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A PRELIMINARY SURVEY ON THE STATUS OF OTTERS IN URUGUAY

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ABSTRACT. New data on the distribution of the Neotropical river otter (*Lontra longicaudis*) as well as new records of the giant otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) in Uruguay are provided. The information presented was gathered from otter sighting surveys completed by Uruguayan researchers, wildlife technicians and environmentalists. New localities for both species, comments on the behaviour and data about the habitats used by the Neotropical river otter were obtained. The information about distribution was completed by an examination of records from zoological collections and literature. This survey confirms that the Neotropical river otter is at least fairly common in Uruguay. The conservation status of the giant otter is uncertain. Although considered extirpated for many years, a recent sighting of two individuals has been reported. This information has to be confirmed.

keywords: otter, *Lontra longicaudis*, *Pteronura brasiliensis*, status, Uruguay

INTRODUCTION

The current distribution of the Neotropical river otter (*Lontra longicaudis*) includes all the Latin American countries from Mexico to Argentina, but excluding Chile. Its conservation status is, however, unknown in some of these countries (CHEHEBAR, 1990; PARERA, 1996).

BOCAGE (1992) reported Neotropical river otters as scarce in Uruguay, with healthy populations only remaining in the area of Bañados de Rocha (eastern part of the country). CHEHEBAR (1990) considered the species widespread throughout the country, with main populations seeming to be in the area of Bañados del Este, Tacuarembó and Esteros de Farrapos.

The former distribution of the giant otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) probably included every country from Panama to Uruguay and northern Argentina (PARERA, 1996) except Chile. The current distribution is fragmented, with recorded populations in

Ecuador, Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Surinam, French Guyana and Guyana (CHEHEBAR, 1990; PARERA, 1996). If they have not been actually extirpated from Argentina and Uruguay, they are probably the most threatened mammals in these countries (PARERA, 1996 and pers. obs.).

There are no previous surveys on the distribution and conservation status of Lutrines in Uruguay. The group is represented in national zoological collections by only 18 specimens of *L. longicaudis* and a single skull of *P. brasiliensis* collected in 1963. The main objective of this survey was to establish the current distribution of otters in Uruguay.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

An otters sightings survey was carried out in Uruguay between September 1997 and March 1998. Forms for this survey were distributed by mail to more than 80 Uruguayan researchers, environmentalists and wildlife technicians. For Neotropical river otters the survey was restricted to sightings of otters or their tracks recorded within the last ten years. There was no restriction for records of giant otters.

For *L. longicaudis*, each form was to be filled with the information of a single sighting (only the most recent observation was recorded if otters or tracks had been observed in that locality on more than one occasion). Each form also requested information about the date of the sighting, the locality, the number of otters observed, how many times otters were observed there and the time of the day when the animals were seen. The following information was also requested for each locality. Considerations about the main threats to their conservation, characteristics of the stream where the observations were made (kind of stream, depth and width), characteristics of the river banks (abundance of plant cover and morphology), and observations on the behaviour of the animals (e.g. vocalisations).

The information about distribution was completed with records from material conserved in the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural de Montevideo (MNHN) and the Facultad de Ciencias zoological collections, and data from literature.

RESULTS

A total of 71 forms were returned. Fifty eight new localities for *L. longicaudis* and six new records for *P. brasiliensis* were added to those already known. These results have tripled the number of localities known to be inhabited by otters in Uruguay (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

Comments about behaviour, as well as data about the characteristics of the habitats used by Neotropical river otters were also obtained. In a preliminary analysis of the collected data, no preference for specific habitats was detected. All reported sightings

were diurnal. Incidental capture of this species in "nutrias" (*Myocastor coypus*) traps were reported (J. A. FERNANDEZ, and R. M. SPINOLA, pers. com.). Three road-kills were recorded.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The survey data, the zoological records and the published data strongly suggest that Neotropical river otters occur throughout Uruguay. Within the last ten years Neotropical river otters have been observed at least in 17 of the 19 political divisions ("Departamentos") of the country. There is no reason to assume that they have been extirpated from those where no recent records have been reported. No conclusions about the areas of the country that support the main populations of this species can be inferred from our survey.

The Neotropical river otter should be considered at least as a fairly common species in Uruguay. Despite this, their populations might be decreasing, and further research should be carried out to discern whether this suspicion has actual fundaments.

The results of this research suggest that the former consideration of the species as scarce in the country (BOCAGE, 1992) was due to the lack of information and not because of actual conservational features.

