming during the monsoon season.¹⁹ They are nocturnal and eat mostly fish, along with frogs, birds and shellfish. They are a close cousin to the small-clawed otter, and have a large, stocky build with short, dark brown velvety fur.²⁰

Like their small-clawed cousins, the smooth-coated otter population is estimated to have also declined by at least 30% in the past 30 years.²¹

The threats to these species are many – with the root cause lying firmly with their interaction with humans.

Hairy-nosed otter

Weighing between 11–18 lbs, elusive and easily identifiable by their hairy nose pad and white upper lip²², these otters have seen the biggest population decline – an estimated 50% in the last 30 years. The hairy-nosed otter was in fact declared extinct in 1998, but small, isolated populations have been rediscovered in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. Estimates for specific populations are very small, varying from 50 to about 300.²³

They eat mostly fish, but also water snakes, frogs, lizards among other small creatures that live in swamps and shallow coastal waters.

Eurasian otter

The Eurasian otter, as its name implies, has a very large distribution, from Ireland to China, and down into Southeast Asia. They are playful, and have a varied diet of fish, crustaceans, amphibians and sometimes reptiles, birds, eggs, insects and worms. They are usually nocturnal, and mostly solitary, and are protected throughout much of their range. The species is recovering in parts in Europe, but it remains at risk in Southeast Asia. (Eurasian otters have not been consistently observed in the pet trade but have been historically hunted for their pelts.)

Threats to their survival and welfare

The threats to these species are many – with the root cause lying firmly with their interaction with humans. They include:²⁴

- loss of mangrove swamps to aquaculture
- reclamation of wetlands for settlements, quarries, mining, hydroelectricity
- overfishing leading to loss of prey, and trapping by fisherfolk who see them as a threat to fish stocks
- agriculture
- pollution (waste, plastics and pesticides)
- trapping for fashion, traditional medicine, and most recently, the pet trade

Though this list of human impacts on otter populations is not to be underestimated, TRAFFIC's 2018 report on the illegal trade in otters named the pet trade as "the most pressing threat to the survival of otters, particularly in Indonesia and Thailand."²⁵





Above:

Takechiyo, one of the 'Instagram famous' otters on has nearly 300,000 followers lives with a family in an apartment block in the Minato district of Tokyo. Photo credit: World Animal Protection/Aaron Gekoski

Left:

Through a photograph, it's easy to see how people can think that otters make for suitable and happy pets but the reality is starkly different. Photo credit: World Animal Protection/Aaron Gekoski

Otter welfare and the pet trade

Born out of a desire to have something unique and special, would-be owners tend to romanticize how lovely it would be to have otters as pets. And it's no surprise: many of the videos on YouTube, appearances on TV shows and reality competitions and other social media platforms give that positive impression. But this filtered version of the daily life with an otter is simply not accurate. The reality of life with an otter is very different: they can be loud, aggressive, destructive, and wield very sharp bites. As a result, often these pets end up abandoned and rescue groups say they are struggling to keep up with the numbers of unwanted otters²⁶ often arriving in their care having suffered weight loss and malnutrition²⁷ and possibly with teeth removed or their scent glands to reduce the smell.

Keeping otters as pets is certainly not good for the animals themselves. In the wild they are highly social creatures²⁸, but as pets live removed from their normal social groups, and usually completely isolated from other otters. Naturally, they spend their lives in and around water, but as pets often get little more than a dunk in a bathtub or child's paddling pool. They are carnivores, with dietary requirements specific to their natural habitat, but often get fed human or other food that leaves them malnourished. They are often led around on leashes, dressed up, and treated like toys.²⁹ A lack of stimulation and socialization can lead to the development of repetitive, compulsive behaviours in captivity.³⁰ While zoos and aquaria are recommended to keep them in groups, and to provide a pool at least three times the otter's body length,³¹ pet owners are highly unlikely to meet these standards, and evidence from our investigation suggests that the breeders and traders who sell the otters are highly unlikely to inform the purchaser of these animals' welfare needs.

