

### Fishing with a living fishing tool

Perhaps we have heard or come across traditional fishing with various nets, sticks, stupefiers, or a wide range of bamboo traps in many shapes and sizes; but how many of us know about fishing employing an animal; that too, with such an animal that can be hardly domesticated. But, many such practices were prevalent quite a few centuries back, and have now become nearly obsolete.

Now, imagine a couple of caged otters restless and agile in a boat released into the river water. They instantaneously dive deep into the water and drive the fish toward the net just like a shepherd dog rounding up the sheep. The scared fish moves toward the net and gets caught. When a sufficient quantity of fish is captured, both the catch and the otter are hauled in together. It is a normal practice to muzzle the otter to preclude it from eating the fish and to fasten it by a line to its master.



This fishing culture employing an otter has been in practice since the sixth century in various parts of the world, including Central Europe, Northern Africa, Scandinavia, Southeast, and South Asia, and China. It was in China where the earliest record of otter fishing has been unraveled but was also practiced largely by the fishermen of Southeast and South Asia. In northern and eastern India, otter fishing was practiced in the big rivers like Indus and Ganges, and along the Coromandel Coast in South India. Otter fishing seems to be especially restricted to the Yangtze basin of China, as has been described by several travelers. The Chinese fisherfolks have gone one step further to have developed commercial fishing with the help of otters. However, it has almost dwindled and is performed in the southern part of Bangladesh.

Two species have been historically employed in fisheries. The 'smooth-coated otter', *Lutrogale perspicillata*, has been used by fishermen in India, Burma, and southwest China, and as far as Malaysia and Sumatra. In more temperate parts of Asia, and in countries like Sri Lanka, Burma,

Thailand, and Sumatra, the common otter or European otter, *Lutra lutra*, has been used for fishing as in European and northern African countries.

In the districts around the Bangladesh Sundarbans, otter fishing still offers livelihood to the shrinking fishing communities. They domesticate, rear, breed, and train otters for which they used to catch the original parents from the wild. Fishing is usually done during the night and a day's catch can range between four and twelve kilograms of fish, shrimp, and crabs. Once the way of fishing supported a great majority of the fishing community living amidst the Sundarbans and around. But, owing to dwindling stock caused by sedimentation, water pollution, and the use of pesticides in agricultural fields, over-catching, the livelihood of the fisher folks is at stake. And many of them gave up fishing as a result. Short-haired otters are an endangered species in Bangladesh and the captive population is very healthy because of the fishing, therefore otter fishing seemingly plays a key role in their conservation as well. So, the enduring struggle for the livelihood of the fisher community is perhaps also a fight for the survival of the species. Would this mutualism, as in the past, aid them to tide over?

*Image courtesy (in sequence): By Olaus Magnus, Archbishop of Uppsala, 1490-1557 - Cropped extract of File: Carta Marine.jpeg (1539) on Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=32289131>; By Hiroki Ogawa, CC BY 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=57136818>*

**Collector- Avik Ray**