

Otters – The Noose Tightens!

The Environment Agency has confirmed that otters are now present in every county in England. The sighting of two otters in Kent confirms that the predator is now resident in all the major river systems in the UK. Even the Thames and Lea in north London have recorded sightings.

The news is not good for carp, however, as the otter is classed as an A1 predator, which means it's at the top of its foodchain. Reports of otters taking large carp for food are growing, and reports of carp fisheries being decimated by the predator are now appearing with alarming regularity. Renowned angler John Wilson reported in *Carpworld* earlier in the year that angling is at a new dawn in its fight against the continual spread of the otter, and urged angling groups to campaign for the right to remove otters that attack fisheries. Anglers are so concerned about the effects otters and other predators will have on fish stocks that

the PAG (Predation Action Group) has been formed to research into, and report on, the effects of predation on fisheries. Otters will be only a part of the group's study, which will also look at the effects of cormorants and signal crayfish on angling, but it's true to say that as the otter population increases, so will the number of carp fisheries destroyed by them.

Fishery owners, clubs and fish farmers are in a difficult position when it comes to protecting their waters and livelihoods, as both otters and cormorants are protected and the authorities appear to be in denial

over the issue of predators in relation to angling.

The otter, which is a member of the mustelid family, declined by 95% of its range in western Europe during the 20th century, but has since made a remarkable recovery in numbers. In England, the otter population

reduced dramatically between the '50s and the '70s due to many reasons, including pesticides washing into rivers, reduction in habitat, and also an element of persecution. Otter hunting was banned in 1978, and slowly but surely, with the banning of certain pesticides, particularly organochlorine chemicals, plus the general improvement in water quality, the otter numbers slowly increased. Otters are very slow to reproduce, with only two sets of cubs being produced by a female in her lifetime.

Earlier in the year, Reading West MP, Martin Salter, a regular angler, said: "We have had conservationists

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running around leaving otters, having taken no time to check there was a

sufficient food source for them. It is irresponsible and unfair to allow certain species to wreak havoc on fish stocks due to a lack of natural food sources."

In a statement on August 18th, wildlife experts at the Environment Agency confirmed that there

are at least two otters in Kent, which have built their holts on the River Medway and the River Eden. The two sightings have delighted conservationists, who previously predicted that otters might not be resident in the county for another 10 years.

In a statement from the Environment Agency, Alastair Driver, the national conservation manager for the agency, said:

"The fact that otters are now returning to Kent is the final piece in the jigsaw for otter recovery in England, and is a symbol of great success for everybody involved in otter conservation."

Otters continue to recover in other parts of the UK too, with a recent survey on the River Ribble in Lancashire showing a 44 per cent increase in the numbers of otters since 2008. The River Ribble is one of 10 rivers taking part in a pilot project which aims to get wildlife organisations, farmers, businesses and the local community to take co-ordinated action to further improve the health of UK rivers. predationactiongroup.uk.org