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Otters in Japan: Idolized Icons, Forgotten Kin

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Abstract: Otters have become a rising star in Japanese zoos and aquariums in recent years. Due to the influence of television programs and social media, as well as online elections held in 2017 and 2018 to vote for a favorite otter from aquariums and zoos, the otter boom occurred, leading to an unprecedented increase in demand for pet otters and illegal trade. On the other hand, Japan was once home to the Japanese Otter *Lutra whiteleyi*, which is thought to have already extincted. Even though the otter that occurred in Tsushima in 2017 made big news, most of the younger generation have no idea that the Japanese Otter was once habituated in Japan. At the same time, sea otters *Enhydra lutris* have been among the most charismatic animals in aquariums. Over 100 individuals were kept domestically at the peak, but only two captive sea otters are kept now, which has led to a second sea otter boom. Meanwhile, in Hokkaido, sightings of sea otters have gradually increased since 2014.

By synthesizing previous studies and newspaper articles on otters and sea otters, this paper reviewed the history and current status of otters in Japan, both in the wild and in captivity. Although the otter boom and the sea otter boom in zoos and aquariums are often considered negative, their popularity throughout the country also has a positive impact on their conservation. Researchers and conservationists have received a large amount of donations from the public to continue the otter research. However, both the reintroduction of the river otter and the sea otter in Hokkaido are facing numerous challenges. Further conservation management plans, legislative support, and financial backing are needed from policymakers to establish the sea otter population in Hokkaido and reintroduce the otters to Japan.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Japan was once home to the Japanese Otter *Lutra whiteleyi*, a subspecies of the Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra* that is thought to have already gone extinct, with the last official sighting reported in 1979. Even though the otter that occurred in Tsushima in 2017 made big news in Japan, most of the younger generation have no idea that the Japanese Otter was once habituated in this country. On the other hand, captive otters originating from foreign countries, particularly the Small-clawed otter *Aonyx cinereus*, have become a rising star in Japan in recent years. There were online elections held in 2017 and 2018 to vote for a favorite otter from aquariums and zoos across the country. Furthermore, due to the influence of television programs and social media, the Asian small-clawed otter has gained significant popularity in

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recent years, resulting in an unprecedented surge in demand for pet otters and illegal trades in South Asia (Tomomi et al., 2018).

At the same time, sea otters *Enhydra lutris* have been among the most charismatic animals in aquariums since their first introduction in Japan in 1982. Over 100 individuals were kept domestically at the peak. However, after the death of Riro, the last male captive sea otter, there are now only two captive sea otters in Japan, kept at the Toba Aquarium, attracting more than 1 million people from across the country to see them each year. Meanwhile, in Hokkaido, since a mother and cub were observed along the Nemuro coast in 2014, sightings have gradually increased (Mitani, 2021). The sea otter population in Hokkaido was estimated to be around 50 individuals as of 2024, primarily located in the eastern part of Hokkaido, from Nemuro City to Kushiro Town. However, they are facing numerous challenges to survive.

In Japan, river otters and sea otters are often perceived as entirely different animals because they do not share the same name in Japanese; however, they share a similar history and situation now: they are popular and idolized in zoos and aquariums, yet they are extinct or endangered in the wild due to overhunting and modernization. This paper aims to review the history and the current status of otters in Japan, both in the wild and in captivity, by synthesizing previous studies and newspaper articles on river otters and sea otters that have rarely been examined together.

