African Clawless Otter *Aonyx capensis*

© T Mcintyre

Namibian conservation status	Near-Threatened Nature Conservation Ordinance (1974) Schedule 4: Defined as "Protected Game" Listed on CITES Appendix II
Global IUCN status	Near-Threatened
Namibian range	Occurs in the perennial rivers in the north-east, and the Kunene and Orange Rivers, as well as in the ephemeral Fish River upstream from its confluence with the Orange, as far north as Neckartal Dam
Global range	Widespread in sub-Saharan Africa. Largely absent from Namibia, Botswana and the Karoo in South Africa, but found along some of the major ephemeral rivers
Population estimate	Insufficient data to make an estimate
Population trend	Thought to be decreasing
Habitat	Predominantly aquatic in fresh water systems, but also occurs in coastal habitats where there is access to fresh water
Threats	▸ Wetland degradation ▸ Suspected of being persecuted by fishermen who see it as a threat to fish resources ▸ Killed unintentionally and possibly intentionally in fish traps and nets ▸ Killed for bushmeat and possibly for other body parts ▸ Climate change, which will increase human pressure on wetlands, and might reduce continuity of surface pools in ephemeral rivers ▸ Lack of information on otters generally

DISTRIBUTION

Widely distributed in sub-Sahara where there is suitable aquatic habitat, in both coastal and fresh water settings, but largely absent from Namibia, Botswana and the Karoo in South Africa. In these drier parts, individuals are found along some ephemeral rivers where pools of fresh water persist (Nel & Somers 1998, van Niekerk *et al*. 1998).

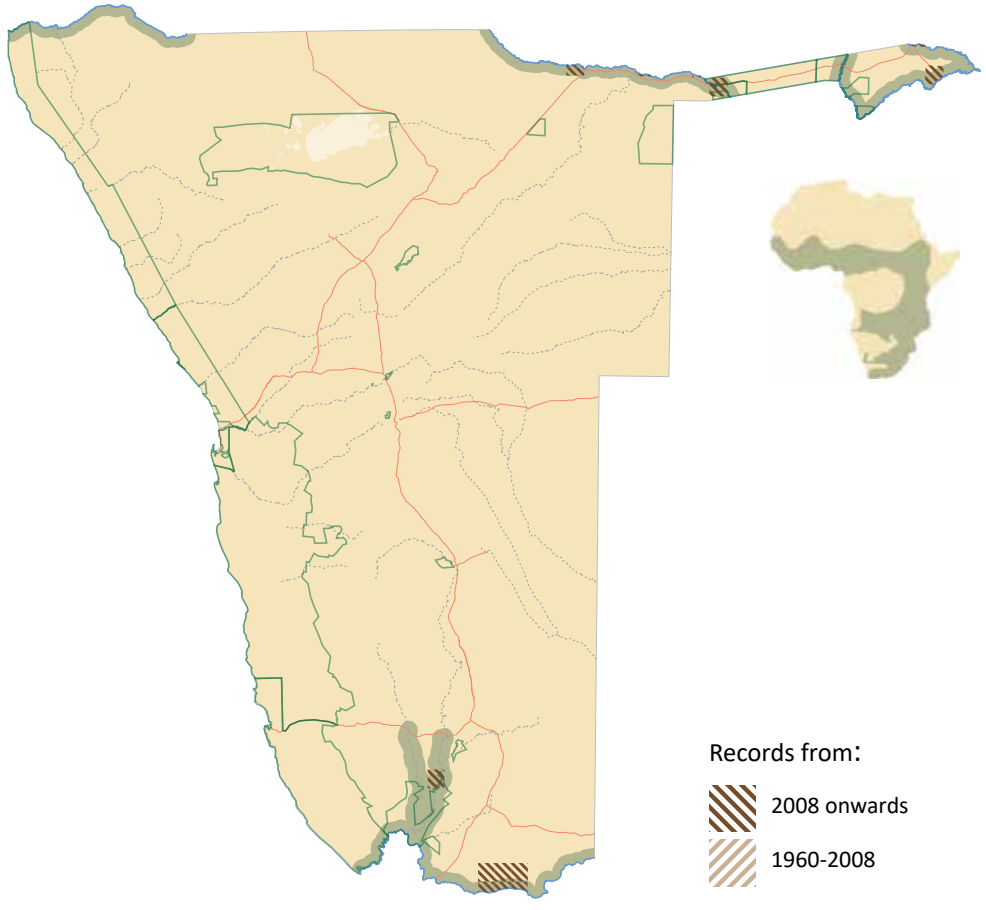
The African clawless otter is reported to have been quite common in the lagoons and swamps of what is now Zambezi Region, and in the Okavango, Kunene and Orange Rivers (Shortridge 1934, Smithers 1983). Shortridge (1934) recorded its occurrence in the ephemeral Fish River, the main tributary of the Orange in southern Namibia, extending almost up to Berseba.

