

OTTER POACHING IN PALNI HILLS

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Abstract

Palni Hills are known for their diverse flora and fauna including otters. The Common Otter *Lutra lutra* and the Small-clawed Otter *Aonyx cinerea* reported from Palni Hills are under severe threat not only from habitat destruction but face extirmination from illegal poaching in the area. Nomadic tribes from Haryana are found to trap otters and sell their oil in northern Indian markets.

Keywords

Palni Hills, Common Otter, Small-clawed Otter, *Lutra lutra*, *Aonyx cinerea*, hunting, oil, status

Introduction

Otters in southern India are represented by three species, namely, the Eurasian or Common Otter *Lutra lutra*, the Smooth-coated Otter *Lutra perspicillata* and the Small-clawed Otter *Aonyx cinerea* (Hussain, 1999). The range of otters in southern India is restricted to the east and west coasts, hilly terrain of the Western Ghats and sporadically elsewhere on the mainland of the peninsula (Hussain, 1999).

Two species of otters, namely, the Common Otter *Lutra lutra* and the Small-clawed Otter *Aonyx cinerea* are said to be present in the Palni Hills (Nagulu *et al.*, 1999) but there is a dearth of information on the actual status and distribution of otters in the region.

Status

All the three species of otters are protected in India under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and two of the three are listed as threatened globally. *Lutra lutra* and *L. perspicillata* are Vulnerable and *Aonyx cinerea* is Lower Risk near threatened according to the 2000 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Hilton-Taylor, 2000). The Eurasian and Smooth-coated Otter are listed under the Schedule II while the Small-clawed Otter is listed under Schedule I, which provides it complete protection from hunting.

Studies on the status and distribution of otters have revealed that otters are now mostly restricted to the protected areas. Major threats to the otter populations have been identified to be the loss of wetlands habitats, reduction in prey biomass, pollution and poaching (Hussain, 1999). Poaching for pelts have also been reported in central India. Seizure figures of wildlife offences in the country revealed that 20-30% of the fur trade is in otter skins. Through trade routes in Nepal and Bangladesh, the skins reach international markets from markets in India that have been identified to be Lucknow, Kanpur, Kota, Calcutta, Bangalore and Delhi (Hanfee & Ahmed, 1999).

The Palni Hills

The Palni Hills, Madurai District, Tamil Nadu are an eastern extension of the Western Ghats and encompass an area of 2068sq. km with an altitude range of 400-2554m. The Palni Hills are located to the south of the Palghat gap and form the important Palni-Anamalai block. On the western border of the Palni Hills are the Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary in Tamil Nadu and the Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala, while the Pambadum Shola forest of Kerala forms the southwestern border. A number of rivers such as Kudraiyar, Pachiar, Porundalar, Palar, Pulavachiar and Konalar originate from these hills.

The Hills include a variety of habitat types with diverse flora and fauna that in turn include several rare endemic plant and animal species. Some threatened mammal species include the Asian Elephant *Elephas maximus*, Grizzled Giant Squirrel *Ratufa macroura*, Nilgiri Marten *Martes gwatkinsi*, Nilgiri Langur *Trachypithecus johnii* and the Nilgiri Tahr *Hemitragus hylocrius*. Leopard *Panthera pardus* and Dhole *Cuon alpinus* are the common predators. Ungulates and other common species include the Gaur *Bos gaurus*, Sambar *Cervus unicolor*, Barking Deer *Muntiacus muntjak* and Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*.

Habitat loss due to encroachment into forest lands as a result of expanding human population, habitat disturbance caused by people entering into the forest for collection of minor forest produce and fuel wood, and poaching activities have been