EXTINCTION OF JAPANESE OTTER AND THE OTTER BOOM: KIN AND REPRESENTATION

History of the Japanese Otter

The Japanese river otter is supposed to have diverged from the Eurasian otter as a separate species 1.27 million years ago (Waku et al., 2016). It was one of the four mammal species designated as a Special Natural Monument in 1965. By the Edo period, the otters inhabited the middle and lower reaches of rivers throughout Japan, from Hokkaido to Kyushu, and were commonly found in villages nationwide. Place names containing the kanji character for otter, such as Datsuno, Datsuzawa, Datsuniwa, Datsubuchi, Datsugoe, and Datsukawachi, still remain across various regions of Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu (Ando, 2008). However, its population declined dramatically during the Meiji era due to overexploitation for its fur. Furthermore, its numbers sharply declined due to habitat deterioration caused by river development and water pollution. Since 1979, there have been no confirmed sightings, leading to the belief that it is already extinct. In 2012, it was listed as extinct on the Ministry of the Environment's Red List. The unfortunate extinction of the Japanese Otter was due to several factors, including the country's rapid industrialization, hunting for pelts, and widespread pollution and destruction of freshwater and marine wetlands, which led to a decline in population levels that could not be reversed (Ando, 2008).

The rising number of confirmed deaths in Ehime Prefecture from the 1954 rediscovery to the 1965 designation as a National Special Natural Monument reflected a growing public interest in otters (Sasaki, 2016). Meanwhile, regarding the current state of otter research and conservation, there are very few otter researchers in Japan. Furthermore, over a quarter of a century had passed since otters were last seen in Japan, and public interest had waned (Ando, 2007). However, after a 38-year lapse, an animal suspected to be an otter was captured by a sensor camera installed by the University of the Ryukyus on Tsushima Island in Nagasaki Prefecture in 2017, attracting public attention and reviving discussions about the Japanese otter.

Although evidence from historical records and sightings suggests that otters once inhabited Tsushima,

it remains unclear whether these were Japanese otters or Eurasian otters from the mainland. Conversely, records of otter presence on Tsushima are limited to 1735 and 1809, with no information concerning their existence from the 19th century to the present day (Okamoto, 2022). The Ministry of the Environment required researchers to conduct a Tracks survey (search for droppings, hair, footprints, feeding traces, etc.) within Tsushima Island, and then conducted DNA analysis on two collected droppings in 2017. The DNA analysis results indicate that the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) haplotypes of otters currently inhabiting Tsushima match those found in southern Korea (Ministry of the Environment, 2018). This suggests that Eurasian otters have sporadically dispersed to Tsushima from Korea, where populations have been increasing in recent years (likely carried by drifting debris in ocean currents or stowing away on ships). Although the presence of at least four individuals was confirmed after that, it was determined that a continuously sustained population had not been established on Tsushima (Kyushu Regional Environment Office Wildlife Division, 2023). However, according to the recent study of a research group led by Associate Professor Koji Uda of Kochi University, the DNA result of droppings believed to be from a river otter collected on Tsushima in February 2024 revealed that this individual is genetically extremely closely related to the Eurasian otter inhabiting South Korea and belongs to the same phylogeny as the population confirmed in 2017-2018. This suggests that previously confirmed individuals may have been breeding on Tsushima, indicating that they may not have only temporarily arrived there, but may have also established a continuous habitat (Kochi University, 2025).

Otter Boom and Otter Elections

Japanese zoos and aquariums began keeping Asian small-clawed otters in their facilities beginning in 1970 (Okamoto et al., 2024). Initially, a total of four individuals were exhibited across two facilities. From there, the number of captive individuals increased to 22 by 1995, and by 2013, a total of 228 individuals were being kept across 39 facilities nationwide (Wakiguchi, 2015). During the absence of the river otter in the wild, an otter boom of captive otters in zoos and aquariums, otter cafes, and pet otters kept by individuals has been populated in Japan. The two online otter elections held in 2017 and 2018 to choose a favorite otter from aquariums and zoos across the country took the form of idol elections, which have proven popular in Japan over the years, attracting media and public attention, which is indicated to be one of the factors contributing to the otter boom (Tomomi et al., 2018).

The first otter election, held in 2017, drew attention from fans as a “cute battle” due to the otters’ popularity for their adorable expressions and movements. According to a spokesperson for the Sunshine Aquarium’s operating company, they had set a goal of 10,000 votes and were surprised to receive 516,082 votes. They hoped this event would prompt people to visit zoos and aquariums to see otters in various regions. Bubuzela, a male African clawless otter, estimated to be 7 years old, kept at Ise Sea Paradise, received 32,131 votes and won first place among the 79 candidates and 5 pairs from a total of 39 facilities. However, Bubuzera had died during the election, so the keeper had to congratulate it on its photo and shared the good news with visitors (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2017a, 2017b).