The present distribution is still assumed to include all of Namibia's perennial rivers and wetlands, but there is very little data to confirm this. Its presence in the Fish River has

Distribution records of African clawless otter, and present estimated area of distribution in Namibia.

Inset: African distribution of African clawless otter according to IUCN (Jacques *et al.* 2015).

The Namibian distribution in the main map is more up to date and does not necessarily agree with the distribution shown in the inset.



been confirmed as far upstream as the site of Neckartal Dam (Palmer 2010), prior to the construction of the dam, as well as in the Löwen River (Nel & Somers 1998). Individuals can move long distances between pools in river beds.

POPULATION ESTIMATE AND TREND

There has been no attempt to estimate populations of either species of otters in Namibia. In keeping with the IUCN (Jacques *et al.* 2015), and South African assessments (Okes *et al.* 2016) of African clawless otter, we expect the population to be declining in Namibia due to increasing wetland degradation, and increased fishing activities by people which would cause increasing levels of disturbance.

ECOLOGY

This is the larger of the two otter species occurring in southern Africa, reaching up to 1,5 m long and up to 18 kg in weight (Smithers 1983). As its name implies, this species does not possess claws; the toes are finger-like, adapted for feeling and grasping their prey underwater (Smithers 1983).

The African clawless otter is predominantly aquatic, but also wanders widely in adjacent terrestrial habitat (Nel & Somers 1998). Preferred habitats in wetlands are areas of dense reed beds and rocky substrate, where their main food items are common. Unlike the spotted-necked otter, the African clawless can forage in both clear and turbid water (Somers & Nel 2007). Given suitable habitat, food availability is the single most important factor determining African clawless otter presence in any area (Nel & Somers 1998). In coastal habitats, they need access to fresh water for drinking and cleansing the fur.

The main prey is crabs and frogs (Smithers 1983, Rowe-Rowe 1992); other foods are fish, insects, and small mammals and birds (Stuart & Stuart 2015). There is some nocturnal as well as diurnal activity, but the African clawless otter is predominantly crepuscular, being most active for a few hours after sunrise and before sunset (Smithers 1983). This animal is generally solitary, but may be seen in pairs and small family parties up to five individuals.

Because otters feed on fish, they are often accused of competing with fishermen for fish. Studies in Zimbabwe (Butler 1994) and South Africa (Rowe-Rowe 1978) have shown this is not always true. African clawless otters in particular are unlikely culprits because fish are not their preferred prey (Carugati & Perrin 1998).

© T Mcintyre

THREATS

Degradation of river-bank vegetation due to clearing and burning of reed beds, and overgrazing and trampling of riverside vegetation by livestock, are common impacts of growing human pressure on Namibia's north-eastern wetlands. These are likely to reduce suitable habitat for otters. Agricultural intensification together with increased numbers of people, causing raised pollution levels, will also negatively impact otters (Kubheka *et al.* 2013).

Fishing may impact on African clawless otters because they are often perceived by fishermen as a threat to the resource, and persecuted as a result (Butler 1994, Rowe-Rowe 1978, Akpona *et al.* 2011). Fishing nets and traps have been recorded to cause otter mortalities in South Africa (Rowe-Rowe 1990); this situation probably also occurs widely elsewhere (Akpona *et al.* 2011).

