

Smooth-coated otter

Origin

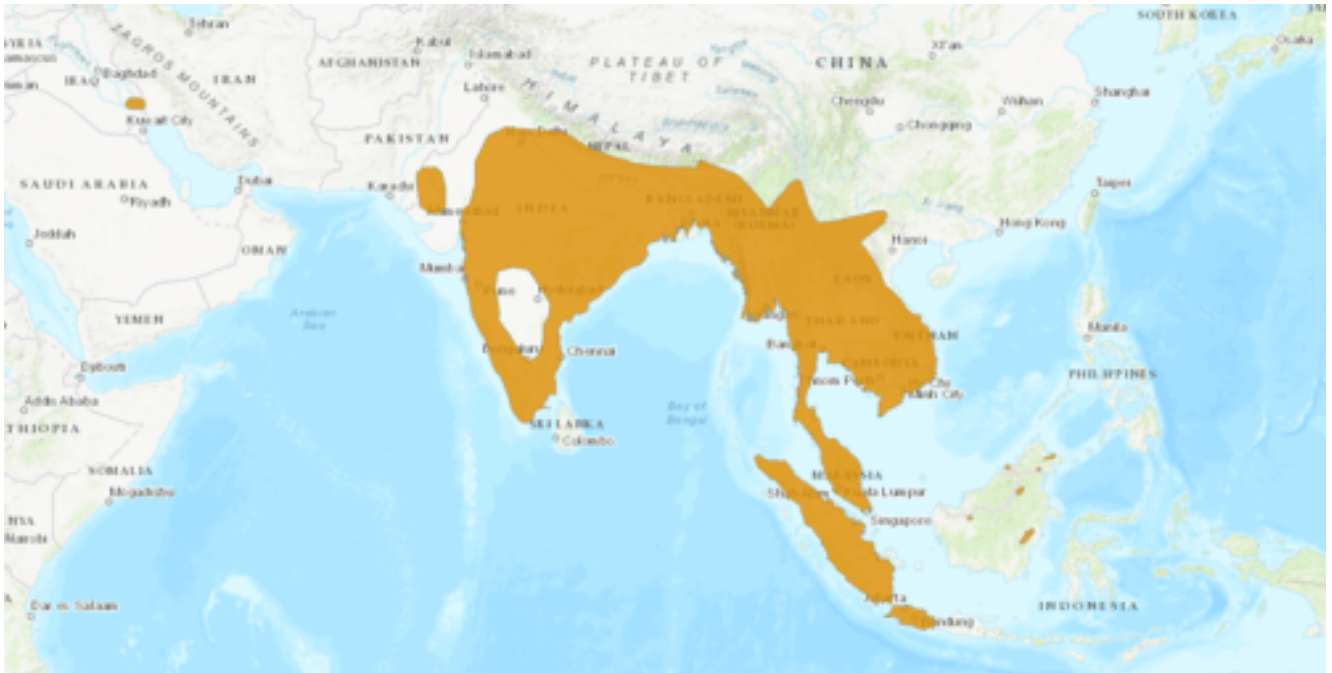
The Smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) is a species of otter found in many parts of Asia, including India. Its origin can be traced back to the Miocene epoch, which occurred between approximately 23 and 5 million years ago.

The ancestral lineage of the Smooth-coated otter can be traced to a group of primitive otters called the *Sivaonyx*. These otters lived in the late Miocene period and are believed to have evolved in the region that is now Southeast Asia. They were smaller than modern otters and had shorter snouts.

Over time, the *Sivaonyx* gave rise to a number of different otter species, including the Smooth-coated otter. Fossil evidence suggests that the Smooth-coated otter first appeared in the Pliocene epoch, around 5 million years ago. The species then spread to different parts of Asia, including India.

It is not entirely clear how the Smooth-coated otter reached India, but it is likely that they migrated to the Indian subcontinent from Southeast Asia. Some experts believe that they may have travelled along the river systems that connect the two regions.

Distribution and Population in India



The Smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) is found throughout India and is one of the most widely distributed otter species in the country. However, its population is fragmented and localized, and the species is classified as “Vulnerable” on the IUCN Red List due to ongoing threats.

Smooth-coated otters are typically found in wetland habitats such as rivers, lakes, mangroves, and estuaries. They are found in most parts of India, including the Himalayas, the Western Ghats, the Northeast, Southern Indian states. According to the latest estimates, there are around 5,000-10,000 Smooth-coated otters in India.

