

# Otter

daniel allen



Animal series

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Otter



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Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*).

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# 1 Introducing the Otter

‘Anyone reading through the literature on otters will be struck by how little is really known about them in the wild.’<sup>1</sup> This observation was made by Philip Wayre in 1977, six years after co-founding the world’s first otter conservation organization. Remarkably, despite major developments in our understanding, this is still very much the case today. As Hans Kruuk noted in 2006, ‘from the many studies on otters, we are left with the main message that very little is yet known about these animals. It is perhaps even more surprising that the cultural history of the otter has been totally overlooked.

As a member of the weasel family (the Mustelidae), the otter (Lutrinae) is closely related to martens, polecats, mink, skunks and badgers. Perfectly adapted for an aquatic lifestyle, fossil records suggest they derived from a common ancestor, *Mionictis*, which lived 20 million years ago. The divergence of species is thought to have taken place in the middle Miocene (see appendix, table 1). Until recent years, otter species classification was in ‘a state of very considerable confusion’. Clement J. Harris listed a total of 19 species and 63 sub-species in his 1968 book, *Otters: A Study of the Recent Lutrinae*. Ten years later Joseph A. Davis used new scientific evidence based on behaviour, structure and appearance.<sup>4</sup> He listed 9 species and 3 tribes. More recently molecular biology and DNA analysis have led to further changes. Today scientists and conservationists generally agree there are 11 otter species with six genera.

## LUTRA

1	Eurasian otter ( <i>Lutra lutra</i> )
2	Hairy-nosed otter ( <i>Lutra sumatrana</i> )
3	Spotted-necked otter ( <i>Lutra maculicollis</i> )

## LONTRA

4	Asian small-clawed otter ( <i>Aonyx cinereus</i> )
5	Cape clawless otter ( <i>Aonyx capensis</i> )
6	Congo clawless otter ( <i>Aonyx congicus</i> )

## AONYX

7	North American otter ( <i>Lontra canadensis</i> )
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8	Neotropical otter ( <i>Lontra longicaudis</i> )
9	Southern river otter ( <i>Lontra provocax</i> )
10	Marine otter ( <i>Lontra felina</i> )

OTHER

11	Smooth-coated otter ( <i>Lutrogale perspicilata</i> )
12	Giant otter ( <i>Pteronura brasiliensis</i> )
13	Sea otter ( <i>Enhydra lutra</i> )

Geographically the otter is widely distributed, found in every continent except Antarctica and Australia. Despite this, not a single species has a growing population. In 2008 all 13 appeared on the *IUCN Red List for Threatened Species*.<sup>5</sup> Five were categorized as endangered (2, 9, 10, 12 and 13), two as vulnerable (4, 11), and one as near threatened (1). They do share some characteristics. Every species, for instance, lives alongside or upon the water, aquatic prey is largely eaten, and of course there is the classic otter appearance: whiskered muzzle, small rounded ears, long sinuous body, thick fur, short powerful legs, large webbed feet and rudder-like tail. But as this chapter will show, the ecology and behaviour varies greatly. The identity of the otter is also by no means fixed or unchanging. Throughout history different people have assigned different meanings and values. The public image has been shaped by a variety of human interactions, ranging from folkloric tales and traditional practices to commercial enterprise, sport, popular literature, television and conservation. *Otter* unravels this complicated cultural history, offering a new way of understanding the animal.



La Loutre, 'Front and Side View.' An original etching designed by the French artist Jacques E. de Seve, and engraved by C. Baquoy. From Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*, c. 1760.



Colour plate of 'The Otter', engraved by Peter Mazell. From Thomas Pennant's *The British Zoology*, 1766.

The Eurasian otter is the most widely distributed species, found in Europe, Asia and North Africa. It ranges from Ireland to Kamchatka in the north, Morocco to Indonesia in the south, and is found at sea level and in the Himalayas.<sup>6</sup> Inhabiting freshwater environments and rocky coastlines, they are particularly proficient swimmers, renowned for their agility and graceful movements. The naturalist Gilbert White (1837) wrote that the otter's body 'is so well formed for diving, that it makes great havock among the inhabitants of the waters'.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Delabere Pritchett Blaine in 1840 noted the 'eel-like . . . glidings in the water actually exceed those of the finny tribes he pursues'.<sup>8</sup> A streamlined body and sharp instincts are assisted by sensitive whiskers which help locate prey. Their diet includes a variety of fish, eels, frogs, crayfish, crabs, birds and small mammals.

