Otters are top predators and important biological indicators of the wetland health. They are highly adopted aquatic hunters and semi-aquatic mammals with long stream-lined bodies, flat tails and webbed feet. They are essentially associated with freshwater lakes, ponds, rivers, canals, streams and undisturbed forest and shrub land adjacent to the water bodies for security. The main food items of otters are fish, crab, frog, insects and wild fruits. They feed only on prey that are numerous and/or species which are less active, so they are opportunistic in feeding.

There are thirteen species of Otters distributed world wide except Australia, Antarctica and most Oceanic Island. Five species: Eurasian Otter (Lutra lutra), Smooth-coated Otter (Lutra perspicillata), Hairy-nosed Otter (Lutra sumwtrana), Asian Small-clawed Otter (Aonyx cinerea) and Sea Otter (Enhydra lutris) are known to occur in Asia. Out of these, only three species viz. Eurasian Otter, Smooth-coated Otter and Asian Small-clawed Otter have been recorded in Nepal.

A study was carried out in Rupa lake to evaluate the knowledge of local villagers on otters, to document the number of otters and to raise public awareness for otter conservation. The major methods used in the study were reconnaissance survey, household survey, key informants’ survey, direct observation, ground transects, boat transects, community meetings and educational classes.

About half of the respondents had some knowledge about otters. Three species of otters were reported by the local people but it has still not been verified through survey. The villagers claimed to have seen 33 otters in the area during the last 12-15 years. Majority of the respondents agreed that they had otters mostly during winter season.

It is likely that the otters present in the Rupa lake are Asian Small-clawed Otter, Smooth-coated Otter and Eurasian Otter, but it should be verified through intensive survey. 16-18 years ago, some Indians were hired to hunt the otters because of the damage done through fish predation in fish ponds of local people. They killed otters for pelts and meat. After that incident villagers noticed very few otters in Rupa lake. These tragic incidents reflect that there was need of awareness and education among local villagers to adopt other alternative methods to protect their fish ponds. About 250 school students in Rupa lake area were taught about the importance of and need to conserve otters.

Conservation education and awareness activities are highly recommended for local people. Intensive survey of the otters should be initiated in the area.

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