Fact Sheet: North American River Otter

Lontra canadensis

Description:
- **Size:**
  - Length: 18-32 in (46-83 cm)
  - Weight: 6-31 lb (3-14 kg)
- **Sexual dimorphism:** Sexes similar except that males are larger than females in length and weight, by an average of about 5%.
- **Physical Description:** North American river otters are a large semiaquatic weasel. They have short legs, muscular and streamlined bodies, small heads and long, powerful tails. Their vibrissae (whiskers) are long and thick. The feet are clawed and webbed.
- **Coloration:** Their backs are dark brown to almost black, while their undersides are lighter brown to tan.

In the Wild

Habitat and Range:
- **Geographic range:** Found throughout most of Canada and the United States, except in parts of southern California, New Mexico and Texas, as well as the Mohave Desert of Nevada and Colorado. Can be found as far south as parts of Mexico associated with the Rio Grande and the Colorado River. Historically extirpated through much of their range, especially in the east, but reintroduction efforts have been successful. Extirpated means that an animal is no longer found in a certain region or location, but it is not extinct.
- **Preferred Habitat:** River otters prefer habitats with access to water and a stable food supply. They can be found, in fresh, brackish and coastal saltwater environments. Examples include lakes, rivers, marshes, swamps, and estuaries. River otters have a wide tolerance for temperature, being found in both warm and cold climates, but have a low tolerance for polluted waters.

Diet:
- **Carnivorous**
  - Prey items include: fish (especially slow, small fish- such as suckers), frogs, crayfish, crabs, rodents, rabbits, and insects.
  - They will also occasionally eat aquatic plants and other plant matter, but this is not the main source of their diet.

Adaptations:
- **North American river otters have a wide variety of adaptations for life in the water.**
  - Long, thick vibrissae (whiskers) help them find prey
  - Webbed feet to help them swim
  - Thick, oily fur that helps keep them dry and insulate them from the water
  - Their tails are muscular and aid in propulsion in the water
- **North American river otters are also quick and agile on land.** They run with a bounding motion, using their long body’s flexibility to make up for short legs. They are also good
at digging and reasonably good climbers. They are often seen sliding on their stomachs in muddy and snowy conditions.

- North American river otters are intelligent and good problem solvers. This enables them to come up with creative methods to capture prey.
- North American river otters communicate through vocalizations and scent marking. They mark their home ranges using a combination of excretions from scent glands located at the base of their tails, urination and defecation. They also communicate through postures and movements.

**Lifespan:**
- In the wild: an average of 8-9 years
- In captivity: up to 21 years

**Ecosystem relationships:**
- Predators: North American river otters are sometimes preyed upon by large apex predators such as alligators, bobcats, large birds of prey, wolves and coyotes. When not with young, or in open space, otters escape predation through speed and agility, especially in water. When confronted with young present or cornered, they will fiercely defend themselves.
- Interspecies competitors: Other piscivores (fish-eaters) such as herons and marsh birds, mammals such as raccoons and foxes, carnivorous fish.
- Role/ Niche: North American river otters are important predators of fish and aquatic invertebrates. They help control the populations of these animals, and serve as a food source for some apex predators.

**Reproduction:**
- Breeding season: Early spring.
- Behavior: North American river otters are usually solitary, but will occasionally be seen in family groups or in groups of bachelor males. Males and females do not normally associate until the breeding season. They are polygynous, males mating with females who have home ranges that overlap with their own. Females care for the pups in a den near water.
- Gestation: delayed implantation for 10-11 months, gestation lasts 5-7 weeks.
- Litter/ Offspring: 1-6 per litter, usually 3-4. Young, called pups, are altricial and dependant on female for care. They are blind until about 1 month old.
- Maturation: River otter pups are weaned at about 3 months old. They become independent of their mother at about 6-12 months, and are reproductively mature at 2-3 years old.

**Activity:**
- Diurnal and nocturnal

**Other “fun facts”:**
- North American river otters can close their nostrils and ears when swimming underwater, which stops water from going up their nose or in their ear canals.
• River otter pups need to learn to swim. At first, they are wary of the water, so their mothers will often simply push them in the water and they quickly learn.
• River otters will sometimes make loud snorting noises to signal danger.
• River otters can swim in very tight circles, creating a whirlpool-like motion that brings fish up from the bottom.

Conservation Status and Threats:
• Listed on the IUCN Red List as Least Concern. However, in some states and localities they are considered threatened.
• CITES- Listed under Appendix II. This makes the international trade of any part of this species illegal without a permit.
• Threats:
  o Historically over hunted and trapped for its fur, especially in the east and midwest. Coupled with pollution of much of their habitat, this caused them to become extirpated through much of their range until regulation and reintroduction helped re-establish and stabilize their populations.
  o Today, their threats vary based on their habitat. Coastal North American river otters are highly impacted by disaster events such as the Exxon-Valdez and BP Gulf Coast oil spills. Inland, other forms of pollution continue to be the largest threat to their survival.

• Conservation efforts:
  o North American river otters are a conservation success story. Reintroductions and strict regulation of trapping has helped stabilize their populations in parts of their range that they were previously extirpated from, such as in the northeast United States.
  o CITES listing has greatly reduced the demand for their pelts.
  o North American river otters are still rare or absent from much of the southeastern United States. Research is being conducted to assess the impact of pollution on these waterways and come up with effective reintroduction plans.

At the Zoo
• The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore currently has one North American river otter named Mary. She was born in January of 2000.

What We Can Do
• North American river otters are highly susceptible to water pollution.
  o Support legislation that helps protect our watershed
  o Properly dispose of all chemicals. Do not pour harsh chemicals down the drain, as some cannot be removed by wastewater treatment facilities. For more information, contact your local water and sewage utility or waste management facility.
  o Wash your car at a facility that has proper wastewater management. When you wash your car in the street, harsh detergents and other chemicals run off into storm drains, which drain directly to the Chesapeake bay, and are not treated.
• Make environmentally responsible lifestyle decisions to help conserve habitat –
  conserve energy and resources.
• Support the conservation efforts of local organizations like The Maryland Zoo as well as
  organizations working in the field to protect wildlife and conserve habitat, such as the
  Chesapeake Bay Foundation and the IUCN Otter Specialist Group.

References:
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