As a nocturnal and solitary animal they are rarely seen during the day, generally retiring in a sheltered hollow beside the water.<sup>9</sup> Typical holts range from tree roots, dried drains and stick heaps to piles of rock, thick vegetation and old burrows. Frequently on the move, the species is extremely elusive, its presence often only confirmed by visual clues left beside the water, such as the five-toed impressions of webbed feet, faeces and remains of partially eaten fish. Historically, this behaviour of leaving prey after several bites has given the animal a bad reputation.<sup>10</sup> Descriptions of otters living entirely on fish were once common, as was their widespread persecution (see chapter Two). In Britain the mystery which shrouded the animal also saw it transform into a much-valued source of sport. Otter hunting was a popular pastime in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see chapter Four). Few people actually see the Eurasian otter in the wild, yet it has become one of the most popular species. Henry Williamson's famous book *Tarka the Otter* (1927) helped transform the animal into a much-loved fictional character, and iconic screen star (see chapters Five and Six).



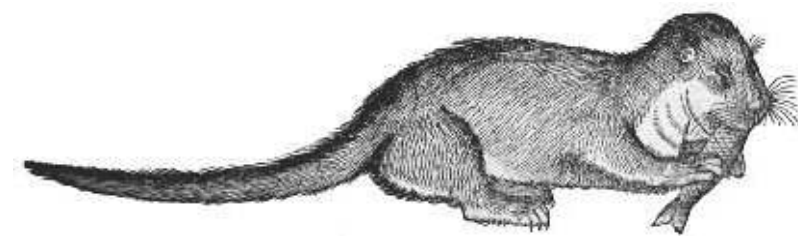
An otter's streamlined body is perfectly formed for diving.



On land their movements are not as graceful. This photograph shows the ungainly run of the Eurasian otter.



The Eurasian otter swims with grace and agility.



Woodcut of otter from Conrad Gesner's *Icones Animalium*, 1560.

The North American otter, also known as the northern river otter, is found in fresh and coastal waters ranging from Alaska to the Gulf of Mexico, and the Pacific to Atlantic coast. Although its appearance and behaviour resembles its Eurasian relative, there are some differences. They are far more sociable. Families of three or four are common, and gregarious groups of up to 18 unrelated males have also been seen together. Male territories are also much larger, ranging up to 250 km, 170 km more than the Eurasian. Measuring up to 1.25 m, and weighing 8 to 9 kg, they are a slightly longer and more slender species. A distinctive feature is its black rhinarium, the hairless part of the nose, which is broad and prominent. As with all otters their fur is made up of two layers: long guard hairs, which form the waterproof outer layer, and a finer, denser under-hair which provides insulation. Such pelts are highly prized by fur traders. This species is still legally killed for its fur in 29 American states and all but one Canadian province on an annual basis.<sup>11</sup> Their population has been maintained by regulating harvests, and monitoring numbers. Across the world other otters have not been as fortunate (see chapters Three and Seven).



Woodcut of an otter with fish, 1483.

The giant otter was once found across the Amazon Rainforest, but decades of poaching and habitat destruction have greatly reduced its distribution. Today there are fewer than 5,000 animals

concentrated in the three Guyanas, and just 60 in captivity. Known locally as the river wolf, measures up to 2 metres in length, making it the largest otter species. With its



A pair of North American otters.



The North American otter has a prominent black rhinarium.



Giant otter fur coat. In the mid-20th century hunting for pelts reduced the giant otter population.



The giant otter was a victim of fashion in the 1960s. They gained full protection against the commercial fur trade in 1975.

