



Species Action Plan: OTTER

Introduction

Scope

This species action plan covers the Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*), the only species of otter in the UK. Otters are mobile and may make use of several habitat types. Actions to improve the quality, extent and/or connectivity of these habitats may therefore benefit otters. Consequently, reference should also be made to relevant Habitat Action Plans (HAPs) such as the Freshwater, Coastal and Woodland HAPs.

Vision Statement

Pembrokeshire is capable of sustaining a healthy population of otters that is resilient to environmental change.

Description of Species

The otter is one of Britain's largest carnivores (males can reach 1.2m in length, females are slightly smaller). They have an elongated, sinuous body, webbed feet and muscular tail, all of which make them well adapted for an aquatic lifestyle. Otters eat a range of fish, predominantly eels in the freshwater environment, although crabs, frogs, voles, insects and birds are also eaten. They exploit a wide range of aquatic habitats from small ditches, moorland streams, lakes and ponds to large rivers, estuaries and coasts.

Otters are solitary, territorial animals, with a typical territory extending up to 25 miles (much shorter if food is abundant and capable of supporting higher population densities). A coastal territory can be as small as four – five km due

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to the abundance of prey in the productive inshore waters. They pair up only to mate and can breed at any time of the year, usually giving birth to between one and four pups per litter. Otters hunt mainly at night, usually spending most of the day lying up in above ground 'couches' (such as areas of scrub or rank grass) or underground holts (often in cavities amongst tree roots or boulders).

Its dependence upon well connected areas of high quality habitat for hunting, breeding and lying up, along with its position as a top predator in the food chain make the otter a good indicator species for the condition of the wider environment.

Habitat Requirements

Otters use a range of habitats from ditches and streams to rivers, estuaries and the coast, both for feeding and as a way of moving around the countryside. They will also utilise wetlands, reed-beds, marshy grassland and scrub or woodland linked to a watercourse. Many different sites associated with these habitats will be used for resting, as many as 30 on an otter's home range. These sites can take the form of loose piles of timber or rocks, ledges on the riverbank, tree root systems, a dense scrub thicket, or an area of undisturbed, rough grassland or other vegetation. Of particular importance are the sites otters use for breeding – Females require larger areas (minimum approximately 0.25ha) free from the risk of flooding and disturbance with a good food supply to raise their young. The cubs require access to still or slow flowing water to practice swimming and hunting.

In Pembrokeshire, otters are frequently found on the coast. Since coastal streams are often too small to support significant populations of fish, coastal otters are thought to feed predominantly on marine species, using the streams mainly for washing the salt from their fur and lying up through the daytime.

As otters (particularly males) are highly mobile, good ecological connectivity at a landscape scale to allow movement between feeding, resting and breeding areas is essential. Well developed bank-side vegetation along riparian corridors is thought to be key in allowing free movement of otters around the wider landscape.

Distribution in Pembrokeshire

The distribution of the otter population in Pembrokeshire has expanded over recent years. Figures from the Otter Survey of Wales show an increase in occupied survey sites on the Cleddau catchment from 54% in 1984 to 97% in 2009. Otters have been found to be active on the vast majority of main rivers and tributaries in all river catchments in Pembrokeshire. They are found around the entire coastline of Pembrokeshire and have also been recorded using some of the islands (Skomer and Ramsey). Otters have even been sighted on the Preseli Hills.

Trends

In the UK the otter underwent a rapid decline in numbers from the 1950's to the 1970's and was effectively lost in midland and south-eastern counties of England. Pressure on otter populations in Pembrokeshire was generally lower due to the less intensive nature of land management practices in the area and the County therefore remained a relative stronghold for otters.

Recovery has been in response to three main factors: the ban on pesticides that caused extinction of otters from many parts of England and Wales in the 1960s and early 1970s; legal protection for the otter since 1978; and the significant improvement in water quality in Welsh rivers since the 1970s which has led to more sustainable fish populations.

Serious pollution incidents, resulting in major fish kills, have also decreased markedly although such incidents do still occur. There remain concerns about the level of some environmental toxins, particularly those which can accumulate through the food chain (bioaccumulation), causing a range of effects in top predators such as otters.

The increases in otter range in Pembrokeshire have taken place within the context of river habitats which have been highly modified in many lowland areas.

Trends across Wales as a whole show continued recovery but sites in West Wales show particularly high percentage occupation.

Conservation Status.

At a European level, otters appear in Annexes II & IV of the EC Habitats Directive. In the UK, they are listed in Schedules 5 & 6 of the Wildlife & Countryside Act, 1981 and are a priority species in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. Otters are a feature of both the Afonydd Cleddau and Pembrokeshire Marine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).

