

# **Otters & Their Waters: frequently asked questions**

Unless otherwise specified, "river otter" means "North American river otter (Lontra canadesis)" throughout this document.

## How deep do river otters dive?

They can dive to 60 feet deep and swim a quarter mile before coming up for air. They may swim as fast as 6-7 miles per hour.

# How long can a river otter hold its breath?

More than 4 minutes, with some estimates reaching as high as 8 minutes.

## Do river otters mate for life?

No. They are polygamous animals, meaning they mate with more than partner throughout their lifetime. A male will mate with a female and then leave to mate with others, leaving only the female to raise the young. Commonly, a family unit will consist of only a mother and her young. Sometimes other adult otters, presumably female "helpers," have been seen with a mother and her pups.

## How long do river otters stay with their mother?

They stay with mom for about a year, usually until the next pups are born.

#### When do river otters become sexually mature?

They reach sexual maturity at two to three years of age. However, in the wild it may take them longer to begin mating successfully.

# What is the gestation period of the river otter?

60-63 days

#### How many pups are in each litter?

Usually there are one to three pups per litter and one litter per year.

#### How many teeth do river otters have?

As adults, they have approximately 36 teeth.

#### What is the taxonomy of the North American river otter?

Taxonomy involves naming and classifying living things into large scientific groups, such as the kingdom Animalia (animal kingdom), and dividing those large groups into smaller subgroups based on how the living things are related. This gives us a scientific name for each individual species.

Kingdom:	Animalia
Phylum:	Chordata
Class:	Mammalia
Order:	Carnivora
Family:	Mustelidae
Subfamily:	Lutrinae
Genus:	Lontra
Species:	canadensis

The scientific name of an animal is usually its genus followed by its species. For example, the North American river otter is *Lontra canadensis*. There is even a subspecies (a defined group within the species) of North American river otters in the southeastern U.S. named *Lontra canadensis lataxina*.

#### How closely related are sea otters to the North American river otter?

They are in the same family and subfamily, but they belong to different genera (genus plural) and species. The sea otter's scientific name is *Enhydra lutris*.

#### Are Mote's three otters related to one another?

No. They were all orphans found separately. Pippi and Jane were raised together. Huck came from Florida Wildlife Hospital and Sanctuary in Melbourne, Florida. Pippi and Jane came from a wildlife rehabilitation facility in Conway, South Carolina.

# How will Mote's otters be visible to the public?

The land area is behind glass and the aquatic area is behind acrylic, making it easy for visitors to see otters in both exhibit areas.

#### Does Mote plan to get more otters and/or breed the ones we have?

For the time being, we are not seeking more otters and are focused on providing the best possible care for the three we have.

Our otters are too young to breed and there are currently no plans to breed them. As an Aquarium accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), we keep in touch a large network of other accredited zoos and aquariums to determine whether or not it is appropriate to breed any animal at a given time.

#### Do we have any form of shelter/burrow for them?

Yes, their den provides a safe place to rest and sleep. If visitors don't see the otters moving about, they can try peeking into the den.

# How are our otters adjusting to their environment, considering they are nocturnal animals?

The otters are being trained for their lifestyle and schedule here at Mote through positive reinforcement. They are rewarded for participating in certain behaviors. They have already adjusted to a more diurnal (daytime) lifestyle.

In the wild, North American river otters are more likely to be nocturnal (active at night) or crepuscular (active around dawn and dusk), but daytime activity is not unheard of.

## Will there be training/feedings visible to the public?

Yes. There will be assigned times for feeding/training. Our ultimate goal is to have two routinely scheduled narrated training sessions during specific days each week. The schedule will be determined soon. Until then, Mote staff will notify Marine Mammal Center volunteers daily about upcoming narrated trainings so you can inform our guests. We're being flexible during the early days of the exhibit to do what is best for our otters' care and training.

## Will the otters leave their exhibit at night?

Yes. In the morning, they will be guided back to their exhibit through a pathway similar to a chicken run.

# What is the minimum number of volunteers needed to staff the exhibit?

There should be one on the bottom level and one on the second level.

# Will the otters be allowed to forage for food at times other than their training sessions?

The otters will be given many different enrichment opportunities, including times when they can forage for "enrichment foods" — e.g., carrots. Enrichment opportunities provide healthy mental and physical stimulation. The otters will participate in training to be fed the main items in their diet. Their diet is composed of raw fish and meat that can spoil, so we wouldn't want to leave it in the exhibit.

# Do otters stand on their hind legs? If so, do they prop themselves up with their tails?

Yes, they stand on their hind legs. Their tails provide balance but do not prop them up. Also, their tails are not prehensile like those of monkeys. River otters use their tails to propel themselves through the water when swimming and to steer when swimming slowly.

# Are they related to beavers and woodchucks?

Beavers and woodchucks are in the order Rodentia, along with rats, mice, squirrels, porcupines, etc. These rodents have incisors (front teeth) that continually grow. Otters are in the order Carnivora. Within that order, they belong to the family Mustelidae, which includes several carnivorous mammals: badgers, weasels, martens, ferrets, mink and wolverines.

## Why do otters exist – what is their role in the ecosystem?

"Although not traditionally thought of as top predators, river otters prey on a wide variety of animals including fish, crayfish, frogs, insects, and birds. Their presence, therefore, regulates the population of these species lower in the food chain. Additionally, otters play an important role in distributing aquatic nutrients in terrestrial ecosystems. For example, the presence of otter 'latrines' has been shown to increase the nitrogen content and growth rate of some plant species. By contributing to primary production (plant growth), river otters increase the prevalence and growth of the plant community in the surrounding riparian habitat." (https://www.nrdc.org/wildlife/files/predatorimportance.pdf)

• Riparian habitat is the interface between land and a river or stream.

# Do North American river otters have oil glands?

Yes. Oil glands in their skin help to waterproof their fur to keep them dry in the water.

#### What is the conservation status of the North American river otter?

The United States Forest Service has declared river otters a Sensitive Species. There are laws protecting river otters in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming. Trapping is allowed in some states.

Historically, river otters were over-hunted for their warm fur. Today, humans remain their greatest threat, especially because of wetland development. Altogether, these otters are doing better than they once were, but they need our help to maintain thriving populations.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature says that the North American river otter "is considered to be Least Concern as it is not currently declining at a rate sufficient for a threat category. By the early 1900s, river otters had declined throughout large portions of their historic range in North America. However, improvements in water quality (through enactment of clean water regulations) and furbearer management techniques have enabled river otters to reclaim portions of their range in many areas. Reintroduction projects have been particularly valuable in restoring otter populations in many areas of the United States. However, river otters remain rare or absent in the southwestern United States and water quality and development limit recovery of populations in some areas. The species is widely distributed throughout its range. In many places the populations have re-established themselves because of conservation initiatives (Polechla 1990). There is an ongoing discussion about the problem of reintroduction of river otters. In recent years it is feared that it may contaminate the genetic structure of the native population."

# Besides alligators, what other animals might pose a threat to river otters?

Bobcats, coyotes, mountain lions, eagles, wolves, black bears, foxes and even domestic dogs can prey on river otters.

# What happened to the dolphin lagoon exhibit that used to be in this area?

"Otters & Their Waters" is located where the dolphin lagoon used to be. The additional space behind the otter exhibit will be used for future exhibits exploring watershed themes, in the same vein as "Otters & Their Waters." In time, we hope to add other animal species to broaden visitors' perspectives on the importance of watershed ecosystems.