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Monitoring otters in SACs: testing the protocol

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Introduction

The Life in UK Rivers Project was undertaken to develop methods for conserving wildlife in rivers designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), including monitoring populations. One of its publications, Monitoring the otter (Chanin, 2003) recommended a protocol for otters which was designed to provide a simple, quick, but robust mechanism which would yield information that was amenable to statistical testing.

The present study was commissioned by English Nature to test the feasibility of this approach and collect information on time taken to visit each site as well as the distance travelled for accurate costing of the exercise.

What was done

The SAC Monitoring Protocol simplifies the standard otter monitoring methodology to record only the most basic information. By confining searches to the close proximity of bridges and only searching spraint sites within 50m of them, the number of sites visited with one day can be considerably increased. However, in order to achieve a suitable sample size in small SACs (60 sites) the distance between sites had to be considerably reduced from the 5-8km recommended in the standard survey. In small SACs it was considered likely that all suitable bridges would have to be checked.

The five English SACs where otters are a primary feature of interest were surveyed (Camel, Derwent, Eden, Tweed and Wye), but work was confined to the English parts of the Tweed and Wye which cross the borders of Scotland and Wales respectively.

Results and conclusions

A total of 357 sites was surveyed, of which 350 were suitable as candidates for long-term surveillance. In most SACs signs of otters were found at between 74% and 90% of sites, a

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surprisingly high proportion. However the proportion of positive sites on the Derwent was noticeably lower (50%), probably as a result of the recent spate. These results are broadly comparable with the results from the most recent national survey.

Once the surveyor was based in the catchment, the survey required between 12 and 17 minutes per site to complete, including driving time between sites. For a surveyor living close to the SAC, total costs of the survey were estimated as between £1300 and £1650 per SAC.

The results of these surveys show that, with a few minor adjustments, the protocol can provide a practical approach to monitoring otters in SACs, even those that are fairly small like the Camel. It is also clear that it would be possible to repeat surveys using the same protocol at intervals in order to compare results over a period of time.

English Nature's viewpoint

Monitoring otters on SACs directly is not a practical option, so indirect methods of inferring the conservation status of the population are necessary. Although the relationship between the percentage of positive sites (signs) and the number of otters is unknown, it seems reasonable to suppose that a high proportion of positive sites is an indication of a strong population. The proposed protocol appears to represent a cost-effective approach that could be applied to all the English otter SACs at a sustainable annual cost.

Selected references

CHANIN. 2003. Monitoring the Otter *Lutra lutra*. *Conserving Natura 2000 Rivers Monitoring Series,* No 10. Peterborough: English Nature.

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Further information

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