A black and white advertisement for Bradleys featuring a woman in a fur coat. The woman is wearing a dark, long fur coat with a large collar and a leopard-print scarf. She is standing in a room with a patterned wall and a window. The advertisement includes the text "OTTER MEETS LEOPARD" and "A Bradley model in natural granite color. Its gentle shoulders and long double-breasted line are enhanced by a sleeker jacket of leopard, from the new collection of original Bradley and Loxton fur models." The Bradleys logo is also visible.

rounded head, bulging eyes, small outward sticking ears, large webbed feet and flattened tail, it has a rather curious appearance. The diet of this apex predator mainly consists of fish, such as piranha, cichlids and catfish, although it has been known to eat crabs, snakes and small caimans. Socially they are gregarious, typically found in groups of up to 20 animals; and matriarchal, led by the dominant female and her mate. These groups are cohesive, often travelling, grooming, hunting, feeding and

sleeping together. As a diurnal species they are extremely conspicuous. They mark their territory by clearing vegetation from the river bank and creating a scenting area, known as a campsite. In the clearing 'members spend much time sprainting, urinating, depositing anal gland secretions, scraping, trampling, kneading mud, rolling, and tearing down vegetation and rubbing it over the body.'<sup>12</sup> By all accounts, this olfactory concoction 'stinks rather than smells'.<sup>13</sup> Vocal communication is also important. Nicole Duplaix identified nine distinct vocalizations including the inquisitive Hah, explosive snorts, wavering screams, threatening growls, reassuring hums, friendly coos, whistle squeaks and whines.

As well as being incredibly noisy, they are inquisitive. Giant otters are often seen lifting their heads out of the water 'periscoping, stretching and retracting' their necks towards unfamiliar sights and sounds, and even charging across the water towards boats.<sup>14</sup> Keith Laidler experienced the formidable sight when he was studying the animal in Guyana: 'They were swimming all round the canoe, red mouths ablaze, barking angrily and getting closer every second . . . this was our first view . . . I thought it might very well be our last.'<sup>15</sup> There are no records of giant otter attacks in the wild; however, there have been a number of fatal incidents in captivity. In 1969, for instance, a keeper fell into an enclosure at São Paulo Zoo and was killed by otters defending their cubs.<sup>16</sup> Similarly in 1978 an off-duty policeman was attacked at Brasilia Zoo when he saved a child who had fallen into an enclosure. The sergeant was badly bitten and later died from infections.<sup>17</sup>

The neotropical otter is nowhere near as formidable. Found throughout much of Central and South America, including the waters of the river wolf, it resembles the Eurasian otter and behaves like the North American one. It also has to contend with a number of aquatic predators such as anaconda, caiman and piranhas. Although the species is thought to be widespread, scientists are 'rather ignorant of its biology';<sup>18</sup> its population is also unknown. The IUCN found there was inadequate information to make an assessment of its risk of extinction in 2008. It therefore appears as 'data deficient' on the *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*.

The southern river otter or huillín has also 'had little scientific attention,' despite having the 'smallest geographical range of all otters'.<sup>19</sup> This is due to its solitary, nocturnal behaviour and its isolated habitat. Within the Patagonian region of Chile and Argentina, this endangered species is clinging on for survival, found in just seven areas from Cautín to Futaleufú. The marine otter, known locally as the sea cat, is in a similar predicament. One of the smaller otter species, it has adapted to a saltwater environment. It has coarse, rough fur and feeds on crabs, fish and molluscs. It once flourished along the Pacific coast from Peru to the southern tip of Argentina.<sup>20</sup> Today the species is on the brink of extinction with less than 1,000 animals left in the wild, and none in captivity.

Three species are endemic to Asia. The smooth-coated otter is more robust than its Eurasian counterpart, and as its name suggests has shorter (12–14 mm guard hair, 6–8 mm under-hair) and smoother fur. Distributed throughout the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, these conspicuous animals live in small groups, usually five strong. When Gavin Maxwell wrote *Ring of Bright Water* in 1960, this species rose to fame. Mijbil, the otter found in the Iraqi marshes and taken back to Scotland, was in fact an unknown sub-species. Much to the surprise of Wilfred Thesiger, who actually found the animal, it was named after the author, *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli*. Sadly Maxwell's otter is now regarded as extinct (see chapters Five and Six).<sup>21</sup>

The hairy-nosed otter is the rarest of all the otter species. Similar in appearance to the Eurasian, it is distinguished by the hairs which grow on its rhinarium, hence its rather charming name. Once found in the open swamps and reed meadows of Southeast Asia, it was thought to be extinct in 1993. Fortunately it was rediscovered in Vietnam the following year, and has since been found in Thailand.