For animals captured in the wild, there is suffering at all stages of capture and transport.³²

Online pet trade

The wide-scale trade in otters as pets is a fairly recent phenomenon. The apparent growth of this trade is alarming given their perilous status in the wild – and the social media hype surrounding this trade and the impact that it likely has on would-be consumers is cause for concern. A study in 2012 of online markets in Indonesia recorded 63 live otters for sale by 46 different sellers.³³ 11 live otters were seized at the Bangkok International Airport in January 2013.³⁴ TRAFFIC's 2015 study of "seizure data" (incidents where authorities seized and recorded the illegal trafficking of otters or otter parts) reinforces the assumption that in certain countries otters were being captured for the pet trade.

A subsequent TRAFFIC study of the online trade of pet otters in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam between January and April of 2018 uncovered 560 separate advertisements and an average of 960 otters for sale at any given time. Indonesia alone was home to 449 of these ads, with an average of 711 otters for sale in that country. Thailand placed second with 80 adverts and an average of 204 otters for sale.³⁵

In the wild otters are highly social creatures, but as pets live removed from their normal social groups, and usually completely isolated from other otters.

Our approach

Seeing this alarming trend, in 2018 World Animal Protection realized that more information was needed about what was fueling these trends and where these otters were coming from. We intended to look into the scope and extent of the otter pet trade and the online activity that fuels it. Our collaboration with the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit of Oxford University (WildCRU), and others helped us assess the extent of the threat to these animals, figure out the best approach, and identify the evidence and information needed to address important unanswered questions. Based on the outcome of this work, the next step for World Animal Protection was clear: to fight for greater protections for otters and a halt to their trade as pets.

One of the immediate conclusions was that the hairy-nosed, small-clawed and smooth-coated otters needed greater legal protections by CITES. In order to strengthen the case, targeted investigations were undertaken into the international live otter trade, to investigate the growing market for pet otters in Japan - what is driving it, what source the animals are coming from, and where they are ending up - as pets or as entertainment.

Online videos and social media seem to be facilitating the purchase of pet otters, and others have suggested that social media may be to blame for the growing market demand.³⁶

At the same time, seizures in Japan increased from two in 2007 to 32 in 2017.³⁷ It seemed that the market for otters in a country that had no native population was growing and was possibly being fed, at least in part, by illegal imports.

We began our investigations following two paths - one online and the other on the ground.

What is CITES?

The United Nations' Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is an international agreement between 183 States that aims to protect wild animals and plants from over-exploitation by humans.

Every year wild animals, their body parts and products, and all types of plants are traded across countries all over the globe. It is important that trade is regulated for conservation purposes and that no species' survival is threatened or driven to extinction. With clear boundaries on what can and cannot be traded between countries the aim is to conserve populations and eradicate illegal wildlife trafficking.

Species of animals and plants can be classed as Appendix I, II, or III; With Appendix I, trade is commercially prohibited, whereas species listed as Appendix II may be traded internationally only under specific import and export controls.

Since the 1970's CITES has been an international agreement adhered to voluntarily by countries, governments, and parties. Although legally binding, countries must support and implement their own national laws to maintain and enforce agreements.

Online videos: Driving demand

We launched our online investigation to look at whether there had been an increase in social media relating to otters as pets. We opted to focus on YouTube videos as an indicator of social media activity, to explore if these channels might be having an impact on market demand for pet otters. We conducted an English language search for a global overview and local language search terms for southeast Asian countries that had been highlighted by TRAFFIC as being of particular concern to the otter pet trade - Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam and in Japan. Our desktop research found that not only had the number of videos depicting otters increased in the past two to three years, in one case a quadruple increase, but that their popularity and/or engagement had also increased. Indonesian and Japanese language pet otter videos showed the greatest increases in both the number of videos produced as well as their popularity.³⁸