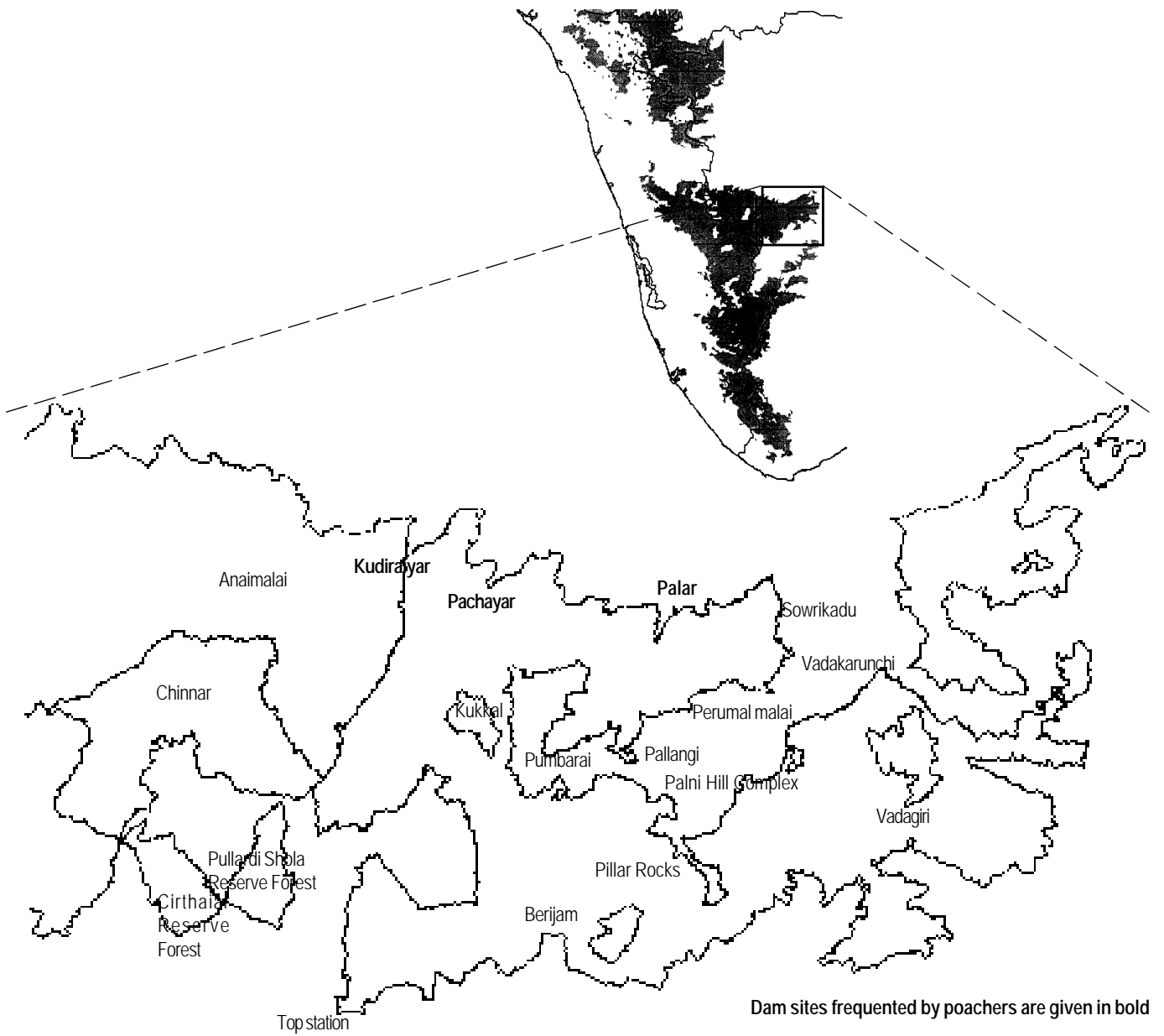


Figure 1. Map showing the study area - Palni Hills

causing concern to conservationists and forest managers of the Palni Hills.

In recent years, certain likely negative impacts on the habitat of otters have been noticed. For instance, tourism, and consequently, water pollution and habitat disturbance may have been responsible for wiping out otter populations in and around Kodaikanal Lake. Runoffs of pesticides and other pollutants into streams, over-fishing etc. are also serious causes for concern.

Another major threat faced by the otters in the region is poaching. Every year otters are thoroughly searched out and hunted extensively for their oil along forest streams, particularly along dams, in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

A study on the status and distribution of mammals was conducted in the Palni Hills between 1999-2000. During the course of the survey, poaching of otters was recorded. A report of the poaching is presented below.

Poaching of otters in the Palni Hills

As mentioned otters are hunted exclusively along forest streams, particularly around dam sites, in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Kudraiyar, Palar, Porundalar and Vardhamanadhi dams are the chosen hunting grounds in the Palnis. Poaching has also been reported along the Amaravathy River.

The poachers belong to the Bagiri tribe of Haryana and have a permit that allows them to wander in the forest tracts collecting medicinal herbs and plants. They claim that during the dry season, there is no source of income in their home state and they are forced to travel all the way down south to eke out a living. During this time, they lead a nomadic existence and different family-groups camp at different dam sites. The women go from house to house begging for food while the men go into the forests tracking otters, collecting herbs and flowers and setting traps for game. Women and children also sell flowers, trinkets and bindhis.

Market for otters

Poachers track otters, set traps and catch them. Otter skin is used for making drums, the meat is eaten and the oil extracted out of the animal's fat is used as medicine. The medicine is apparently a good cure for joint pains and pneumonia.

Tracking otters and setting traps

An otter's presence is betrayed by its spraints and footprints. Otters are known to frequent the same spot for defecation. The traps are set on the banks of the stream close to where the tracks are visible. The traps are covered over by leaves and sand. The traps are sort of clamps that snap shut when stepped over.

Trade details

An otter's oil sells for Rs.30.00 for 10g. A single otter of average size is worth about 250g of oil. An adult otter may yield up to 500g of oil. Thus, an otter is worth between Rs.750-1500. The market for the oil is known to be in northern India but further details are not available.

Conservation of otters

In the wild, tracking an otter may take more than a month. In fact, it was noticed that two months of extensive tracking in the Palni Hills did not produce any result. Sadly, this also reflects the status of otters in the region.

Hussain (1999) suggests that detailed surveys should be conducted to assess the status of otters and threats to their sustained reproduction. It is felt that conservation efforts should be extended to wetlands and reservoirs outside protected areas as well. Decline in prey base due to accumulation of pollutants calls for reduction in the discharge of pesticides, industrial effluents and sewage into wetland and river ecosystems. It also calls for more control over poaching operations.

In the case of Palni Hills, poaching is the most serious threat to the otters. Animals, to a large extent, are capable of adapting to problems such as low prey availability, disturbance and alteration of their habitats by altering their diet, territory and habitat. In such cases populations may dwindle, but will not necessarily be wiped out. Hunting may cause irrevocable loss to the existing populations leading to their extinction in the region. Measures have to be taken to prevent trapping of otters in the Palni Hills.

Conclusion

Faced with the task of protecting the otters of the Palni Hills, the approach would be to threaten or roughen up the tribals who hunt these otters. This could lead to anguish, resentment, clandestine hunting and even bribery. It would be interesting to know where the market is for this oil. Why is it worth for the tribals from Haryana to come all the way to southern India for this, and, who buys their medicinal plants?

Coming back to these tribals - they are not crafty, wicked poachers. Despite their hardships, there is a sense of pride and dignity about them that is admirable. It is ironical then that the Bagiri people worship the otters. They claim that back home they have nothing to call their own and the otter is their only source of livelihood during lean months and their God ... so then, do gods go extinct? Well, at this rate the otters of India are certainly likely to end up as a myth.

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