Sumatra and Cambodia. As this otter is said to be the 'most difficult to identify in the field',<sup>22</sup> very little is actually known about the species. With an estimated population of fewer than 300 it is now considered one of the most endangered species in the world. The survival of *Lutra sumatrana* recently experienced another setback. In June 2008 an animal rescued from a Cambodian fisherman became the world's only captive hairy-nosed otter. Dara, as he was known, resided in a specially built enclosure at Phnom Tamau Zoological Garden and Rescue Centre, near Phnom Penh. Annette Olsson, a research manager for Conservation International, initially had high hopes: 'Scientists recommend establishment of a breeding population in captivity to ensure survival of this species. Dara could be the founder of such a captive population, if and when we find him a wife, of course.'<sup>23</sup> Sadly a mate was not found, and Dara died of a lung infection in spring 2010. The post mortem also revealed stomach ulcers.

A species which has benefited from captive breeding is the Asian small-clawed otter (also known as the Oriental small-clawed otter). The smallest otter species, they are known for their gregarious behaviour, distinctive finger-like front claws, and being the least proficient swimmers of all otters. Their natural habitat in southern India and Southeast Asia ranges from freshwater swamp forests to rice fields, mangroves, streams and reservoirs. Most people, however, will be familiar with their appearance as their playful antics and excitable chirps are seen and heard in zoos across the world. They breed particularly well in captivity, having as many as seven cubs in a litter, and are relatively tame. In the 1970s a hand-reared small-clawed otter called Mouse 'personified the Otter Trust', even though the organization was primarily concerned with the British *Lutra Intra*. Philip Wayre, co-founder of the Trust, reflected: 'it is probably true to say that through his close contact with such a large number of people Mouse contributed more to the conservation of otters by arousing public interest and concern than any human being has done.'<sup>24</sup> The species is still raising public awareness in the twenty-first century. In 2007 there were 666 captive animals on public display, far more than any other otter species.<sup>25</sup>

The other two members of the *Aonyx* genus are found in Africa. Both the Cape clawless and Congo clawless (also known as the swamp otter) are much larger than the small-clawed, measuring up to 1.5 m and 1.8 m respectively. They use their dextrous fore-feet to catch prey, including slow-moving fish, crabs, molluscs, insects and frogs. The Cape clawless is distributed throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa, from Senegal and Kenya to South Africa,<sup>26</sup> whereas the swamp otter is only found in the Congo basin. Owing to difficulties in the region a 'detailed ecological study' has yet to be conducted on this species.<sup>27</sup> The clawless otters share their habitat with the spotted-necked otter (sometimes classified as *Hydriectis maculicollis*). The species is abundant in central Africa, particularly Lake Victoria and Lake Tanganyika, but notably absent in far western and southern Africa. As a member of the *Lutra* genera they are equipped with webbed feet, a broad fleshy muzzle, and teeth adapted for catching fish. They are also amongst the best swimmers. In Swahili they are known as the water hyacinth (fisi maji); the irregular mottled patches of white that appears on their chest and legs account for their names.



*Aonyx cinerea* have distinctive partially webbed forefeet.

The sea otter is strikingly different. Residing in the shallow coastal waters of the northern Pacific Ocean, its three subspecies are found in Russian (*Enhydra l. lutris*), Alaskan (*E. l. kenyoni*) and Californian (*E. l. nereis*) waters. The characteristic habitat is over a kelp forest no more than 1 km from the shore. Their appearance and behaviour are quite unique. As well as being the heaviest otter, it is the largest member of the weasel family, and only marine mammal. They generally 'eat, sleep, mate and are born and raised in water',<sup>28</sup> and spend most of their lives floating belly-up on the surface. On the rare occasions that they do venture ashore their movement is by no means graceful.