At a global level, many of the most viewed and most popular videos were posted by commercial video sites, and seemed to be produced by a small number of individual owners. A number of these videos reached over 1 million views each. The appearance of phrases such as 'I want one' in the comment

section certainly suggests these videos may be driving demand³⁹ and the acceptability of owning an otter as a pet.⁴⁰

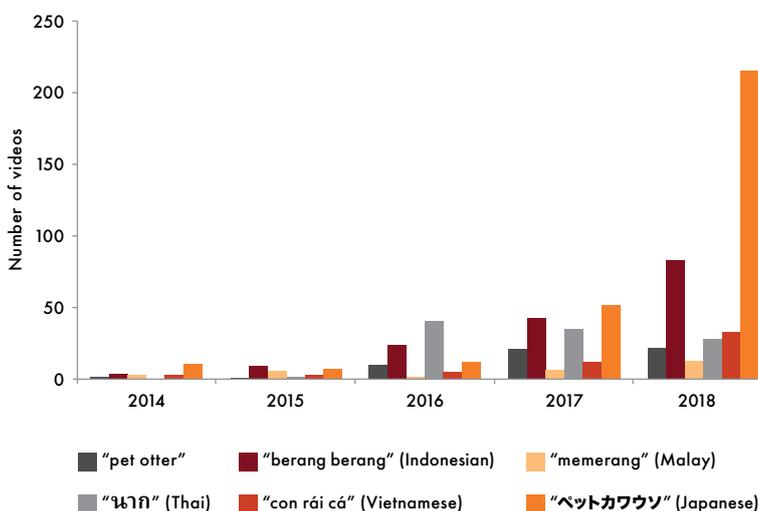
Through these videos, the otters are shown walking on leashes or portrayed as an affectionate, easy-going household pet, like a domesticated one. What this accomplishes is the viewer is left with the mistaken impression that otters are suitable animals to be kept as pets but the complex habitat and dietary requirements of otters, combined with the potential to cause harm to people (by biting), mean that otters are extremely difficult to keep in a home, captive environment.

It became apparent through our research that there was an urgent need to identify where pet otters are being sourced from, through what route and countries. And we needed to further investigate the role of social media and the prevalence of Otter "cafes" in Japan in driving the demand.

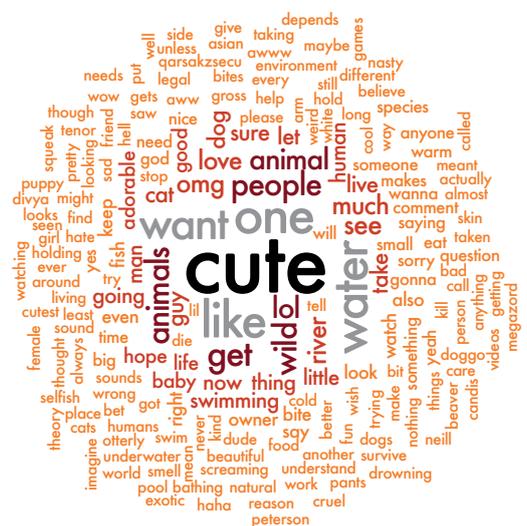
With this in mind, we deployed our investigators to look at the pet otter trade on the ground in Japan and Indonesia, and to look at the online and use of social media to prop up the trade in Thailand.

