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THE SITUATION OF THE OTTER IN FLANDERS, BELGIUM

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During the last three years the National Campaign for the Protection of Small Carnivores (NCBR) worked on a survey of the otter in the Flemish region of Belgium. Research has been completed and is published in a detailed report in which an attempt is made to give an overview of the historical and recent spread of the population of the otter. The report contains all important information on recent and former distribution of the otter in Belgium and will serve as the basis of a detailed action programme for the conservation of otter habitats in this country.

Attention is focussed primarily on the timespan between 1889, the year the authorities started a subsidized campaign for the elimination of the otter, and 1987. Despite the fact that a lot of information regarding the 'success' of this campaign has been irretrievably lost, it has been possible to provide a satisfactory reconstruction of the development of the otter's population during the last century on the basis of a number of diverse sources.

In overall terms it can be stated that otters were present all over the Flemish territory, but that their numbers diverged in accordance with local conditions of the environment. Important early breeding grounds were : the basin of the Yser, the environs of Bruges, Antwerp and Ghent, the region of the creeks, the upper Scheldt, Dender, Zenne and Grote Gete, Dyle, Demer, the basin of the Nete, the Albert and Kemp Canals, the Antwerp North Kemp and Limburg Kemp regions.

As a result of severe persecution (about 300 otter were killed each year by the beginning of the century) the formerly dense otter population was reduced to spectacularly small numbers during the first half of this century, so much so that the otter was well on its way to becoming an extinct species as early as the 50s and 60s. In spite of the subsequent loss of many through water pollution and the continuing (now illegal) persecution, certain modest populations seem to have remained in existence in some areas until the beginning of the 80s. The following places should be noted : the region of the Yser around Diksmuide, the creek area, the Scheldt valley around Gavare, the swamps of Berlarebroek, the Dyle valley with the environs of Mechlin, Bornem, Lier, Antwerp, and also the Meuse valley and especially the Bree-Kinrool area. It must be understood, however, that since then and for the time being, permanent occurrence (with reproduction) has nowhere been observed or established with any degree of certainty.

So the otter has become an endangered species in Belgium on the extinction. Probably nothing can be done to save the last otters, because water pollution, habitat destruction and disturbance are still rife. All future efforts will concentrate on the re-establishment of a healthy otter population, although this will take a very long time. Plans are made for an ecologically orientated approach to water management and first steps are set to create so called 'otter reserves' in some of the areas mentioned above. These are chains of wetlands and waterways connected to each other in a way that they can hold small otter populations. In such areas parts are reserved for total protection whilst elsewhere attempts are made to reconstruct the natural habitat and to purify the water. In the meantime the zoological garden of Planckendael (Muizen) has started breeding European otters in captivity. All activities are co-ordinated by the 'Otteroverleggroep' (OOG): a commission in which national and regional authorities, organisations and specialists are represented. In the near future they will take charge of funds to support projects on the protection of otter habitats.

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