At sea the species survives rough and freezing conditions. Where most marine mammals are kept warm by an insulating layer of fat, the sea otter is protected by an extremely dense layer of fur. Ranging from 26,000 to 165,000 hairs per square centimetre, it is the densest coat in the animal kingdom. This fact did not go unnoticed by international fur traders, who hunted the species to the brink of extinction in the nineteenth century (see chapter Three).

Sea otters maintain their body warmth in two ways. First, they take a lot of time grooming their coat. The air which is pressed from their fur during dives is not naturally restored. The animal lifts a flipper to its mouth, and painstakingly blows air into it, restoring insulation.<sup>29</sup> Second, they have a very high metabolism, eating 30 per cent of their body weight in a day. This is two and a half times more than a terrestrial mammal, giving them one of the biggest appetites of all mammals in proportion to their size.<sup>30</sup> Although their diet varies it mostly consists of sea urchins, crabs, abalones, clams, squid and slow-moving fish. This diet makes them an important keystone predator. Grazing sea urchins have the capacity to wipe out underwater kelp forests. By controlling their abundance, sea otters enhance kelp forest ecosystems, enlarge fish stocks, and attract fish-eating birds and mammals.<sup>31</sup>

During the forage for food their flipper-like hind feet propel them to depths of up to 100 metres. Their front paws are much shorter, with tough pads and retractable claws. These are used for gripping prey from the seabed. The sea otter is well known for being one of the few tool-using mammals. Its habit of using a stone as an anvil to break open hard-shelled molluscs has been well documented. While floating on its back a stone is rested on the chest, and a shell is held tightly between the paws. The mollusc is then struck against the stone until the shell breaks and its contents can be devoured. To prevent drifting away with the current they often drape their bodies with kelp. Their social organization is also distinctive. Although sea otters are usually alone, these gregarious animals aggregate in huge groups known as rafts; the largest reported contained 2,000 animals. Males and females are also strongly segregated. A fine example of this can be found on the Californian coast between Los Angeles and San Francisco. A group of males is found at each end of the 150 km stretch with a female group in the middle.<sup>33</sup> Groups of animals floating on the open seas made the species particularly vulnerable to human persecution.



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## 2 Folklore, Fables, Tradition and the Otter

Although scientific understanding is now given priority over myth, the meanings and values of animals were once derived from folkloric tales, fables and traditional practices. The relationship between people and the otter has developed over the centuries. Across the world attitudes towards the animal have been shaped by different symbolic, moral, mythical and practical interpretations, many of which have been long forgotten. Some of the portrayals may now raise an eyebrow, or even a smile, but they are significant parts of the animal's cultural history.

The otter features in several religions. In ancient Persia the animal was valued above all other animals. The Zoroastrian people believed it was against nature and their god to kill the otter, and would hold ceremonies for those they found dead in the wild. The animal was so sacred that the Zoroastrian scriptures (in the *Avesta: Vendidad*) detailed 18 severe penalties for 'the murder of a water-dog', including the perpetrator being made to kill 10,000 frogs, 10,000 snakes, 10,000 worms and 10,000 corpse-flies. He would also be forced to carry 10,000 loads of cleansed wood to the sacred fire, and give away land, property, all his wealth and even his daughter to 'godly men'.<sup>1</sup>

Animals also had a moral and symbolic role in the Christian faith, as demonstrated by the *Physiologus*. Written by an unknown Greek philosopher roughly in the fourth century, its chapters tell tales of beasts, birds and nature to teach Christian dogma. The hydrus is a notable example. Over the centuries it has been depicted as a water-snake, dragon, bird and otter. The last has become most widely associated with the allegory in recent years, as the following passage from 1896 proves: 'When the crocodile sleeps, it keeps its mouth open; but the otter wallows in the mire until it becomes thick coated with mud, which dries and hardens and forms a sort of armor, thus enabling it to run securely into the jaws and down the throat of the sleeping crocodile, and to kill it by devouring its bowels. This signifies the Lord's (otter's) descent into hell (the crocodile), his victory over Satan, and rising from the grave.'

The Hydrus, depicted as an otter, eats its way out of the crocodile's side having crawled into its mouth, c. 1200.



