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## Southern Alberta Otter Numbers May Sink without Conservation Lifeline

By David McIntyre

During the past 23 years, I've irregularly observed river otter tracks in the snow along the Crowsnest River. The noted sightings have all come from a relatively small stretch of the river – its upstream terminus being defined by the Turtle Mountain sulphur spring, its lower end defined, more loosely, as a point somewhere downstream from the westernmost highway bridge leading to/from the former town of Hillcrest (since 1978, part of the community of Crowsnest Pass).

The preceding may not fully define the range of the species on the Crowsnest River, but it does provide a focal point. Regardless of the species' actual range along the Crowsnest River, it would appear that the core component of this range is centred in the vicinity of Turtle Mountain.

My observations of otter tracks on the Crowsnest River since January of 1983 have prompted me to look for them in the Castle and Oldman Rivers, and I've rafted, canoed, kayaked, and skied all of these rivers in an attempt to locate any sign of surviving otters. Historically, it would appear (via published reports and anecdotal feedback) that river otters were present in the Castle, Crowsnest, and Oldman Rivers at least as recently as the late 1970s.

From all available accounts made known to me, it also appears that the species has been extirpated from the Castle and Oldman Rivers during the past two decades, with the exception of a single pair of tracks found on the Oldman River this past winter.

Skiing the rivers in the winter months, in particular, has likely provided me with the most definitive picture of the otters' range, and this picture, as I "developed" it, suggested that there are probably no river otters in the Castle River and perhaps as few as one on the Oldman River (at least west of the Oldman Dam), and that the remaining otters in the Crowsnest River are confined to the area noted previously. The Crowsnest River doesn't tend to freeze, at least to the point of offering secure skiing.

My efforts to have Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) acknowledge and protect the remaining Crowsnest River otters, assuming there is still a viable population, appear to be mired in an SRD-expressed observation that river otters in northern Alberta are not considered threatened. Thus, the provincial perspective is that river otters in southern Alberta – part of the province-wide picture, even if disconnected by an essential network of connecting waterways – need not receive special acknowledgment, attention, or protection.

Logic would suggest that the actual Alberta river otter population south of the TransCanada Highway is likely less than that of several other key mammal species the province is trying to save.

I'm concerned that drawing public attention to the noted Crowsnest River otter population, whatever it is, has the potential to attract subversive elements from society who might try to eradicate the surviving otters. I'm also cognizant of the fact that the status quo (doing nothing) is likely to be even more detrimental to the species in the Crowsnest River, one of the few remaining rivers in southern Alberta to have any river otters.

To gain some feeling for the status of river otters in southern Alberta, one might ask southern Alberta's residents how many river otters they've seen in southern Alberta during their respective lifetimes. The results, if published, would define the obvious.





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If we have a viable population of otters, we should launch extreme measures to save it. I'm appealing to each of you to do whatever you feel appropriate in an effort to gain protection for river otters in the Crowsnest River.