Although some authors suggest that river otters are nocturnal and crepuscular animals in Uruguay (GONZALEZ, 1983; SARALEGUI, 1996; IBARRA et al., 1998), all the sightings reported in this survey were diurnal. We conclude from this data that in Uruguay these animals are, at least in part, also active during the day. Whether they are mostly diurnal or crepuscular and nocturnal in Uruguay is not clear yet. PARERA (1996) reports this species as diurnal in Argentina, and considers that they become more nocturnal when they are disturbed.

The situation of the giant otter in Uruguay is uncertain. Although REDFORD and EISENBERG (1992) present four localities for this species in Uruguay, there is only one documented record (XIMENEZ et al., 1972). This paper presents two localities where they were observed in the late seventies, as well as a sighting of two individuals foraging in 1996. This would be the most southerly record for the species over the last 20 years. As the species is currently thought to be extirpated in Uruguay, and the latest record has to be confirmed, further observations are necessary to confirm the occurrence of the giant otter in Uruguay. Accurate surveys to assess the status of this species should be carried out immediately.

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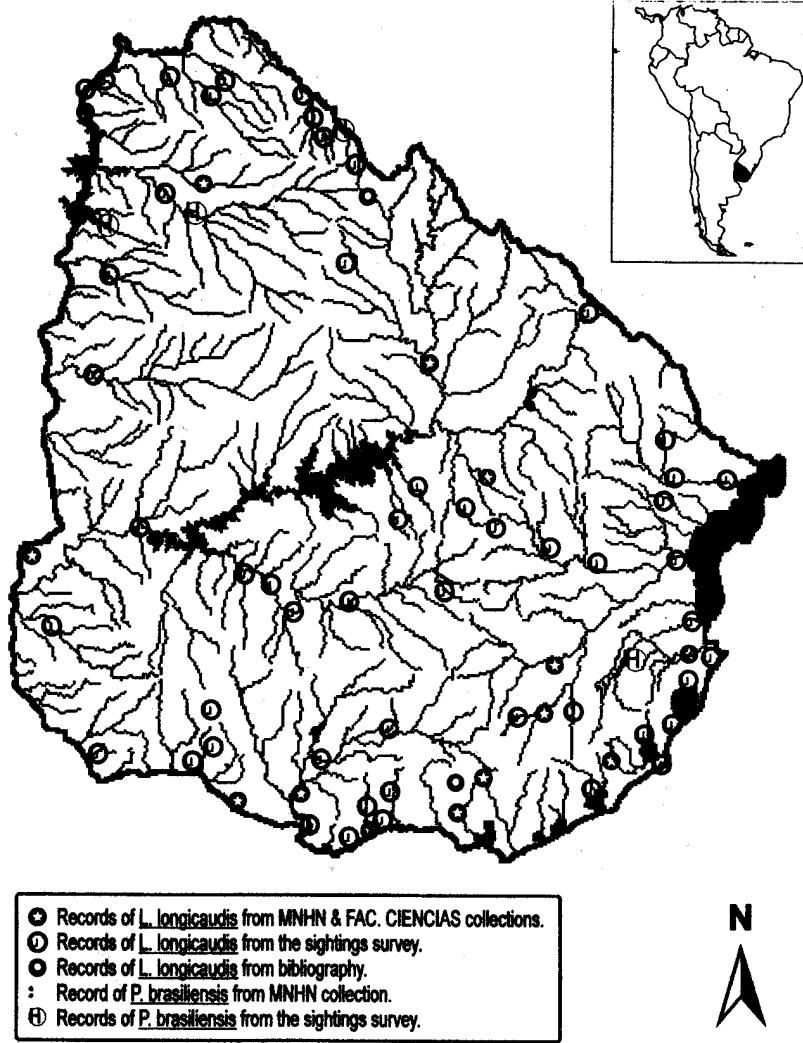


Figure 1. Map of the main rivers and streams of Uruguay indicating places of otter records