In central Africa the Congo clawless otter, and the African clawless otter in other parts of Africa, is hunted for bushmeat, and otter body parts may also be used for traditional medicine (Cunningham & Zondi 1991, Nel & Somers 1998, Jacques *et al.* 2004, De Luca & Mpunga 2005b). We do not know whether these threats pertain in Namibia.

Climate change could negatively impact African clawless otters through its influence on river hydrology (van Niekerk *et al.* 1998). Reduced stream flow would have the effect of increasing human pressure on wetland resources, which would not suit otters. More frequent seasonal drying up of ephemeral pools could reduce their food sources, and reduce the continuity of pools enough to make the river beds unsuitable for these otters. This in turn would reduce the possibilities for dispersal and social interactions, thereby also limiting their populations. In the Fish River, this impact of reduced continuity between pools will be added to the reduction in downstream flows in the Fish River as a result of the Hardap and Neckartal Dams.

The lack of information on both otters in Namibia is, in itself, a threat as it renders them "invisible" to conservation authorities and interest groups. Without any people studying otters, they have lacked someone to speak out about their demise. Strategies to conserve these animals have been absent while they have probably experienced a steady decline.

CONSERVATION STATUS

The IUCN assessment of this species (Jacques *et al.* 2015) reports that otters in Africa are faced with habitat loss or degradation, polluted waters, and/or degraded aquatic ecosystems, as well as increasing human pressure on their prey base and reduction of resting and denning sites. These factors are expected to cause a 20% decline in the African clawless otter population over the next three generations (i.e. 13 years from 2015), which prompted the uplisting from Least Concern to Near-Threatened in 2015.

The decline in population of this species that is thought to be occurring throughout its range in Africa is based on the assessed threats and decreasing reports of signs and sightings (Nel & Somers 1998, Kubheka *et al.* 2013, Jacques *et al.* 2015, Reed-Smith *et al.* 2015a). Unfortunately there is very little solid information in Namibia to substantiate this, but there is no reason to expect the situation here to be any different.

© T McIntyre

The continuing decline in habitat quality, the growing pressure on inland fisheries and harvesting of wetland resources, plus unintentional and possibly intended killing of otters from fishing activities, warrant concern for otter populations. These factors justify the status of Near-Threatened.

ACTIONS

Projects to monitor the presence and population density of both species of otters in Namibia's perennial rivers would help to estimate the African clawless otter population, giving confidence to the conservation status and possibly yielding new and valuable information. Camera trap monitoring, backed up with field observations and surveys, could be usefully applied here (Nel & Somers 1998, Stevens *et al.* 2004, Hönigsfeld Adamič 2011). An important aspect is correctly separating the two species and especially recognising their different tracks, so that the species are correctly identified (Rowe-Rowe 1992). (Tips for separating spoor and signs of African clawless otter, spotted-necked otter and water mongoose are given in the description of water mongoose).

Studies on the dietary preferences and impact of the African clawless otter on fisheries in north-eastern Namibia need to be undertaken, to inform the discussion around whether otters compete with local fishermen for fish. Conservation actions such as raising awareness, setting the record straight, should be implemented using this information.

Greater awareness of the presence of otters and their conservation status could help to stimulate interest and greater conservation efforts, using them as "flagship species" (but see Stevens *et al.* 2011). This should be done in collaboration with tourist and fishing lodges on Namibia's perennial rivers and wetlands. Otter-spotting and other tourist activities focussed on otters could possibly be an initiative for community-based tourism enterprises in the north-eastern wetlands. A survey of tourists on the Wild Coast in South Africa showed that most tourists were prepared to pay more for otter-centred activities (Dumalisile *et al.*2005).

Greater attention to wetland conservation and restoration is needed in developmental work, which can be achieved through rigorous environmental impact assessments, bringing attention to the importance of ecosystem services, and thorough implementation of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Foster-Turley 1990).

Assessors: John Pallett and Gail Thomson
Reviewer: Michael Somers

Suggested citation: Pallett J & Thomson G 2022. A conservation assessment of African Clawless Otter *Aonyx capensis*. In: NCE, LCMAN, MEFT (eds) 2022. Conservation Status and Red List of the Terrestrial Carnivores of Namibia. Pp 110-113. MEFT, LCMAN & NCE, Windhoek, Namibia