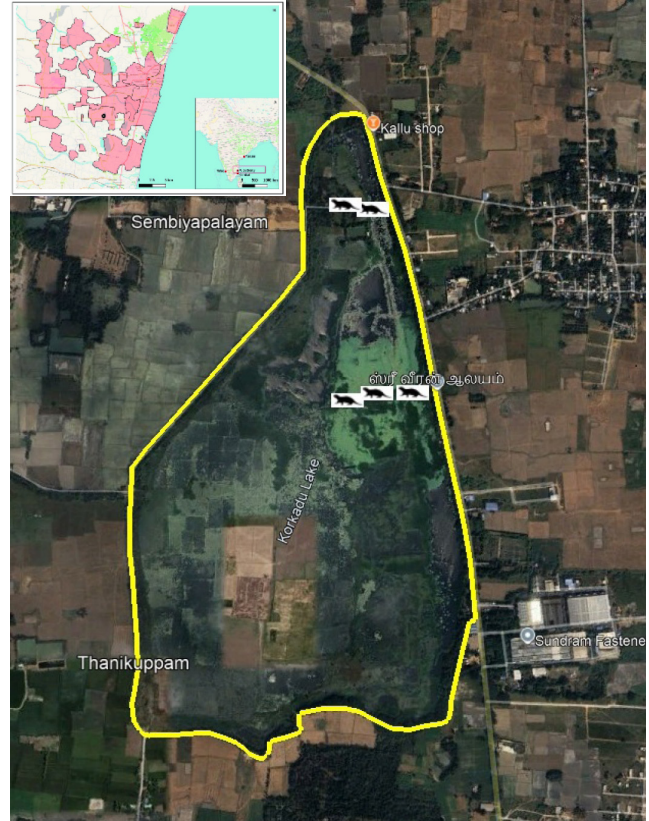


Hope for Conservation: a new sighting of Smooth-Coated Otters in Puducherry

The Smooth-coated Otter *Lutrogale perspicillata*, a sleek aquatic mammal weighing between 7 and 15 kg, is a keystone species in wetland ecosystems across southern Asia (Raha & Hussain 2016). Its range extends from Indonesia and southern China to Pakistan and India, with a unique population in Iraq. In India, these otters thrive in diverse aquatic habitats—from the Himalayan foothills to the wetlands and coasts of the south. Unfortunately, their preferred habitats—rivers, lakes, and wetlands—are increasingly threatened by human activities, placing the species at risk (Baskaran et al. 2022).



The Smooth-coated Otter: a key species rediscovered in Korkadu Lake.



A map showing the location of the Korkadu Lake and Smooth-coated Otter sightings in Puducherry, southern India.

Listed as ‘Vulnerable’ on the IUCN Red List and protected under Schedule II Part II of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, Smooth-coated Otters depend on lowland habitats with shallow waters, dense riparian vegetation, and moderate currents for foraging and grooming.

Otter Sightings in Puducherry

Five Smooth-coated Otters were directly sighted in Korkadu Lake, a vital wetland near Puducherry that covers 87.02 ha and has a water depth of 1.2–1.8 m. Interviews with local fishermen revealed additional populations, an estimated eight individuals in Korkadu Lake. These figures



Water hyacinth, an invasive plant, forms dense mats on the water's surface in the Korkadu Lake and Sankaraparani River, Puducherry.

suggest that otter populations in the region may be larger than previously recorded, underscoring the need for detailed surveys and long-term monitoring. Early sightings were recorded in the Sankaraparani River, Puducherry (Raman et al. 2019).

Challenges Facing Smooth-Coated Otters

Despite their ecological significance, smooth-coated otters face several threats:

Conservation Welfare: Interviews revealed that otters often raid fishing nets and depredate domestic fowl, leading to friction with local communities.

Invasive Species: Water Hyacinth *Eichhornia crassipes*, an invasive aquatic plant, forms dense mats on the water's surface, blocking sunlight and displacing native aquatic plants crucial for other habitats.

Conservation Priorities

To safeguard this charismatic mammal and their habitats, the following actions are critical:
Community Education: Raising awareness about the ecological role of otters among local residents, particularly fishermen, can help Smooth-coated Otter welfare and foster coexistence.

Habitat Protection: Implementing sustainable fishing practices, controlling invasive species like Water Hyacinth, and regulating sand mining are vital to maintaining healthy ecosystems.

Monitoring and Research: Regular population surveys and ecological studies will provide valuable insights into otter behaviour, population trends, and habitat requirements.

A Call to Action

The rediscovery of Smooth-coated Otters in Korkadu Lake, Puducherry highlights the resilience of nature when ecosystems are



Map showing the early and new sightings of Smooth-coated Otter in Puducherry.

restored and protected. These findings reaffirm the critical importance of combining scientific research, local knowledge, and community involvement to conserve vulnerable species. By addressing threats and enhancing habitat protection, we can ensure that Smooth-coated Otters continue to thrive in India's wetlands.

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