Table 1. Records of otters from Uruguay

GENUS	SOURCE	DEPT.	LOCALITY	YEAR	RECORD
Pteronura	SURVEY	ARTIGAS	RIO CUAREIM - RINCON DE PACHECO	1960	Skin
Pteronura	MNHN 1266	CERRO LARGO	Ayo. SAUCE c/ RIO NEGRO	1963	Skull
Pteronura	SURVEY	ROCHA	BANADO DE INDIA MUERTA	19307	Skin
Pteronura	SURVEY	ROCHA	UNCERTAIN	19607	Skin
Pteronura	SURVEY	SALTO	Ayo. ITAPEBI - ZONA CASACADA SALTO GRANDE	1977	Other
Pteronura	SURVEY	SALTO	RIO URUGUAY c/ Ayo. ITAPEBI	1979	Other
Pteronura	SURVEY	SALTO	RIO ARAPEY GRANDE - O DEL PUENTE ARTIGAS - RUTA 4	1986	Other
Lontra	SURVEY	ARTIGAS	Ayo. MAGUINA - TRAMO MEDIO	1997	Other
Lontra	SURVEY	ARTIGAS	ISLA DEL ZAPALLO - RIO URUGUAY	1986	Track
Lontra	SURVEY	ARTIGAS	PIEDRA PINTADA - RIO CUAREIM - 20 km AGUAS ARRIBA DE ARTIGAS	1997	Other
Lontra	SURVEY	ARTIGAS	RICARDINHO - RIO CUAREIM - 50 km AGUAS ARRIBA DE ARTIGAS	1997	Other
Lontra	SURVEY	ARTIGAS	PASO DEL INFIERNO - Ayo. YUCUTUJA GRANDE	1988	Other
Lontra	SURVEY	ARTIGAS	Ayo. CATALAN GRANDE - CURSO MEDIO	1988	Other
Lontra	SURVEY	ARTIGAS	Po. MARCELO - Ayo. CATALAN GRANDE c/ Ayo. CATALANCITO	1987	Other
Lontra	SURVEY	ARTIGAS	PARADA CAMANO - Ayo. PELADO	*****	Other
Lontra	SURVEY	ARTIGAS	RICARDINHO - RIO CUAREIM - 50 km AGUAS ARRIBA DE ARTIGAS	1997	Other
Lontra	SURVEY	ARTIGAS	PARADA CAMANO - Ayo. CUARO GRANDE	1988	Other
Lontra	MNHN 3267	ARTIGAS	RIO URUGUAY c/ Ayo. MANDIYU	1980	*****
Lontra	SURVEY	CANELONES	PARAJE MOSQUITO (SOCA)	*****	Other
Lontra	SURVEY	CANELONES	BARRA DE CARRASCO	1986	Other
Lontra	SURVEY	CANELONES	LAGUNA DEL CISNE	1997	Skin
Lontra	SURVEY	CANELONES	Ayo. PANDO	1987	Other
Lontra	MNHN 782	CANELONES	ATLANTIDA - Bdo. TROPA VIEJA	1958	*****
Lontra	MNHN 3408	CANELONES	RIO STA. LUCIA - AGUAS CORRIENTES	1993	*****
Lontra	MNHN 2963	CANELONES	PANDO - Ayo. MOSQUITO	1980	*****

Lontra	MINHN 287	CANELONES	ATLANTIDA - BANADO DEL CISNE	1954	*****
Lontra	SURVEY	CERRO LARGO	LAGUNA FORMOSA c/ RIO NEGRO - 15 km N SIERRAS DE ACEGUA	1997	Track
Lontra	SURVEY	CERRO LARGO	Ayo. CHUY	1997	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	CERRO LARGO	RIO TACUARI c/ LAGO MERIM	1996	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	CERRO LARGO	PUNTAS Ayo. CORDOBES	1992	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	CERRO LARGO	ESTANCIA EL TAMIARI - Ayo. TACUARI	1997	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	CERRO LARGO	Ayo. CORDOBES - CERCA DE CERRO CHATO	1988	Otter
Lontra	MINHN 3196	CERRO LARGO	Cda. BRAVA	*****	*****
Lontra	MINHN 2849	CERRO LARGO	Ayo. CORDOBES	1975	*****
Lontra	SURVEY	COLONIA	Ayo. CUFRE c/ RUTA 1	1998	Track
Lontra	SURVEY	COLONIA	Ayo. SAN PEDRO c/ RIO URUGUAY	1987	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	DURAZNO	RIO YI c/ Ayo. CABALLERO	1996	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	DURAZNO	RIO YI - 8 Km AGUAS ABAJO DE DURAZNO	1997	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	DURAZNO	Ayo. LAS CANAS - CAPILLA DE FARRUCO	1996	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	DURAZNO	EL MEMBRILLAR	*****	*****
Lontra	SURVEY	DURAZNO	Ayo. CHILENO GRANDE c/ CHILENO CHICO	1996	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	FLORES	RIO YI c/ Ayo. PORONGOS	1997	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	FLORIDA	RIO STA LUCIA - PASO PACHE	1997	Track
Lontra	SURVEY	FLORIDA	Ayo. ILLESCAS c/ Cda. DE LA VICTORIA	1997	Track
Lontra	SURVEY	FLORIDA	RIO YI c/ Ayo. TIMOTE	1995	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	FLORIDA	Ayo. ILLESCAS - NE CAPILLA DEL SAUCE	1997	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	FLORIDA	CHAMIZO PASANDO SAN RAMON	1994	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	LAVALLEJA	RUTA 8 CERCA DE MARISCALA	1995	Otter
Lontra	MINHN 3263	LAVALLEJA	AGUAS BLANCAS	*****	*****
Lontra	MINHN 288	LAVALLEJA	Ayo. PIRANGA - 8ª SECCION	1957	*****
Lontra	BARDIER, 1992	LAVALLEJA	Ayo. SAUCE - CERCA DE SOLIS DE MATAJOJO	1991	Otter
Lontra	MINHN 1935	MALDONADO	Ayo. PAN DE AZUCAR	1963	*****
Lontra	MINHN 1328	MALDONADO	CERRO SALAMANCA	1968	*****
Lontra	SURVEY	MONTEVIDEO	LAGUNA PARQUE LECOCQ	1997	Track