Threats

Threats to otters come from:

- Loss of suitable habitat for hunting, lying up or breeding and raising cubs. Habitats and features that provide ideal breeding sites and natal dens for otters are vulnerable, and are easily lost as a result of disturbance and habitat degradation. For otter breeding sites to be properly protected, active management is often needed to maintain the condition of the site.
- For such a mobile species, the connectivity between areas of suitable habitat is as important as the total extent of the habitat. Otters are

known to travel widely utilising linear features such as riparian (river) corridors. Fragmentation of these features may adversely affect populations disproportionately in relation to the actual area of habitat loss.

- Pollution of watercourses. Poor water quality, such as high pollutant and low oxygen levels, directly impacts upon sources of food for otters. This results in both an inadequate supply of food and food sources which are contaminated with pollutants which may then be passed along the food chain to otters, potentially causing a range of effects.
- Disturbance and/or persecution. Whilst the persecution of otters is illegal, inadvertent disturbance is known to occur, particularly by opening up previously undisturbed areas for recreation.
- A high level of mortality on the roads is thought to limit recovery in some areas. However, this is not thought to be a significant problem in Pembrokeshire. Although roads are becoming busier, otter crossings are routinely included in new road schemes where connectivity features for otter would be disrupted by the road.

Related Information

Other plans / policies directly affecting the management of otters in Pembrokeshire and further sources of information include:

- Freshwater Habitat Action Plan. Available here: <http://ukbars.defra.gov.uk/project/show/36389>
- Coastal Habitat Action Plan. Available here: <http://ukbars.defra.gov.uk/project/show/36391>
- Woodland Habitat Action Plan. Available here: <http://ukbars.defra.gov.uk/project/show/36390>
- Rhododendron Clearance: Recommendations for Reducing the Impact on the Otter (Liles, 2006). CCW report; Contact Natural Resources Wales local offices for details.
- Cleddau Rivers SAC Core Management Plan, 2015. Natural Resources Wales. Available here: <http://www.ccg.gov.uk/landscape--wildlife/protecting-our-landscape/special-sites-project/aber-to--brecon-sac-list/afonydd-cleddau--cleddau-river.aspx>
- Pembrokeshire Water Framework Directive Strategy: Natural Resources Wales. Contact local offices for details.
- Otter Breeding Sites on the Afonydd Cleddau (Liles/the Otter Consultancy, 2014) [*title t.b.c.*] NRW report; Contact Natural Resources Wales local offices for details.
- EIA (Agriculture, Wales) Regulations, 2007. Welsh Government. Available here: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2007/2933/pdfs/wsi_20072933_mi.pdf
- Pembrokeshire Marine SAC Management Plan, 2008. Available here: <http://www.pembrokeshiremarinesac.org.uk/english/downloads/PMSAC%20agreed%20ManScheme%202008.pdf>
- Pembrokeshire County Council Supplementary Planning Guidance: Biodiversity: How Biodiversity can be Protected and Enhanced in the Development Process. Available here:

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http://www.pembrokeshire.gov.uk/content.asp?nav=1626,109,141,1014&parent_directory_id=646&id=21476

- Otter: European Protected Species. Natural England Species Information Note. Available here:
<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/136005>

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Plan Aims

Aim	Deadline	Comments
Maintain and improve public awareness of otters in Pembrokeshire and the issues affecting their conservation.	Date of next review	
Expand the diversity and extent of habitats available for otters in Pembrokeshire	Date of next review	
Maintain the distribution, range and size of the otter population in Pembrokeshire	Date of next review	
Improve knowledge and understanding of the otter population in Pembrokeshire	Date of next review	

Suggested Actions

Code	Action	Report By	Lead Role	Progress / Additional Information
	Build otter holt and reptile hibernaculum		PRT	
	Otter survey at Teifi Marshes		WTSWW	
	Otter Recording of Pembroke Upper Mill Pond NR		WTSWW	
	Through the implementation of Pembrokeshires Biodiversity SPG, ensure all Planning applications are assessed for possible effects on biodiversity resources. Ensure that planning applications which affect LBAP Habitats and Species are addressed and include full		PBP	

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	ecological surveys which are properly considered, and mitigation measures which significantly addresses potential negative impacts.			
	Otter Recording at Llangloffan Fen NNR	WTSWW		
	Produce and distribute a Survey postcard for Otter to gain more records of Otter in the County and engage the public with their conservation	PBP		
	Coastal Otter Survey	PMSAC		
	Connectivity mapping for otter in Castlemartin Peninsula	PBP		
	Enhance connectivity on Cleddau Rivers and elsewhere		NRW	http://ukbars.defra.gov.uk/project/show/37512
	Management of water quality to ensure suitable conditions for otters and their prey			
	Map and Monitor network of breeding sites on the Cleddau Rivers SAC		NRW	Will follow initial survey / report by the Otter Consultancy 2014
	Maintain integrity of identified breeding sites and enhance these where issues have been identified		NRW	Will follow initial survey / report by the Otter Consultancy 2014
	Establish whether coastal otter populations are independent of river populations		PMSAC / Otter Consultancy	