

MS Thesis Defense

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Title: Otter Social Science Research: An Evaluation of the General Public's Knowledge of Otter Species

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ABSTRACT

Otters are a charismatic species that are frequently overlooked and have been depleted throughout history by the fur industry, habitat degradation, and conflicts between otters and commercial fisherman, leaving several otter species to be listed as endangered (IUCN Otter Specialist Group 2011). In order to achieve more conservation to strengthen otter populations, the general public must be informed of the species' population status. The distributed questionnaire was aimed to identify the level of existing knowledge the general public has about otter species. Assessing the general public's prior knowledge can help direct the information on otter species to the general public in an more effective way, and can be used to gain funding and push laws that promote conservation and protect different species and their ecosystems (Medina-Vogel 2008, Owings 1997, Dietz et al. 1994, and Drahem et al. 2011). The survey was distributed in three different locations: Washington, D.C., Boston, Massachusetts, and Bridgewater, Massachusetts. The survey sites in Washington, D.C. and Boston, Massachusetts were chosen to assess the local residents, as well as tourist, found within a metropolitan core community (MAPC 2008). The third location, in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, was chosen in order to give a more rural and suburban demographic (MAPC 2008). The questionnaire confirmed in all three locations that the general public knew very little about otter species, specifically the number of otter species, whether or not otters are endangered,

where otters are located, and if Native Americans can hunt them. Out of the three locations, the participants in Boston, Massachusetts performed the best at identifying the two otter species out of four images shown. The second part of the questionnaire focused on marketing, and asked the general public to rank their likelihood to conserve that otter species based solely on the name provided. In all three locations, the majority of the participants indicated they were either neutral or more likely to conserve all of the otter species names listed. With the data collected, otter species information can be more effectively targeted for the general public, allowing for more opportunities to support the conservation and projection of otter species in and outside of the United States. The questionnaire results also assessed the importance of marketing when it comes to varying demographics and whether or not species names should be reconsidered.