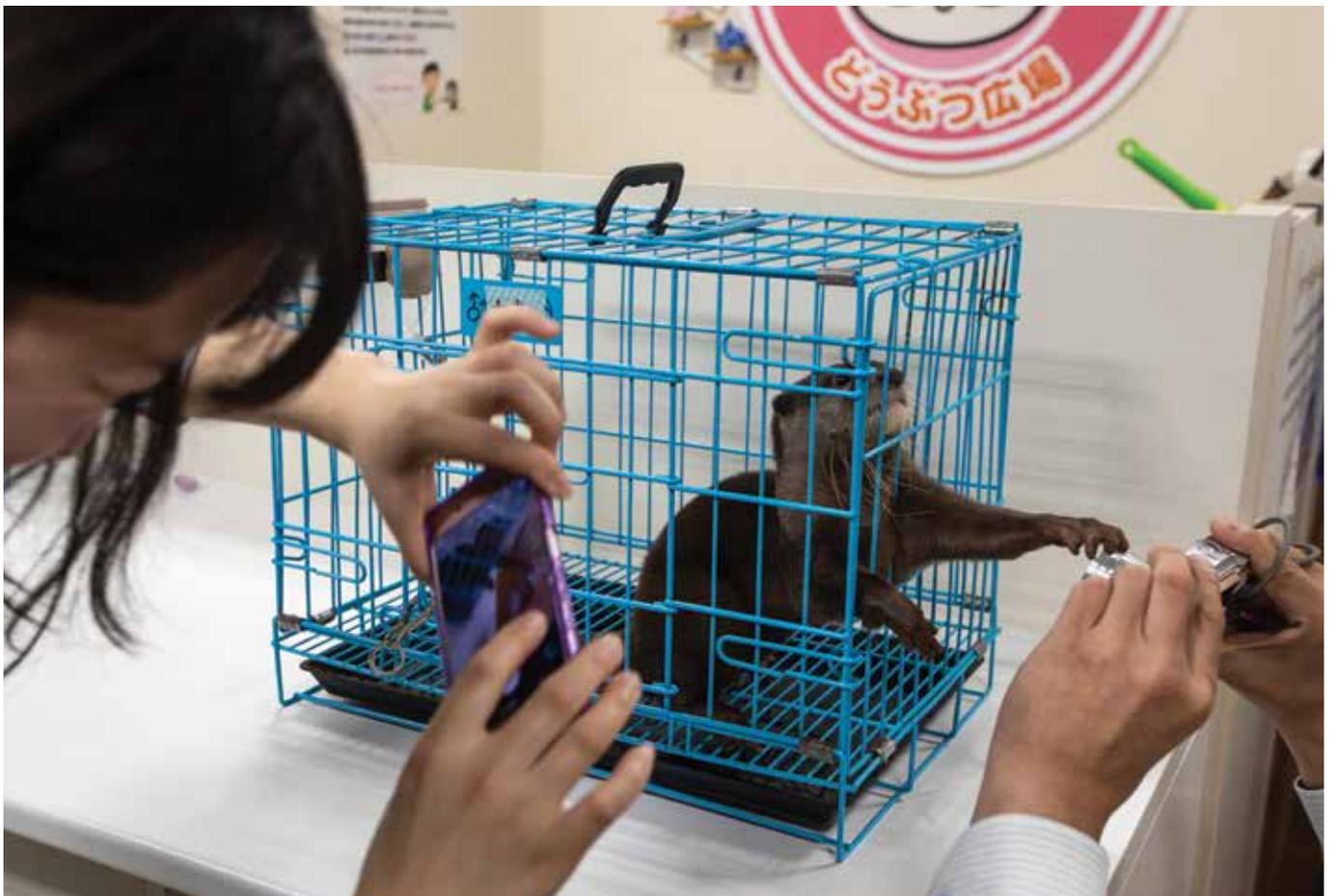


Number of pet otter videos (including reposted videos) published per year



Comments on pet otter videos





Following the trail: On the ground in Japan

Japan⁴¹ is currently undergoing an “otter craze” fueled primarily by Instagram-famous” pet otters who are shown off on television and social media, and as previously discussed, YouTube videos. There is even a Japanese word, “usolar” which means “otter fanatic.”⁴² These otters are not native to Japan, so they are either imported or bred in captivity. Our investigators set out to uncover how these animals are being acquired, how they are treated, and how World Animal Protection can intervene to save these animals from a life of cruelty.

One driver of the acceptability of otters as pets is the recent proliferation of Japanese “otter cafes” – coffee shops that have otters on display and in some cases available for holding, petting or being available for “selfies” by customers.