Still using the keyword ‘cuteness’, the second otter election was held in 2018, with 83 otters from 39 facilities nationwide standing for. However, the purpose of the otter elections has suddenly shifted to ‘raise awareness about otter ecology and habitats’ (Mainichi Shimbun, 2018a), amid rampant illegal trades in pet otters (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2018a). During the voting period, otters from each facility made appearances in promotional videos and handed out business cards to visitors themselves with their dexterous paws,

employing every imaginable tactic in their election campaigns (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2018, 2018c). The election posters for each otter are displayed on the special event website, and each otter has its own catchphrase. For example, Hassaku, an Asian small-clawed otter at Nasu Animal Kingdom, popular for its adorable cries, promoted itself as "Nasu's Handsome Otter" to attract votes (Mainichi Shimbun, 2018a). The Sunshine Aquarium sought support by releasing a video of Yamato clasping its paws to ask for votes. It even announced a pledge on YouTube that visitors could take a two-shot photo with Yamato the otter if they won first place (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2018b, 2018c). Eventually, the popular twin African clawless otters Kirari and Hirari (both male, 1 year old) from Ise Sea Paradise Aquarium won first place in the second election, receiving 32,645 votes out of a total of 380,200 votes cast. This accomplishment followed their father, Bubuzela, making it a consecutive victory for the African clawless otter family (Mainichi Shimbun, 2018b). However, 7 Asian small-clawed otters were ranked in the top 10 of the second election.

TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring program of WWF Japan, conducted a survey and published a report summarizing the findings, pointing out that the "otter election" has clearly served to increase the general popularity of otters kept in zoos across Japan and framing their image as closer to humans rather than to wildlife. Furthermore, a seller of otters at a pet shop visited during the survey stated the election event indeed sparked demand from customers. Meanwhile, they indicated that there are also peculiar elements in how otters are exhibited at certain zoos and aquariums, which undoubtedly give visitors the impression that otters can be like "pets" (Tomomi et al., 2018). However, the circumstances have changed in recent years, with the establishment of World Otter Day (WOD), which was initiated by the International Otter Survival Fund. Following a request for cooperation from the Japan Association of Zoos and Aquariums (JAZA), WOD events aimed at raising awareness about the global status of otters and conservation activities commenced in 2017 at nine facilities housing Eurasian otters. From the following year, they have been held at all facilities housing other species (Morimoto, 2025). Although the request for event cooperation from JAZA ended in 2022, WOD events have become established at zoos and aquariums nationwide in recent years, gradually changing people's attitudes toward otters as wild animals.

SEA OTTERS IN JAPAN

Sea Otters in the wild

Sea otters, once continuously widespread along the North Pacific coast from Japan to California, were near extinction during the 1700s and 1800s due to overhunting for their dense, highly valuable commercial fur. Sea otters around Hokkaido were also believed to have disappeared in all areas except the four northern islands (Mitani, 2021). Since the 1970s, small numbers of sea otters have been regularly observed on the eastern coast of Hokkaido (Hattori et al., 2005). By the mid-1990s, sightings had increased, but many deaths had occurred due to entanglement in fishing nets. At Cape Erimo, one or two individuals have been residents since 2002. A total of 15 individuals have been observed simultaneously, including Cape Nosappu and Cape Ochi-ishi. It is thought that individuals dispersing from the Four Northern Islands are visiting and in the process of re-establishing a population. However, due to obstacles such as entanglement in nets, the situation is not conducive to stable survival (Ministry of the Environment, Nature Conservation Bureau, Wildlife Division, 2010).

