

Fifth otter survey of Wales 2009 - 2010 (Extract of Summary Report)

The return of the otter to England and Wales is one of the major conservation success stories of the last 30 years. The main reason for this increase has been the reduction in levels of toxic pesticides that were harmful to otters in the 1960s and 1970s, but the general improvements in water quality and consequent increase in fish stocks have probably played a significant part.

Monitoring otters

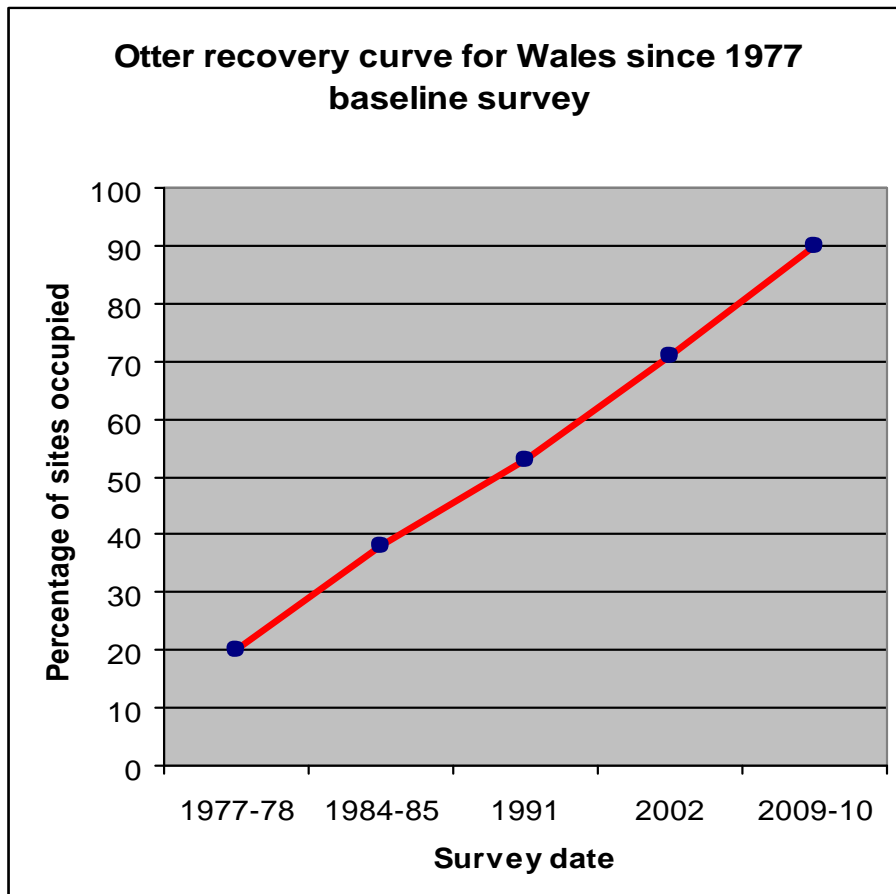
The first otter survey of Wales was carried out in 1977-78 covering 1018 sites across all the river catchments. Together with surveys in England, Scotland and Ireland, it provided a baseline for the distribution of otters. The baseline survey undertaken during 1977-78 found signs at 208 sites from a total of 1018 giving a percentage positive of 20%. This confirmed the results of the analysis of hunting records and the impression of many naturalists, that otters were absent or only sparsely distributed in much of the Country. Subsequent surveys and research have demonstrated that this was probably the low point of the decline which began in the late 1950s, and was primarily caused by the introduction of the persistent organochlorine pesticides dieldrin and aldrin that were widely used as seed dressing and sheep dip.

Trends

In Wales repeat surveys of the baseline sites have been carried out in 1984-85, 1991, 2002 and 2009-10 using the same method and visiting the same sites. Further sites were added to the 1018 baseline sites for the 1984-85 survey giving a total of 1097, of which 421 showed the presence of otters giving a percentage positive of 38%. In the 1991 survey an additional 5 sites were added giving a total of 1102, 579 of these showed the presence of otters, a percentage of 53%. During the 1984-85 and 1991 surveys additional Spot Check sites were included to provide additional sites to give a better picture of distribution. For the 2002 survey it was decided to concentrate efforts on full survey sites only, giving a total to survey of 1097 sites of which 784 showed the presence of otters, a percentage of 72%.

The 2009-10 survey incorporated the spot checks of the 1991 survey as full survey sites to bring the total sites to be surveyed as 1108.

Signs of otters were recorded at 996 sites out of the total of 1108 giving the percentage of positive sites as 89.89% for the fifth Otter Survey of Wales.



2009-10 Survey

During the period of July 2009 to March 2010 the fifth otter survey of Wales was undertaken by experienced expert volunteer surveyors drawn from across Wales including Environment Agency Wales (EAW) Biodiversity Staff, Wildlife Trust Staff, IBAP officers, local mammal groups and local naturalists coordinated by Rob Strachan (EAW) in association with The Snowdonia Mammal Group. Most of the sites were surveyed via a series of survey weekends and catchment targeted survey days around Wales. Expert volunteer assistance has been used for some catchments.

In addition to expert and experienced volunteers there was an opportunity to provide training for inexperienced volunteers by double manning at survey sites during the targeted catchment survey weekends.

