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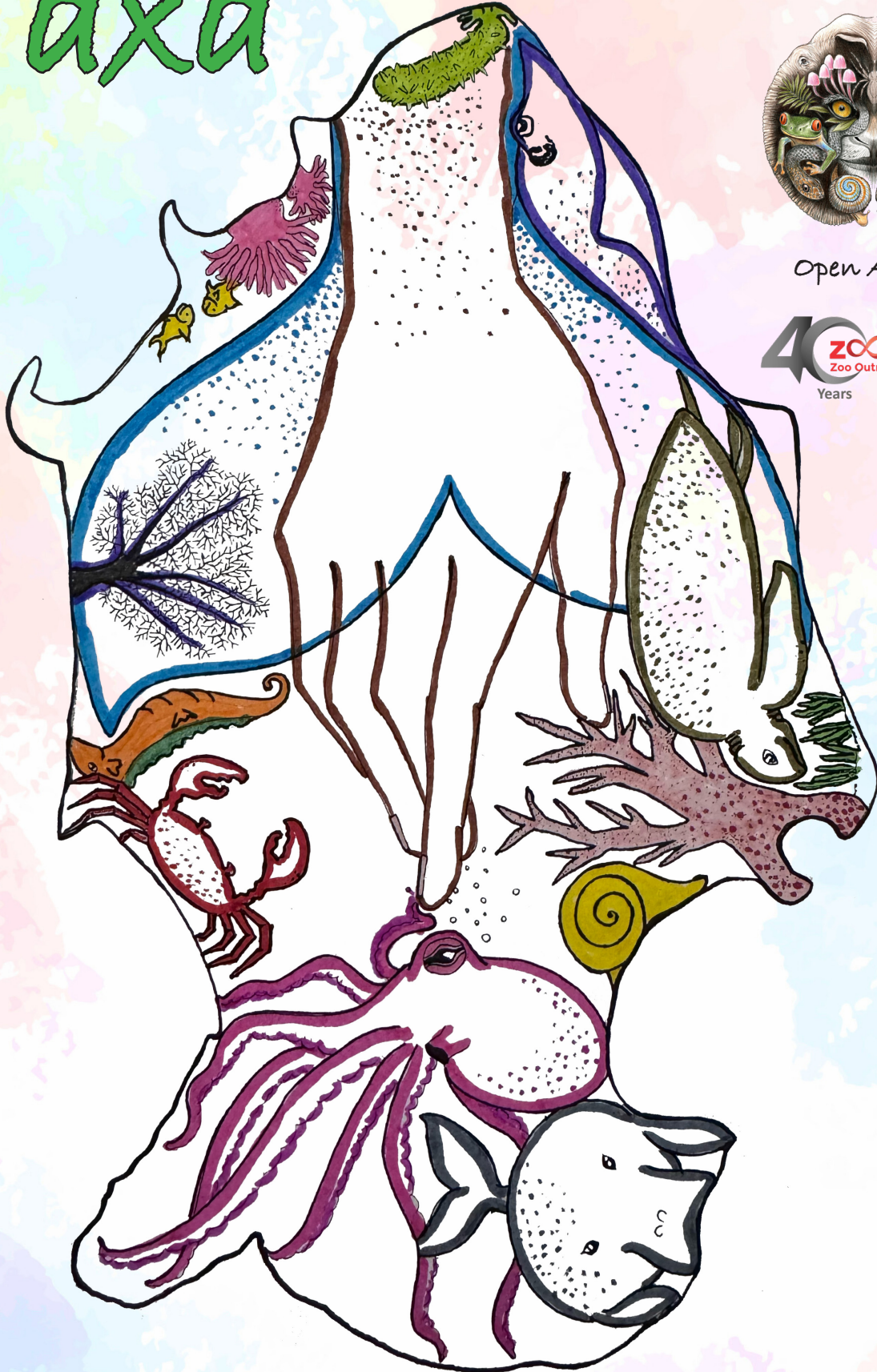
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continued on the back inside cover

Cover: Little Andaman is part of the island chain with incredible biodiversity, but these amazing species are threatened by development projects, and need our support.
Pen and ink artwork by Priyanka Iyer.



First confirmed sighting of the elusive Eurasian Otter in Goa, India

Abhijeet Patil¹ , Shricharan Desai² , Swanand Patil³  & Mirjoy Mathew⁴ 

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Abstract: Otters are semi-aquatic carnivores that play a vital role in maintaining the balance of freshwater ecosystems. India is home to three species of otters: the Smooth-coated Otter *Lutrogale perspicillata*, the Asian Small-clawed Otter *Aonyx cinereus*, and the Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra*. In Goa, only the Smooth-coated Otter and the Asian Small-clawed Otter had been previously recorded. Our discovery has confirmed the presence of the Eurasian Otter in Goa, expanding its known distribution. This ground-breaking finding was made on 14 February 2025, when an injured otter was found near Dharbandoda, Goa. Upon examination, the presence of a distinctive W-shaped or zig-zag patterned rhinarium confirmed that the otter was indeed a Eurasian Otter. Unfortunately, the otter was later declared dead. This discovery highlights the rich biodiversity of Goa and emphasizes the need for further research and conservation efforts to protect these elusive creatures and their habitats.