The conditions in which these animals are being held is a far cry from the quality of life they would enjoy in the wild. In fact, the animals are often kept in cruel conditions with little or no regard to their wellbeing. They lack direct sunlight, adequate space to move and poor nutrition. In some cases, the animals were in clear distress, and with little to no enrichment beyond a tub of water, and continuous interaction with café patrons.

Our research found numerous breeders, some adjacent to the cafés themselves, but because it is notoriously difficult to breed otters in captivity, according to interviews with breeders and experts, a very small number of cubs appear to actually be born this way. All this means, of course, that the Japanese otter pet trade is most likely supplied through illegal trafficking of animals through Southeast Asia.

All otters we encountered were said to be “small clawed,” which are a CITES Appendix II listed species that require a permit to cross borders. Once in Japan, however, there is no legislation regarding the keeping, breeding or trading of otters. There is a huge gap between numbers of Asian small-clawed otters in Japan and the numbers of otters officially imported. There are question marks around “legal routes” in which fraudulent paper work is used and takes advantage of minimal oversight.⁴³

Opposite page:

The latest craze taking off in Japan, tourists can pay to spend time at otter cafes where they can feed, take selfies and interact with captive otters. Photo credit: World Animal Protection / Aaron Gekoski

Right:

Conditions for otters in the cafes in Japan lead to lifelong suffering through lack of adequate access to proper nutrition, enrichments and environment. Photo credit: World Animal Protection / Aaron Gekoski





Following the trail: On the ground in Indonesia

In Indonesia otters are considered to be common, and commonly thought of as a pest that “raids” fish farms in rural areas. They are also popular as pets, generally in more urban settings, which are, like in Japan, undergoing an “otter craze”. In markets, it appeared that otters could be acquired to order, rather than on the spot.

Online pet stores and Facebook buy/sell groups exist in abundance. The largest Facebook group, “OTTER&FERRET FANS Group Sell Buy Animal Malang East Java” has 43,000 members. Other groups have between 3,000 and 16,000 members and all are very active with more than 10 posts a day.⁴⁴

Our investigations have revealed that the otters being sold in Indonesia are either wild caught or bred by local amateur breeders. Our evidence suggests the wildlife traders have a readily available supply of wild sourced otter pups captured from areas across Indonesia. Evidence points to an interlinked trade network involving farmers, hunters, collectors, dealers, enforcement agencies, and transportation operatives. Our investigators were told that it was common for traders not to have direct contact with hunters, instead using what was

referred to as a collector, or ‘middleman’ who deals directly with the hunter. Further, the traders implied that they were well positioned to easily source numerous otter cubs, and could obtain as many as required. They promised they could easily provide 40 cubs, if the appropriate financial incentives were offered.⁴⁵

The process to take these pups from the wild is cruel. Our team was told that hunters will use dogs to smell out dens (known as holts), then kill the fiercely-protective parents and freely take the young.

While many of the operations in the field seem to be individual hunters, farmers and dealers, multiple sources referred to a rumoured larger scale commercial breeding operation.⁴⁶

The evidence strongly suggests that wild sourcing and illicit trade in short clawed otters is widespread across the country.

Opposite page:

Top-left: Members of the Komunitas Otter Indonesia (KOI), an otters enthusiasts group regularly meet to take their “pet” otters on outings
Photo credit: World Animal Protection/Aaron Gekoski

Top-right: Founder of KOI, Georgian Marcello says the group has a slogan, the 3B’s, meaning otters are *bau* (smelly), *berisik* (noisy) and *boros* (an extravagance).
Photo credit: World Animal Protection/Aaron Gekoski

Bottom: Despite best intentions, keeping an otter as a pet is life of cruelty and suffering.
Photo credit: World Animal Protection/Aaron Gekoski

Following the trail: Online investigation of Thailand

All four species of otter native to Thailand are protected, making it illegal to hunt, keep or trade them.⁴⁷ Captive breeding is also illegal here. Most buyers and sellers appear to be based in Bangkok. While the otter trade on Facebook caters mainly to domestic consumers, we also know there is also some international trade out of Thailand, since 32 otters were seized en route from Thailand to Japan.⁴⁸

Sellers are extremely secretive, not disclosing their locations, and not allowing purchasers to see the otters in advance – though video or a photo is sometimes offered to interested buyers. This level of secrecy even extends throughout the trade network with dealers not having direct contact with hunters, but instead using middlemen or collectors.