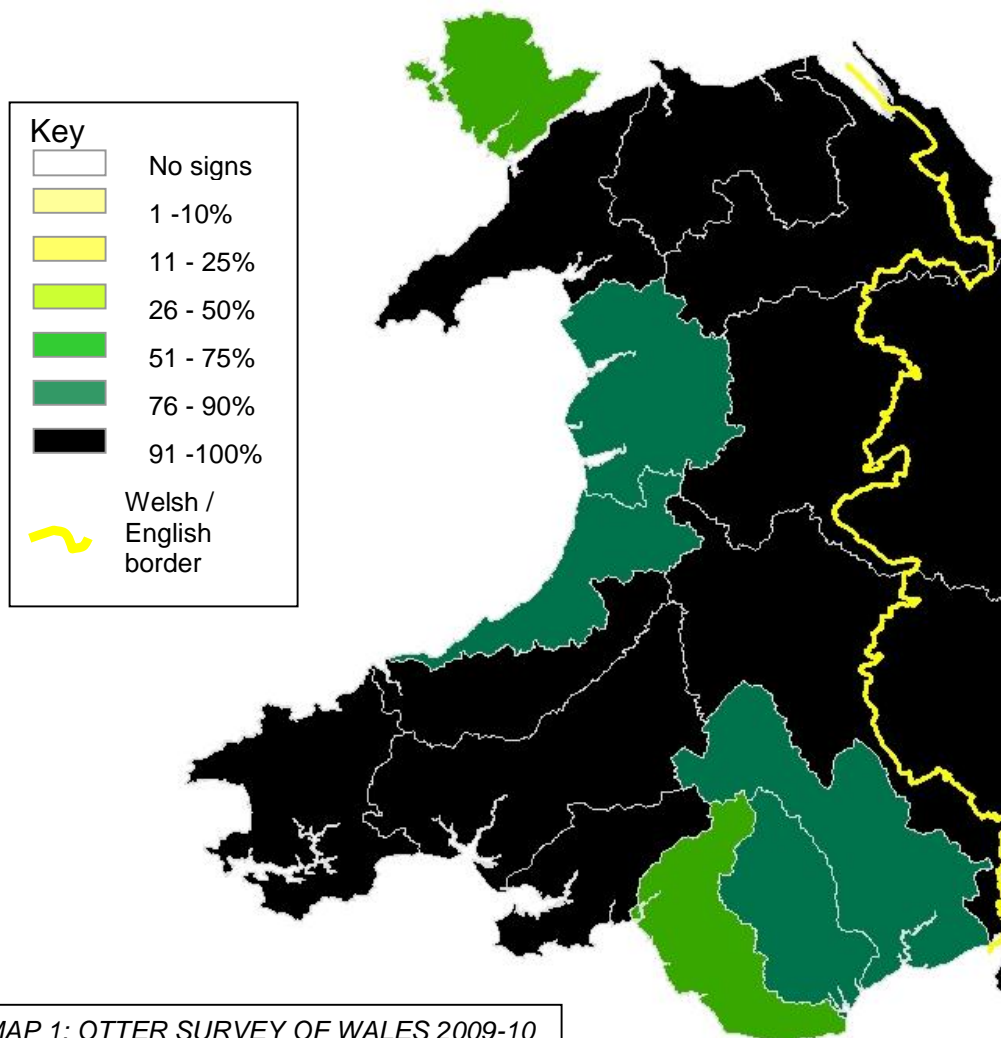
The Otter Survey of Wales was divided on the basis of 16 Hydrometric areas in accordance to previous Otter Surveys of Wales (established as baseline data 1977-78) and is presented here to aid comparison of data.

The results of this fifth national survey show a continued trend of recovery for the otter with some individual catchments attaining full capacity for the species.

Four catchments were of particular concern in 2002, Anglesey, Mid Glamorgan, Taff and Glaslyn/Lleyn and these now have shown an impressive expansion in sites occupied by otters.

Out of 1108 sites surveyed across Wales only 112 were negative for otters at the time of survey

Geographical patterns



An increase in otter distribution cannot be directly translated into an increase in otter numbers but such an increase in distribution must represent a significant increase in the number of otters on the rivers and wetlands of Wales. The tolerance of otters to apparently high disturbance situations such as city centres is far higher than was thought. They appear to select low disturbance habitats where possible but at least some otters are willing to tolerate high levels of human disturbance under some circumstances. It is likely that there is a variation between individual otters in the tolerance of human disturbance



Spot the otter ! Weir on the western Cleddau outside the County Hall in Haverfordwest

Other issues

One of the consequences of this recovery has been the increase in reported road deaths, and the number of accidental deaths of otters remains a cause for concern. Nearly 250 otters are known to have been killed on the roads in Wales since the last survey in 2000-02 and this is certainly an underestimate. Deaths in fish and crustacean traps remain a concern and with higher numbers of otters using coastal habitats, deaths in lobster and crab pots may become a serious issue around the Welsh coast. Another consequence of the recovery of otter populations has been increased concern about predation, particularly on specimen fish in still water fisheries and rivers. This creates a challenge to all those involved in river, wetland and fishery management to ensure that the successful return of our top freshwater predator is not seen as a long-term problem for fisheries but as a symbol of a healthy ecosystem.

Conclusions

Recovery has been in response to three main factors, the ban on pesticides that caused extinction of otters from many parts of England and Wales in the 1960s and early 1970s, legal protection for the otter since 1978, and the significant improvement in water quality in Welsh rivers since the 1970s.

The recovery has been the result of natural expansion from the remnant populations without the need for reintroduction (as elsewhere in the UK). The prospects are for full recovery across Wales is very probable within the next decade. This represents a major success story for pollution control, as well as investment by the water industry and efforts by landowners and river managers to improve river and riparian habitat. Tracking the otter's recovery has demonstrated the benefits of long-term monitoring and the use of this iconic species to raise awareness of pollution problems and the benefits of action to improve the environment.

Rob Strachan, Natural Resources Wales