Keywords: Dharbandoda, freshwater ecosystem, otter distribution, semi-aquatic carnivore, Western Ghats.

Otters are indicators of healthy aquatic ecosystems, playing a key role for maintaining land water continuum. The Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra* has been recorded across northern, central, western, and eastern India, particularly in the Kashmir, Himalayan foothills, and parts of the Western Ghats (Joshi et al. 2016; Mudappa et al. 2018; Palei et al. 2021; Jamwal et al. 2023; Mohsin et al. 2024). Until now, there were no confirmed records of

this species in Goa. Previous studies have only reported the presence of the *Smooth-coated Otter* *L. perspicillata* and the Asian Small-clawed Otter *A. cinereus* (Borker et al. 2014). The Otter population in Goa may face a range of anthropogenic threats, including unregulated mining, and riverbank modifications all of which degrade the riparian habitats. Increasing tourism pressure, night-time vehicular traffic, and encroachment on wetland habitats may also contribute to disturbance, and habitat fragmentation. This paper documents the first scientific record of *Lutra lutra* in Goa and discusses its significance.

OBSERVATION AND DETAILS

On 14 February 2025, an otter was discovered lying on the roadside near Dharbandoda, Goa (15.4001° N, 74.1307° E). Dharbandoda is a small settlement located near the western edge of Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary. The surrounding habitat includes semi-evergreen forest patches, agricultural, and some closed stone quarries, with seasonal streams & rivulets connected with Ragada River eventually connecting to Zuari River basin.

The individual had sustained an injury near its mouth but was still breathing heavily. Wildlife rescuer Charan,

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Image 1. Eurasian Otter lying in the middle of the road. © Abhijeet Patil (Planet Life Foundation).



Image 3. Front paw of Eurasian Otter. © Arcane Conservancy Trust.



Image 2. The distinct W-shaped or zig-zag shaped rhinarium. © Dr. Charmaine Pinto - Pet Care Clinic.

along with Abhijeet Patil from Nature's Nest Goa, promptly transported the otter to a veterinary hospital for medical attention. On arrival at the veterinary facility, the otter was found to be semi-conscious, and unresponsive to stimuli. A visible laceration was observed at the lower jawline. The injury appeared to be consistent with trauma, possibly due to vehicular collision, as inferred from the roadside location, and absence of other wounds.

During treatment, a critical morphological characteristic—the W-shaped or zig-zag rhinarium (the furless skin surface surrounding the external openings of the nostrils)—was observed, confirming the species

as *Lutra lutra* (Blanford 1888; Mudappa et al. 2018), a trait diagnostic of *Lutra lutra*. The confirmation was based on existing identification guides and previous morphological studies of otters in India. For external expert consultation, the photos were sent to the members of the International Otter Survival Fund (IOSF), who also confirmed the species to be Eurasian Otter. However, due to the emergency nature of the case and the otter's condition, molecular identification could not be carried out at the time. Later on 15 February 2025, early morning the Otter was declared dead. Apart from photographic documentation, no other biological samples were preserved post-mortem due to lack of



Image 4. Hind leg of Eurasian Otter (distinct webbing between the digits). © Arcane Conservancy Trust.

permission for collection, and sample storage. This marks the first scientifically documented record of *Lutra lutra* in Goa. The record is significant because:

1. It confirms the presence of all three otter species found in Goa—a state known for its rich riparian and estuarine ecosystems.
2. It suggests the need for further otter surveys in the region, as the species might have been overlooked due to its elusive nature, and nocturnal habits.

DISCUSSION

Although Goa does not currently have a formal otter-specific conservation program, otter habitats benefit indirectly from protection within areas like Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary, and Mollem National Park. Large parts of riparian habitats remain unprotected and vulnerable to degradation, calling for targeted conservation interventions. These findings can help inform state wildlife authorities and local conservation agencies by highlighting the need to include otters in existing freshwater ecosystem protection plans. It also calls for immediate identification and protection of critical river stretches where Eurasian Otters may persist,

through habitat mapping, community engagement, and stricter regulation of harmful activities like sand mining. As a direct follow-up, we propose initiating a seasonal otter monitoring program in eastern Goa through camera trapping and sign-based surveys, coupled with community interviews.

CONCLUSION

This report establishes the first record of *Lutra lutra* in Goa and confirms that the state home to all three otter species. This record underscores the conservation value of Goa's freshwater systems and suggests that even small, forest-adjacent rivers may harbour elusive species like *L. lutra*. Recognizing and protecting such microhabitats is essential for preventing local extinctions. The detection of Eurasian Otters in Goa not only expands the known distribution range of the species but also indicates the ecological integrity of Goa's riparian corridors and highlights the role of these landscapes in supporting keystone carnivore species.

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