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Lontra	SURVEY	MONTEVIDEO	LAGUNA PARQUE LECOCQ	1996	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	PAYSANDU	RIO QUEGUAY	*****	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	PAYSANDU	RIO QUEGUAY GRANDE - 25 km N DE PANDUJE - RUTA 80	1995	Otter
Lontra	MINHN 2966	RIO NEGRO	CERCA DE FRAY BENTOS	1984	*****
Lontra	IBARRA et al., 1998	RIVERA	Ayo. GAJO DEL LUNAREJO	1996	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	ROCHA	Km 280 RUTA 9	1997	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	ROCHA	Ayo. ALFEREZ c/ Ayo. AIGUA	1996	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	ROCHA	Ayo. BALIZAS - ENTRE LAGUNA Y RUTA 9	1997	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	ROCHA	CANAL N°2 c/ CANAL ANDREONI	1997	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	ROCHA	POTRERILLO	1995	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	ROCHA	POTRERILLO - LAGUNA NEGRA	1997	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	ROCHA	Ayo. SAN LUIS - CERCA DE 18 DE JULIO	1997	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	ROCHA	Ayo. ROCHA - PUERTO DE LOS BOTES	1995	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	ROCHA	Ayo. BALIZAS c/ OCEANO ATLANTICO	1990	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	ROCHA	LAGUNA DE CASTILLOS - ESTANCIA BARRA GRANDE	1996	Otter
Lontra	MINHN 879	ROCHA	LAGUNA NEGRA	1960	*****
Lontra	MINHN 3231	ROCHA	Ayo. SAN MIGUEL	1989	*****
Lontra	MINHN 3228	ROCHA	RUTA 9 Km 230	*****	*****
Lontra	SURVEY	SALTO	RIO DAYMAN - TERMAS	1995	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	SALTO	ALREDEDORES DE LA CIUDAD DE SALTO	*****	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	SALTO	RIO ARAPEY - TODA SU EXTENSION	*****	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	SALTO	RIO URUGUAY	*****	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	SALTO	RIO DAYMAN - TODA SU EXTENSION	*****	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	SALTO	RIO ARAPEY GRANDE - COLONIA RUBIO	1997	Otter
Lontra	MINHN 285	SALTO	CERRILLADAS DE Ayo. ARAPEY CHICO	1957	*****
Lontra	ZVGM 1173	SAN JOSE	PUERTO ARAZATI	*****	*****
Lontra	SURVEY	SAN JOSE	4 km NE DE ECILDA PAULLIER	*****	Track
Lontra	SURVEY	SAN JOSE	SIERRA DE MAHOMA	*****	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	SORIANO	TAJAMAR A 500 m DEL RIO NEGRO	1989	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	SORIANO	RIO SAN SALVADOR - CERCA DE DOLORES	1992	Otter

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Lontra	SURVEY	TACUAREMBO	RIO NEGRO - LAGO RINCON DEL BONETE - ISLA ARENOSA	1986	Track
Lontra	SURVEY	TACUAREMBO	Ayo. TRES CRUCES - GAJO MEDIO TRAMO SUPERIOR	1991	Otter
Lontra	MNHN 3277	TACUAREMBO	RIO TACUAREMBO GRANDE	*****	*****
Lontra	SURVEY	TREINTA Y TRES	RIO OLIMAR - CIUDAD DE TREINTA Y TRES	1997	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	TREINTA Y TRES	Ayo. OTAZO	1986	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	TREINTA Y TRES	CHARQUEADA - PASO EL PELUDO	1997	Otter
Lontra	SURVEY	TREINTA Y TRES	Ayo. LAS PAVAS - 5 km NE DE VALENTINES	1980	Otter