There are many baby otters readily available for purchase (individuals and multiples) in and around Bangkok, with many just opening their eyes. Captive breeding was suggested to our investigators as a possible source, with some sources arguing that that it would take poachers some time to find them

in the wild, and by the time they are acquired and transported to Bangkok they would most likely be older, and with eyes fully opened. Still other sources told our investigators that the available animals could just as easily have been wild caught and transported in short order. One dealer indicated that when he was trading in otters, he would often wean the wild pups until they were strong enough to travel, and then load them onto a bus to Bangkok.

Our research found that Facebook is home to at least 10 groups dedicated to pet otters in Thailand, that either share cute videos and images, facilitate networking among owners, or explicitly facilitate buying and selling.⁴⁹ TRAFFIC's 2018 report⁵⁰ found that Otter Facebook groups' membership in Thailand doubled, from 106,111 in 2016 to 203,445 in 2018.

As with our research in Indonesia, the evidence gathered by our investigators in Thailand also strongly suggests widespread wild sourcing and illicit trade in small-clawed otters.⁵¹

Facebook is home to at least 10 groups dedicated to pet otters in Thailand, that either share cute videos and images, facilitate networking among owners, or explicitly facilitate buying and selling.

CITES and the protection of Asian otters

CITES seeks to ensure that international trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. The Asian small-clawed otter, the hairy-nosed otter and smooth-coated otter are currently listed in Appendix II of CITES.⁵² While an Appendix II listing provides some protection, it is insufficient in the case of small-clawed and smooth-coated otters because the trade is mostly illegal, including from unverified and likely-fraudulent captive breeding sources. At the upcoming CoP18, there are proposals to transfer the smooth-coated and small-clawed otter from Appendix II to Appendix I.

An Appendix I listing is warranted⁵³ for these species because the species meet the criteria, first and foremost, but also because an Appendix I listing will send the necessary market signals, add further trade controls, and enhance scrutiny of captive-breeding operations. As explained below, according to the best available information, the wild populations of both species meet Criterion C in Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP17) because they have suffered marked declines inferred on the basis of reductions in range, habitat loss, decline in habitat quality, high levels of exploitation, and vulnerability to extrinsic factors, including habitat loss and degradation.

World Animal Protection believes that both species should be transferred to Appendix I at CoP18.

Affected by trade

One of the criteria used to assess whether to add a species to Appendix I is the effect of trade:

- whether or not it is known to be in trade; or
- if that trade has had or may have a detrimental impact on the status of the species; or
- if there is demonstrable potential international demand for the species, that may be detrimental to its survival in the wild.

For both the smooth-coated and small-clawed otter, evidence exists that the species are in trade, that the trade is having a detrimental impact, and that international demand is growing, primarily for live otters to be used as pets. These otters are also traded for their pelts and, to a lesser degree, for traditional medicine. Information on the overall scale of the illegal trade in tropical Asian otter species is scarce, due in part to the lax enforcement of national laws and international trade restrictions. As such, the seizures that have been reported likely represent only a small fraction of the overall illegal trade in otters.⁵⁴

Taking the precautionary approach

According to CITES, “When considering proposals to amend Appendix I or II, in the case of uncertainty with either the status of a species or the impact of trade on the conservation of a species, the Parties should, by virtue of the precautionary approach act in the best interest of the conservation of the species concerned and adopt protections that will counteract the anticipated risks to the species.”⁵⁵ However, given the challenges associated with counting otters in the wild, estimating population sizes and collecting data on rates of decline is virtually impossible. The IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Otter Specialist Group is concerned that the decline in small-clawed otter and smooth-coated otter are much more precipitous than can be inferred from available population data given extreme levels of habitat loss and degradation and exploitation, along with the near extinction of a closely-related hairy-nosed otter in the region.⁵⁶

Given the challenges associated with counting otters in the wild, estimating population sizes and collecting data on rates of decline is virtually impossible.