Many of the early Christian stories about saints also featured wild animals. The mythologized relationship between saints and the natural world evoked closeness with God. The otter is associated with two patron saints. The first is St Kevin (AD 498–618)



Two otters warm the feet of St Cuthbert, a modern icon by Aidan Hart.

of Glendalough, County Wicklow. According to legend, one winter night he waded into a lake, recited his prayers, and accidentally dropped his breviary. As it disappeared into the icy water he feared it would never be seen again. Only moments later an otter swam to the surface with the undamaged book in its mouth, and returned it to the monk. This same otter appeared in later times of need. When the

was danger of starvation at the monastery the animal brought salmon every day. The otter, however, sensed that one of the monks had imagined his pelt as a pair of gloves and never returned again. With this, the altruism and generosity of the otter was set against the selfish and greedy thoughts of the monk.<sup>3</sup>



In southern Sweden petroglyphs dating back to 1000 BC were found in Kivik, featuring stylized animals which appear to represent captive otters.

The second famous legend, of St Cuthbert (c. AD 634–687) and the otters, comes from England. This Northumbrian monk used to discreetly slip out of his monastery at night, much to the intrigue of his fellow order members. One night a monk quietly followed him outside the monastery walls, and the sight he witnessed was quite remarkable. Cuthbert walked into the sea, waded up to his neck, raised his arms to the sky and prayed. When he came to shore, he was not alone: ‘There followed his footsteps two little sea animals, humbly prostrating themselves on the earth; and, licking his feet they rolled upon them, wiping them with their skins and warming them with their breath.’<sup>4</sup> The otters continued offering their warmth until a blessing had been received. The next time the monk met Cuthbert he fell to his feet, confessed to following him, wept and begged for his forgiveness. The monk was readily forgiven and, on being asked, happily agreed not to mention the miracle again during Cuthbert’s lifetime.

In France the Carthusian monks had a very different relationship with the animal. Forbidden to eat meat, they classified the otter as a fish and duly ate it. When Thomas Pennant observed this in the mid-eighteenth century, he wrote: ‘Its flesh is excessively rank and fishy. The Romish church permits the use of [the otter] on maigre days. In the kitchen, of the . . . convent near Dijon, we saw one preparing for the dinner of the religious of that rigid order who, by their rules, are prohibited during their whole lives to eat flesh.’<sup>5</sup>

For the Ainu, an aboriginal people from the northernmost islands of Japan, the otter had an important role in the story of creation. According to folklore, the god of heaven sent a sparrow to the god of creation to tell him that man should be made from wood, not stone. When the god of heaven changed his mind the duty of messenger was passed to the otter. On seeing a pool of glistening water the animal soon became distracted with swimming and playing, and totally forgot about the message. The consequence was that man, in being made out of wood rather than stone, remained mortal. The otter was punished in various ways for this. In one interpretation, ‘the god of heaven became angry and trod upon the face of the otter’, which ‘explains why the otter has such an ugly face’.<sup>6</sup> In another the animal was given such a bad memory that if a person were to eat an otter’s head, they would become as forgetful as the creature. Those who did happen to desire such a feast could take precautions to avoid ill-fortune. As Reverend John Batchelor wrote in *The Ainu and their Folklore* (1901): ‘When eating it the people must take their swords, knives, axes, bows and arrows, tobacco boxes and pipes, trays, cups . . . and everything they possess, tie them up in bundles with carrying slings, and sit with them attached to their heads while in the act of eating . . . If this method be carefully adhered to, there will be no danger of forgetting where a thing has been placed, otherwise



‘Who Killed Otter’s Babies’, illustration from Walter Skeat’s *Fables and Folk Tales from an Eastern Forest*, 1901.

In Southeast Asia the otter has appeared in many fables. ‘Who Killed Otter’s Babies’ is a wonderful moral tale. The following version is based on the story as told by Walter Skeat in *Fables and Folk Tales from an Eastern Forest* (1901):

Mouse-deer was looking after Otter’s babies one day while Otter went out to catch fish. When he returned he was horrified to find his babies dead and crushed flat. ‘I’m very sorry,’ said Mouse-deer, ‘but I’m the War-Dancer and Woodpecker sounded the war-gong. I had to dance and accidentally trod on your children.’

