



PHOTO: AHAMADUZZAMAN SHOYON

The Otter Side of the Story

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They require no introduction, especially in the river country of Bangladesh, but I will take the liberty to introduce them.

A children's lullaby which was famous among the 90s kids put the 'Bhodor' or 'Otters' on the map, at least for a good part of the generation that grew up on the classic *Amar Bangla Boi*. The lullaby is by none other than the great litterateur of the orient, Rabindranath Tagore. If this still does not tickle your memory of the creature, then how about a gentle reminder of the time when *Zootopia* was a massive hit and everyone got themselves embroiled in the drama of finding Mr Emmitt Otterton?

Even with their seemingly long stint both on tv screens and books, otters, much like all other wild species, are being pushed out of their habitats and towards extinction. In Bangladesh, the otter species somehow managed to create a strange porous wall between the wild and the domestic. They have for centuries been used in a traditional fishing technique by the villagers in Narail and other villages adjacent to river bodies.

This story has been written about in many a platform many a time. But the bare minimum has been done when it comes to scientific research and eventual conservation of the species. The two kinds of otters found in Bangladesh are keystone species that should have thrived in the water bodies of this country. However, rampant industrialisation and encroachment of major rivers in the country has practically driven these charismatic creatures to their death beds.

The two species of otters—Smooth-Coated otter and Oriental Small Clawed otter—used to be abundant in the country.

A recent research by a young university graduate, Zahid Amin, who completed his

survey work just a few months ago, concluded that locals were familiar with otters just a decade back; so much so that one individual claimed to have hunted between 2,000 to 5,000 otters in his lifetime.

Some unconfirmed reports in the recent past have also claimed that Bangladesh has another species of otter, namely the Eurasian otter. Of the two species, the Oriental-small clawed otter calls the Sundarbans range its home, while the Smooth-coated otter was mostly found in the riverine areas of the country.

Amin and team's research in the villages



A smooth-coated otter inside a cage in one of the otter fishing villages.

PHOTO: FAYED MASUD KHAN

of ten districts of Bangladesh between 2017 to 2018—Rajshahi, Netrokona, Sunamganj, Kushtia, Pabna, Natore, Sirajganj, Tangail, Jamalpur and Mymensingh—has found out the presence of at least 50 to 60 Smooth-coated otters in the country. In fact, all of these 50 to 60 otters were found in the Rajshahi region. Prior to 2016, there was no known report of Smooth-Coated otters in Rajshahi, until one photographer captured an image, prompting this research.

But, this is an excruciatingly low number for a species so widely abundant even a few years ago. There is no particular study on the state of the Oriental small-clawed otter in the country. Their habitat range is considered to be the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world.

During their research in the villages of Netrokona, the team found a community who were solely involved in hunting otters with self-made traps attached to large catfish with sticks. They shared their hunting gears and technique with the researchers. According to the elders in the village, the hunters would first identify otter faeces and

then track their routes. Their tracking soon revealed to them that otters traditionally use the same location overtime and so they would place the trap along those routes. As soon as the otters' stepped onto the trap, two metal jaws would trap its leg, hence breaking its bones. But this method would not cause any damage to their skin. The otters would be killed and sold for their skins, bones and teeth. The locals would also sometimes consume the meat as it is a cheap source of protein.

They revealed that almost all parts of the otter's body had a market value. The bones and teeth were used for medicinal purposes. One of the senior members showed us a bone from the otter's genital area which he has been wearing around his waist for the past thirty years. He claims that it increases his physical strength and also helps manage his arthritis. The elder claims to have killed more than 4,000 otters in his lifetime.

Nearly the entire range of both the species found in the country is under threat. From conflict with fishermen because they are considered competition for fish resources



An Oriental Small Clawed Otter

es to being hunted for their skin or for medicinal purposes, the threats to the otter population in the country are manifold.

But not much has been done to conserve the species in the country at all. Any conservation initiative requires a baseline study of the current conditions of the species and its habitat. Unfortunately, in the case of otters, there has been no large-scale study prior to the work done by Amin.

"The two areas we found in Rajshahi have been specified in our report and I think the government should take decisive measures to protect these areas for the con-



Two smooth-coated otters which are used for

servation of otters," opines Zahid.

Jahidul Kabir, Conservator of Forests, Wildlife & Nature Conservation Circle of the Bangladesh Forest Department also confirms the lack of scientific research and baseline study in identifying the threats and population status of both the otter species in the country.

"I admit this is something that needed to be researched from before but we are planning to work on the issue in the near future. Both species are protected under the Wildlife Preservation Act 2012 and poaching, killing or trading of any protected species is a punishable offence," he said.

However, asked whether anyone has been indicted in such cases thus far, Jahidul Kabir admitted that no one has been caught carrying out such an offence.

The work that these young student-turned-researchers have done is groundbreaking simply for its novelty and attempt at bridging the knowledge gap. They have also identified specific areas that are in need of serious conservation actions on the government's part. For the conservation of Smooth-coated otters, the government should look into habitat protection of char areas in Rajshahi, where photographers as recently as 2016 established the presence of Smooth-Coated otters. For the conservation of Oriental Small-Clawed otter, Jahidul Kabir recommends further protection of the Sundarbans and nearby areas.

At present, though, the most pertinent issue for conservation of otters in Bangladesh is the lack of any study altogether. Without concrete knowledge of the problems, it is not possible for scientists to come up with tangible action plans. Soon, we might have to spell the end for yet another species.



A hunting trap used to capture otters in the earlier days.

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