Case study 1:

Small-clawed otter

The wild population of Asian small-clawed otters (*Aonyx cinereus*) meets the criteria for listing in CITES Appendix I. In particular, the wild population meets Criterion C in Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP17) because it has suffered a marked decline inferred on the basis of habitat loss, decline in habitat quality, exploitation, and vulnerability to extrinsic factors.⁵⁷ Asian small-clawed otters have declined by more than 30 percent in the last 30 years, due in large part to significant reductions in its range and exploitation for the global trade in otter skins and live animals for the pet trade.⁵⁸ Additionally, the Chair of the Otter Specialist Group has indicated that this species has likely declined at least 30 percent over the last two generations, or 20 years. World Animal Protection notes that a diversity of range States support inclusion of the small-clawed otter in Appendix I.

Asian small-clawed otters have disappeared or declined in many parts of their range. They are believed to be extirpated (eradicated completely) or extremely rare throughout much of their range in southern China. Recent surveys suggest that small-clawed otters have disappeared from the western Himalayan foothills and perhaps the Indian part of the Sunderbans. It is likely that the present range in India has been diminished, and the species is now considered to be extremely rare in Myanmar. Throughout their range, Asian small-clawed otters are threatened by habitat loss from human development and activities. In addition, poaching for illegal trade in furs, traditional medicine and a burgeoning online trade in otter pups as pets pose a threat to the survival of the species.⁵⁹ Small-clawed otters are a popular attraction in zoos and increasingly popular in pet shops, pet fairs, and even in coffee shops. In Tokyo, Japan our investigations visited eight “otter cafes” where tourists pay to interact and feed otters.

Trade in live animals is a growing concern. In just two years, between 2015 and 2017, 59 live otters, mostly juveniles, were confiscated in four countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam), and 32 were identified as Asian small-clawed otters, according to a report by TRAFFIC.⁶⁰ The growing trend in trade of live, juvenile small-clawed otters is alarming, especially since many are taken from the wild. World Animal Protection’s investigations into the small-clawed otter trade from Indonesia suggest that although owners of small-clawed otters in Japan – where demand for live otters is growing – claim they have

captive-bred animals, many of those otters may be sourced from the wild in Indonesia.⁶¹ Extensive research into the otter trade in Indonesia by TRAFFIC⁶² suggests that Indonesia does not have captive breeding facilities for otters that would be capable of producing the quantity of otters found in commerce and trade or facilities that would qualify as breeding “specimens bred in captivity” as defined in Resolution Conf. 10.16 (Rev.).

Multiple TRAFFIC⁶³ reports have shown that seizures in live-small clawed otters is increasing, and the popularity of the creatures on Instagram and other social media sites is fueling demand and popularity. According to a recent study by researchers at WildCru, otter videos on YouTube have both increased quantity and in popularity, possibly reflecting emergent growth in demand for live, juvenile otters.⁶⁴ An Appendix I listing would facilitate enforcement, especially with regard to online sales and would be helpful in preventing laundering of supposedly captive-bred small-clawed otters.



Case study 2:

Smooth-coated otter

The wild population of smooth-coated otters (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) meets the criteria for listing in Appendix I of CITES. In particular, the wild population meets Criterion C in Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP17) because it has suffered a marked decline inferred on the basis of habitat loss, decline in habitat quality, exploitation, and vulnerability to extrinsic factors. Smooth-coated otters have declined by more than 30 percent in the last 30 years, due in large part to significant reductions in its range and exploitation for the global trade in otter skins and live animal trade. In the last decade, loss of mangroves to aquaculture, reclamation of wetlands for settlements, aquaculture, stone quarrying and sand mining, large-scale hydroelectric projects, and other habitat alterations have increased, leading to reduced habitat for smooth-coated otters. Marked reductions in smooth-coated otter populations have been observed in many parts of their range due to intense poaching and extensive habitat loss in south and Southeast Asia.⁶⁵ Moreover, according to TRAFFIC, poaching and illegal trade for use as pets, for fur, and for use in traditional medicine poses a significant and growing threat to all tropical Asian otter species. Between 1980 and 2015, 2,949 otter pelts were