Otter was furious and ran to King Solomon to seek justice for his family. Mouse-deer was hauled up before the king’s court, and admitted ‘I accidentally killed Otter’s babies while dancing to the sound of Woodpecker’s wargong.’

King Solomon asked Woodpecker why the gong had been sounded.

He said, ‘I’m the Chief-Beater and I hit the war-gong because I saw Great Lizard armed with his sword.’

Great Lizard explained, ‘I wore my sword because I saw Tortoise wearing his coat of mail.’

Tortoise stepped forward, ‘I wore my armor because I saw Crab aiming his trident.’

Crab insisted, ‘I aimed my trident because I saw Crayfish brandishing his spear.’

Crayfish maintained, ‘I brandished my spear because I saw Otter coming down the river to kill my children!’

And with this King Solomon made his judgement, ‘If that is the case, the Otter himself killed the children of Otter’s children, and the Mouse-deer cannot be blamed, by the law of the land!’<sup>8</sup>

In this sequence of events the otter is used to show how the action of one person always impacts upon the lives of others. The tale teaches its listeners to be aware of themselves, and to always take responsibility for their behaviour.





A Tlingit shaman's wooden mask of a man in the process of transforming into a land otter.

In Native American tradition the otter was feared by some nations, but highly revered by others. Along the Pacific Northwest Coast the Haida, Heiltsuk, Tlingit and Tsimshian were fearful of land otters. Dwelling primarily in the roots of trees, these animals became known as root people, or Kushtas. The Kushtas were cunning tricksters who could transform into human form at will. They were feared as they freely capsized boats and kidnapped near-drowned people. In Tlingit mythology, unwary travellers were also visited by deceased relatives or seemingly friendly guests. When they ate the feast which had been prepared for them they were put under a spell and slowly lost all human characteristics. It was said that only a shaman's intervention would save these kidnapped souls from life amongst the roots.<sup>9</sup> The otter became a totem of shamans because of these supernatural powers to charm and transform.<sup>10</sup>



Eskimo mask in the form of an otter.

The animal was also valued for its perceived healing powers. The Midewin people, or Grand Medicine society, of the Great Lakes Region greatly esteemed it as a sacred spirit. According to the

creation myth, the Midewin came into existence after the servant (Great Rabbit) of the Good Spirit saw the helpless condition of the original people. Great Rabbit, who wanted them to have the means to overcome starvation and disease, chose to communicate with the people through an otter. He shared the mysteries and secrets of the Midewin with the animal, and handed him the sacred drum, rattle, and tobacco for curing the sick. Using his medicine bag he then 'shot' a sacred white shell, the *mi'gis*, into the body of the otter, giving him immortality and the ability to pass on these secrets to the original people. This myth accounts for the widespread use of otter-skin medicine bags and their central role in healing ceremonies. The ritual involving the *mi'gis* was replicated in an elaborate ceremony which ended with a patient spitting the shell from their mouth, a sign that their bodies had been entered by supernatural power.<sup>11</sup>

Amongst the Iroquois League, the Mohawk, Oneida, Onon-daga, Cayuga, Seneca and Tuscarora nations, there was a group called the Otter Society. Its membership consisted solely of women who taught people 'how to give thanks to the water animals, to retain their favour, and to cure illnesses brought on by transgressions against the water animals'.<sup>12</sup> Their rituals did not involve singing or dancing or the use of shells; instead they were said to cure by sprinkling sacred healing water over patients. The Crow Nation of Montana, on the other hand, had a much more elaborate ritual. Chief Plenty Coups gave a detailed description of this in his 1930 biography. He wrote:

The-fringe wound a strip of otter skin around his head, tossed another strip, which had been cut out as to include the animal's tail, over his shoulder, and, singing to the drums of his helpers, lifted his medicine out of its bundle. It was a whole otter's skin, with the head stuffed . . . He whistled like an otter, dipped the medicine skin in a paunch kettle of water, and sprinkled it upon the wounded man while the helpers sang to their drums. The young man sat up . . . They walked into the river, where The-fringe dived like an otter, smoothly, and without disturbing the water . . . the otter skin seemed itself to be alive and swimming. Then I saw its nose at the wounds of the young man, saw its tail wiggle in the water as if it sucked blood and was pleased . . . Red blood came quickly, and quickly The-fringe stopped it. 'You are healed,' I heard him say. And this was true. The young man was well again. Two lumpy scars were where the holes had been.<sup>13</sup>



'The Otter', from *The Master of Games*  
c. 1410.

