

The 'Otter' Side of Goa

"To you, that's an otter eating fish; to the people whose livelihood depends on fishing, that's Rs.200 worth of fish gone.' says Atul Sinai Borkar while briefing me about the otters that he's working hard to save. Borkar is spearheading a project, which aims to study otters, their ecology and distribution in Goa and conserve otters and their habitat through stakeholder participation. Otters are amphibious mammals, which live in and around water bodies. They are considered to be the top predators within the ecosystems they inhabit; it is believed that their presence is an indicator of the health of wetlands. However, in recent years, the otter population has been globally threatened owing to threats such as habitat degradation and fragmentation, sand mining, building of dams, pollution of water bodies as well competition for prey between humans and otters which antagonizes humans against them. Moreover, they are also poached for their pelt which is prized in international markets for its softness but the trade of which is illegal. This set Borkar wondering about the status of Otters in home-state, Goa.

When Borkar set out on his mission, he found that he faced with a blank slate. There was little or no information on the species found in Goa i.e. Small-clawed Otters and Smooth-coated Otters. Seeking to change this, he decided to embark on a full-fledged study of otters and their habitat in Goa, under the aegis of the Mhadei Research Station and the Centre for Wildlife Studies. Borkar's thinks that since anthropogenic pressures affect otters and their habitat, it is imperative to include local communities in the project. Having secured his core team, which is shored with the support of numerous volunteers, Borkar has been studying otters in designated areas.

First, it was necessary to determine which regions were most likely to be suitable habitat, from the point of view of an otter. Next came the task of determining whether the otters agreed with the team's hypothesis and did indeed live there. Once they were found, then their behavior and ecology would be documented and studied. In order to determine which regions were to be studied, the selected area was digitally mapped and divided into segments. These segments would then be randomly selected and then surveyed for otter presence and activity. Since both Small-clawed and Smooth coated Otters are found in Goa, it'd be necessary to take both their habitats into consideration. For the former, forested patches near riverine habitats and wetlands were chosen while mangroves and creeks near the sea were the sites to look for the latter.

Then comes the actual survey, which I participate in. I'm part of a group that will survey a mangrove patch for Smooth-coated Otters. GPS in hand, we mark the point where we begin the survey. We're in luck as barely 100m away from where we begin, lies a fresh heap of otter droppings called 'spraint'. Otters are known to defecate in the same designated area called 'defecating areas'. A single family uses the same defecating areas. While they live in groups that can span from seven to 20 individuals, very little can be confirmed owing to the lack of prior information. This lacuna makes this survey all the more imperative.

Depending on the intensity of the fishy odour, I learn to tell how fresh the spraint has



been. In the interests of science, accurate data and a practical joke, Borkar makes me bend down to smell it just so I can be absolutely sure! The spraint usually comprises dry fish scales thus giving researchers a clear idea of what otters eat.

The location is duly marked on the GPS and off we move. This is followed by another patch of fresh spraint. In addition, the mud around shows the impressions of otters that have rolled around, flailed their limbs and wiped their tails, in what is a grooming ritual. The ground around is wet, which tells us that the otters crossed that area only an hour before we made an appearance. I've barely finished grumbling about missing them when Borkar points to the water where the otters are foraging. The adults manoeuvre through the water, their sleek bodies glistening in the sun. The pups are at the other end of the spectrum of grace with their awkward splashing and squeaking. They swim in search of their primary food, fish. Their long thick tails act as rudders propelling them while they swim. This is the first time that I've seen otters at length in the wild, at such close quarters. It's hard to contain my excitement and I don't want to go further but work must be done and so the group leaves the spot.