seized in India; although few are identified to species level, given that smooth-coated otter pelts are particularly desirable, a significant number are likely smooth-coated otter pelts.⁶⁶ Evidence of trade exists across the range of this species. In Pakistan, fishermen target smooth-coated otters for their pelts because they fetch high prices from middlemen who move the pelts into Russia. In Iraq, smooth-coated otters are hunted for their pelts and sold to smugglers who operate along the borders.

The trade in live otters for pets is an emerging threat to tropical Asian otters. Smooth-coated otters were also found for sale in a TRAFFIC study. A study of online trade in otters via five Facebook groups in Thailand from March 2017 to April 2018 found 15 posts offering a total of 29 smooth-coated otters.⁶⁷ In addition, there were 88 posts (183 individuals) that were unidentifiable as the photos posted were unclear or the otter were too young to identify at the species level. YouTube⁶⁸ seems to play a role in perpetuating demand for live otters, and the increase in posts featuring otters suggests that demand is growing.

Opposite page:

Three small-clawed otters on riverbank, Sundarbans East Wildlife Sanctuary, Bangladesh. Dr Gertrud Neumann-Denzau.

Right:

Marked reductions in smooth-coated otter populations have been observed in many parts of their range due to intense poaching and extensive habitat loss. Photo credit: World Animal Protection/Aaron Gekoski





Above:

Otter cafes are becoming increasingly common, particularly in Japan. Tiny shallow pools, small enclosures, unnatural interaction with hundreds of paying customers a day, are all detrimental to the otters' physical and mental wellbeing. Photo credit: World Animal Protection/Aaron Gekoski

Left:

An otter in captivity at a cafe in Tokyo Japan. These environments are wholly unsuitable for all species of otters.

Overleaf:

Wild smooth-coated otter in Singapore. Photo credit: World Animal Protection/Aaron Gekoski



Conclusion:

What we found

It's clear that there is a massive appetite for pet otters in Indonesia, Thailand and Japan, and that it is being fed by YouTube videos, social media, and a steady supply of pets for sale through online markets.

Our research and investigations have led to the following conclusions:

1. Online activity is growing and is driving up the interest in and the trade of otters as pets. This activity includes YouTube channels and videos, some of which have garnered over a million views, "Instagram famous" pet otters, some with over 300,000 followers and Facebook Groups with hundreds of thousands of members and lots of daily traffic. The comment sections of these social media spaces and profiles are filled with statements like "so cute", and "I want one", increasing the acceptability of having a wild animal as a pet.
2. Indonesia and Japan are experiencing an "otter craze" that is driving illegal hunting, illegal trafficking, and unregulated captive breeding of otters, many of whom are virtually new-born pups when they are when acquired by their new owners.
3. In Indonesia and in Thailand, where despite it being illegal to hunt, trade or breed them, there seems to be an abundance of new-born otters quickly and readily available, online to order for would-be buyers.
4. Due to marked declines inferred on the basis of reductions in range, habitat loss, decline in habitat quality, high levels of exploitation, and vulnerability to extrinsic factors, including habitat loss and degradation the smooth-coated otter and small-clawed otter need to be afforded greater International protections.

► Help protect otters

- Join our call and pledge to never purchasing a wild animal as a pet. Wild animals belong in the wild, not in our homes.
- Think before you click - help change the conversation online about the acceptability of owning wild animals, like otters, as pets. Every "like" leads to a lifetime of cruelty.
- Proposals for the Asian smooth-coated otter and small-clawed otter to be transferred to Appendix I at the 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES (CoP18) must be passed.





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