Among all the sightings, Kuchan, a male wild sea otter named after its first appearance near the entrance of the Kushiro River, which flows through central Kushiro City, drew attention from residents and

tourists in January 2009. While sea otters were occasionally seen along the eastern coast of Hokkaido, sightings outside aquariums were rare; this was the first confirmed record of a sea otter within the city of Kushiro. The day after Kuchan appeared, over 100 people gathered on the bridge and in the surrounding areas, seeking the opportunity to take photographs (Mainichi Shimbun, 2009a; 2009b). Since then, showing no sign of returning to the sea, it had been moving between the Nusamai Bridge and the Kusuri Bridge, approximately 500 meters upstream, attracting over 200 people who gathered there after a few days. The area around the scene was extremely crowded, and a man in his seventies accidentally fell into the river, but was fortunately rescued by nearby people (Asahi Shimbun, 2009a; Mainichi Shimbun, 2009c). Meanwhile, Kuchan made a significant impact on the local community. During the first month Kuchan stayed in the city, the nearby commercial facility saw approximately 10,000 more visitors and sales of around 10 million yen more than during the same period last year (Mainichi Shimbun, 2009e).

Regardless of the popularity of Kuchan and its inestimable economic impact, the Nemuro City showed no sign of taking any action to protect it. One day, oil was discovered floating near the Nusamai Bridge on the Kushiro River, where Kuchan occasionally appeared, causing concern among the residents. The Kushiro Coast Guard removed the oil, but stated that this was part of their routine operations and had no relation to the sea otter (Asahi Shimbun, 2009b). Another day, Kuchan was entangled in a 40-centimeter-long fishing hook and line. Although it did not appear to suffer any significant injuries, the hook remained on its left hind leg for a few days. Kushiro City and the Hokkaido Prefectural Government stated that protection can also cause stress, so they decided to monitor the situation carefully while consulting with specialists. Since sea otters are internationally protected animals, national permission is required for capture, even for conservation purposes (Asahi Shimbun, 2009c; Mainichi Shimbun, 2009d). Fortunately, the hook had not been visually confirmed since then, and no impairment to its behavior had been observed (Mainichi Shimbun, 2009e).

Meanwhile, the fishermen claimed that the otters in the Sea of Okhotsk have depleted three of seven fishing grounds, consumed approximately 18 tons of sea urchins, and resulted in a loss of around 31 million yen. The cooperative petitioned the Hokkaido Prefectural Government for assistance in late March, while the city of Nemuro established an ad hoc council in late April to discuss measures to prevent otter damage (Takeo, 2010). Eventually, the city of Nemuro added the sea otter to the Wildlife Damage Prevention Plan (Mainichi Shimbun, 2010).

Several sightings were reported annually after Kuchan. Since a mother and cub were observed along the Nemuro coast in 2014, sightings have gradually increased (Mitani, 2021). The sea otter population in Hokkaido was estimated to be around 50 individuals as of 2024, primarily located in the eastern part of Hokkaido, from Nemuro City to Kushiro Town. However, in April 2025, a sea otter carcass washed ashore in Hamanaka Town—the first such case in Japan and globally—was found to be infected with the highly pathogenic avian influenza virus (H5 subtype) (Mainichi Shimbun, 2025b). The same highly pathogenic virus was also confirmed in three carcasses recovered in Nemuro City in the next month. In May 2025, it was also reported that a mother sea otter and her baby were attacked by a group of killer whales in Hamanaka town. The pair disappeared afterward and is believed to have been preyed upon by the whales (Mainichi Shimbun, 2025e). Moreover, oil spills and entanglements in fishing gear pose a continuous threat to the species, preventing the population from stabilizing (Doroff et al., 2021). Until now, no official conservation plan has been established in Japan; however, the sea otter remains listed as a pest, which is considered a potential threat to fisheries (Nemuro City, 2024).