A few more wet patches are followed by the irritating realization of the many 'misses' that make up this morning. Patches of flattened grass are tell-tale signs of otters that have taken to grooming in earnest. Breaks in the vegetation on the bank indicate the routes they use from land to water and vice versa. The path is narrow and we shuffle along in a single file, under the blazing canopy of a white-hot sun. The air hangs heavy, enhancing the heat. As we dawdle on, Borkar suddenly goes into a frenzy, signaling us to stop. He whispers three instructions: On your knees, quiet and look ahead. A family of otters present themselves in a bid to investigate these strange two legged travesties on their path. They raise themselves to their full height on their hind legs and hiss and blow in what is a display of threat before disappearing into their dens. This display of aggression is the most adorable I've seen! (That said, never underestimate angry otters. They can be nasty when provoked.) When it comes to luck, our cup runneth over, it seems! This is the first time any of us have seen an otter on land and at such close quarters! We practically skip across the rest of the trail.

Our next destination is a strip of forestland by a river-ideal habitat for the Small-clawed Otter. Unlike their gregarious cousins, Small-clawed otters are nocturnal and very shy. This forest patch seems straight out of a sylvan dream. The water wraps around rocks and whirls into little pools and eddies in some places; in others, it stands still, barely a ripple on the surface. This leg of the survey will require a keener, precise eye. In the case of the Smooth-coated otters, the spraint lay on the path and hence dried faster. However, here, it can be washed away by the flowing river. Moreover, the dense canopy of the woods slows down the drying process. So although a spraint may look fresh, it will take a discerning eye to be sure of that.

"Keep your eyes on the rocks. And don't look for birds." With this warning we start off. We trip and tumble our way through the water to mark spraint, peer through gaps to check for dens, all the while dividing our attention between keeping the equipment from water, to keeping our noses to the ground for a successful survey. I alternate between accomplishment and tomfoolery as I tread over the dry rocks and plonk over mossy

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boulders.

At the end of our segment, on a flat rock that resembles a table, there lies a heap of spraint accompanied by a large fish that is missing a portion of its neck. What caused the otter(s) to let go of such a sumptuous meal, we wonder? Nearby, lies a heap of beer bottles and that probably is the answer. Human disturbance. Although otters adjust easily to new habitats, they are increasingly facing the threat of human disturbance. This becomes a cause of worry, especially since a significant population is believed to exist outside PAs within human habitations. While it would be normal to assume that those found within PAs are relatively safe, it must be remembered that most waterbodies extend beyond PAs and likewise, so will the otters. Therefore, the objective of this endeavour is not just to study otters but also to involve local people in the conservation of otters.

Otters adapt easily. While they use roads and pathways as routes and defecating areas, many were found to be using old huts and boats as dens. Man-made fishing pools provide a quick meal and hence, otters have taken to foraging there. Even leftovers are taken care of by hungry otters. It is this proclivity for human habitat that adds to the fishermen's angst. In an era of depleting fish reserves due to various environmental factors, the competition becomes all the more fierce. Otters are known to tear nets and 'steal' fish, the evidence of which is found in their spraint. With both their nets and fish gone, the fishermen are obviously angry, given that they face the threat of a dwindling livelihood.

Fortunately or unfortunately, otters aren't easy to catch and so direct killings by humans are very rare. Through a series of informal interviews, questionnaires and surveys, Borkar found that most people wanted to get rid of the otters one way or the other. As he tells me, "We can't pick up otters and put them elsewhere. Even if we were to do that, other otters will take their place." The way he sees it, co-existence is the only solution. A hard task to complete, especially when people equate otters to monetary losses. To change this, Borkar and his team are in the process of implementing a series of outreach programmes in human habitations that show healthy otter presence. Apart from spreading awareness about the otter and its importance to the ecosystem, the team will also try and devise solutions to help mitigate the conflict. As otters aren't necessarily a rural problem, Borkar also intends to take his programme to the urban lot in cities. One such interesting programme is the Otter Bike Ride organized in collaboration with [Indusrider](#). On offer, are amazing views, a good ride, good food, and of course, the chance to learn about and help otters.

All of this is of course only a grain in the sand. Borkar and his team realize that their endeavour has a long way to go. "I stumbled into otter conservation because I found otters very interesting." One hopes that the rest of us follows that line of thought.

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