Alongside these folkloric portrayals, the otter has gained a universal reputation as a fish-killer. The consequence of this has been centuries of worldwide persecution. In England, and later Britain, the monarchy played a leading role in the organized killing of otters. Kings and queens from the Plantagenet dynasty through to the Hanoverians employed an otter hunter (King's Otterer) and maintained a pack of otterhounds (otter dogges) to protect the valuable fish stocks of inland fisheries. The first recorded pack was established in 1157. Under the royal patronage of King Henry II, Rog

Follo was appointed the King's Otterer.<sup>14</sup> This position came with a large manor, known as Otterer Fee, in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire. In 1422 Henry VI appointed William Melbourne as Valet of our Otter-Hounds. Melbourne's huntsman was paid tuppence a day to hunt with eight hounds.



Otter hunt in 15th-century France. From Gaston Phoebus' *Book of the Hunt*.

The animal was seen as even more of a problem in the sixteenth century. In 1557 Queen Mary ordered the Norwich Assembly to insist that freshwater fishermen on the River Yare 'keep a dog to hunt the otter, and to make a general hunt twice or thrice in the year or more, at time or time convenient, upon pain to forfeit ten shillings'.<sup>15</sup> In 1566 the Acte for the Preservation of Grayne was passed. This was significant since the otter, along with seven other animals, was reclassified as vermin. Under this legislature parish constables and churchwardens were given new powers to offer bounties for the heads of badgers, foxes, hedgehogs, otters, polecats, stoats, weasels and wildcats. Bounty prices reflected the perceived 'pest value' of vermin in any given parish. In Doncaster in 1611 for example, a dead otter attracted six pence, compared to four pence for a polecat, and two pence for a weasel.<sup>16</sup> With this law the practice of killing was duly encouraged.



Hunting scenes in the Netherlands, c. 1578.

The animal was targeted by all manner of people. Otter hunters were initially seen as experts in pest control, and otter killing provided a small income. By the 1770s there was widespread opposition to the animal: 'What miles Whitaker has traversed in pursuit of this fish destroyer! The banks of the Torne, Trent and Don were trodden again and again by his unwearied feet . . . Every hall and mansion



of consequence in the neighbourhood received him . . . the more he protected the “Stew ponds”, the more cordial were his receptions.’<sup>17</sup> Though otter-hunting did not become widely accepted as a source of sport until the nineteenth century, the animal was described in terms that emphasized its role as an invader and devourer of fish, such as fish monger, fish slicer, varmint, cunning marauder and four-legged fisher. Wildlife painters and natural history illustrators reinforced this reputation, invariably depicting the animal alongside dead fish.



‘Hunting ye Otter’, from Richard Blome’s *The Gentleman’s Recreation*, 1686.

The otter was particularly disliked by the angling community, who turned to lutracide. Isaac Walton had, of course, set out a clear contract with the animal in *The Compleat Angler* (1653): ‘I am Sir, a Brother of the Angle, and therefore an enemy of the Otter; for I hate them perfectly, because they love fish so well.’<sup>18</sup> As the readership grew, the opinion of Walton became more deeply instilled in the angling fraternity.<sup>19</sup> By the twentieth century the soaring popularity of angling meant that well-stocked stretches of river were in demand.<sup>20</sup> Riparian owners killed otters as their presence devalued their waters. For the more affluent game angler or angling association the inflated price of water rights meant that rented stretches of water were expensive purchases. The desire to safeguard such investments heightened inclinations to kill. For coarse anglers who spent relatively little, on the other hand, preventing the otter from killing future possible catches was a good enough excuse.



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