Sea Otter Boom in Captivity

The sea otter has been referred to as the “third idol animal” alongside the panda and the koala for a long time (Nakagawa, 2010). The history of captive sea otters in Japan began with the introduction of a male sea otter at Izu Mito Sea Paradise in 1982. The next year, four sea otters were introduced from Alaska at Toba Aquarium. The first baby was born in 1984, creating a nationwide “sea otter boom”. Sea otters were subsequently exhibited at aquariums across Japan, with over 100 individuals kept domestically at the peak in 1994 (Mainichi Shimbun, 2025c; Mitani et al., 2024). However, after the last import from America in 1998 and from Russia in 2003, sea otter imports ceased following the establishment of regulations in 2003. Since then, breeding has been challenging due to issues such as unsuccessful mating and inadequate milk production. The captive population has been steadily declining (Mainichi Shimbun, 2025e). By 2022, there were only three captive sea otters in Japan.

Riro, the only male sea otter in Japan, who was a superstar at the Uminonakamichi Marine Ecology Science Museum in Fukuoka, died in January 2025 at the age of 17. Due to its popularity around the country, a floral tribute stand had been set up beside the otter pool where it was kept, until three months after its death. Over 700 floral tributes arrived from across Japan and overseas to mourn its passing (Mainichi Shimbun, 2025a).

Today, only two sea otters, Mei (21 years old, female) and Kira (17 years old, female), at Toba Aquarium remain. Their popularity has been described as a ‘second sea otter boom’. During the 2025 Golden Week holidays, visitors had to wait over two hours to be granted viewing time (limited to one minute) in the space in front of the tank (Mainichi Shimbun, 2025c). The average lifespan of sea otters in captivity is around 20 years. As both Mei and Kira are females, breeding is not possible (Mainichi Shimbun, 2025e). It is undeniable that there will be no captive sea otters in Japan for several years to come.

Conclusion

As reviewed, the river otters and sea otters in Japan did share a similar history. The population in the wild declined dramatically due to overhunting and human activities. On the other hand, they are treated like idols in zoos and aquariums due to their cuteness and human-like behaviors. Although the otter boom and the sea otter boom are often considered negative, their popularity throughout the country also has a positive impact on their conservation. A crowdfunding campaign was launched in July 2025 by the Ocean Mammal Team at the Wildlife Research Center, Kyoto University, to support the expenses of their research and investigation into marine mammals, including population censuses, general behavioral observations, and feeding behavior observations of sea otters. The final amount of the donation is an incredible ten million yen, which is double their initial target, demonstrating the depth of public interest in marine mammals, including the sea otter[1]. Meanwhile, the Asian Otter Conservation Society of Japan also launched a crowdfunding campaign titled ‘What We Can Do for the Otters We Have Driven to Extinction’, received donations totaling 1.5 million yen from 166 individuals, enabling an international symposium to be realized.[2] The international symposium was held in both Tsushima and Tokyo in August 2025, aiming to

1 READYFOR. (2025). 海が変わっていく。海獣とヒトが共に生きるため、いま、調査が必要です [The ocean is changing: Research is needed now for marine mammals and humans to coexist]. https://readyfor.jp/projects/ku_wrc_kaiju-han (Accessed October 20, 2025).

raise awareness that river otters still exist in Japan.

However, the efforts of researchers and the public interest are not enough. Both the reintroduction of the Eurasian otter and the sea otter in Hokkaido are facing numerous challenges. Further conservation management plans, legislative support, and financial backing are needed from policymakers to establish the sea otter population in Hokkaido and to reintroduce the river otters to Japan.

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2 Asian Otter Conservation Society of Japan. (October 10, 2025). 国際シンポジウム「日本のカワウソのこれまでとこれから　―海外の事例から考える―」を終えて [International symposium "The Past and Future of Otters in Japan—Considering Case Studies from Overseas"]. https://ocsj.asia/2025/10/%e5%9b%bd%e9%9a%9b%e3%82%b7%e3%83%b3%e3%83%9d%e3%82%b8%e3%82%a6%e3%83%a0%e3%80%8c%e2%bd%87%e6%9c%ac%e3%81%ae%e3%82%ab%e3%83%af%e3%82%a6%e3%82%bd%e3%81%ae%e3%81%93%e3%82%8c%e3%81%be%e3%81%a7%e3%81%a8/ (Accessed October 15, 2025).

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