Features

Appearance

The Smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) is a medium-sized otter species that is found in many parts of Asia, including India. The Smooth-coated otter has a sleek and muscular body that can measure up to 1.3 metres in length, with a flattened head and a long tail that makes up about 60% of its body length. Adults can weigh between 7 to 11 kilograms. Their fur is short and dense and ranges in colour

from brown to grey. They have distinctive white markings around their eyes, which give them their scientific name “perspicillata,” meaning “spectacled.” It can be difficult to tell male and female Smooth-coated otters apart just by looking at them. However, males are generally larger than females and have thicker necks and broader heads. Males also have a more prominent penis bone, which is used during mating.

Lifestyle

Smooth-coated otters are social animals that live in family groups. They are active during the day and are excellent swimmers, able to stay underwater for up to six minutes. They use their sensitive whiskers and webbed feet to catch fish, their primary source of food. They also feed on crustaceans, amphibians, and small mammals. Smooth-coated otters are known to be playful and engage in activities like sliding down muddy banks, playing with objects, and wrestling with each other.

Smooth-coated otters typically give birth to two to four cubs at a time, after a gestation period of around 60 days. The cubs are born with closed eyes and weigh around 100 grams. They are weaned at around three months of age and become sexually mature at around two years of age.

Food Habits

Smooth-coated otters are carnivorous animals and primarily feed on fish. They are skilled hunters and use their sharp teeth to catch fish in the water. Apart from fish, they also feed on crustaceans, frogs, snakes, and other small aquatic animals. Smooth-coated otters are known to hunt cooperatively, working together to corner and catch their prey. They are also known to store their food in dens for future consumption.

Habitats

Smooth-coated otters are found in a variety of wetland

habitats, including rivers, lakes, mangroves, and estuaries. They are adaptable and can survive in both freshwater and saltwater habitats. However, they require clean and unpolluted water to thrive. In India, Smooth-coated otters can be found in many protected areas, including national parks and wildlife sanctuaries.

Vulnerable Species

Smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) is classified as "Vulnerable" on the IUCN Red List. The species has been listed as Vulnerable since 1996.

The conversion of wetland habitats for agriculture, urbanisation, and hydroelectric dams has led to the loss and fragmentation of otter habitats. Habitat degradation due to pollution, siltation, and other human activities has also affected otter populations. The Smooth-coated otter is hunted for its fur, meat, and body parts, which are used in traditional medicine. Human activities, such as fishing, boating, and recreational activities, can disturb otters and their habitats, leading to a decline in their populations. Otters can become entangled in fishing nets and drown, or get hit by boats and other vehicles. Many people are not aware of the importance of otters and their habitats, and conservation measures have been insufficient to protect the species.

Protected Areas

Smooth-coated otters (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) can be found in many protected areas in India.

- Chilika Lake Wildlife Sanctuary, Odisha is located in the state of Odisha and is an important habitat for Smooth-coated otters, as well as a variety of bird and fish species.
- Kaziranga is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is home to

a large population of Smooth-coated otters, as well as other threatened species such as the Indian rhinoceros and the Bengal tiger.

- The Sundarbans is a vast mangrove forest in West Bengal and is an important habitat for Smooth-coated otters, as well as the endangered Bengal tiger and other species.
- The Satpura Tiger Reserve is located in the state of Madhya Pradesh and is an important habitat for Smooth-coated otters, as well as a variety of other mammals, birds, and reptiles.
- The Periyar Tiger Reserve is located in the state of Kerala and is home to a population of Smooth-coated otters, as well as the endangered Nilgiri tahr and other species.
- In addition to these protected areas, there are many other national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and conservation areas in India where Smooth-coated otters can be found. These protected areas play an important role in conserving the species and its habitats, and efforts are underway to improve the management of these areas to better protect otters and other wildlife.

Conservation of the Species

Protecting and conserving their natural habitats is one of the most effective ways to ensure the survival of these species. This can be achieved through the creation and management of protected areas, such as national parks and wildlife reserves, and the restoration of degraded habitats.

Illegal hunting and poaching of these species is a major threat to their survival. Effective anti-poaching measures, such as increased patrols, community-based monitoring programs, and strong enforcement of wildlife laws, can help to reduce this threat.

Raising public awareness about the importance of these species

and their conservation can help to reduce the demand for their products, such as fur and body parts, and reduce human-wildlife conflict. Education and awareness programs aimed at local communities and hunters can also help to reduce the illegal hunting of these species.

Gathering more information about these species, including their population sizes, distribution, and ecological needs can help to inform conservation efforts and improve our understanding of their conservation status.

In some cases, conservation breeding programs may be necessary to support the recovery of populations that are at risk of extinction. This involves breeding individuals in captivity and then releasing them back into the wild, once sufficient populations have been established.