

RECORD OF A PRESERVED EURASIAN OTTER (*LUTRA LUTRA*) FROM ANJAR, BEQAA VALLEY, LEBANON

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Abstract: A preserved Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*) specimen approximately 25 years old was discovered in Anjar, Lebanon. The specimen was shot and taxidermied by a local fish farmer and represents a rare physical record from the Beqaa Valley, a region previously identified in conservation planning efforts.

Keywords: Eurasian otter, Lebanon, Beqaa Valley, taxidermy specimen, conservation record

INTRODUCTION

The Eurasian Otter (*Lutra lutra*) in Lebanon faces significant threats from habitat degradation, water pollution, and human persecution (Loy et al., 2011, 2015). Despite historical presence throughout the country's wetlands and river systems, current distribution data remains limited. Physical specimens from Lebanon are exceptionally rare, making documented findings valuable for conservation planning and genetic research.

LOCALITY

The specimen was discovered by the researcher at a former fishery in Anjar (33°74'N, 35.°95'E), a town in the Beqaa Valley, Lebanon, near the Syrian border, at an altitude of approximately 950m a.s.l. The region was previously identified as a critical habitat for *L. lutra* in Loy et al.'s (2011, 2015) conservation action plan for Lebanon. The Anjar - Kfar Zabad wetland area had historically supported small-scale fishery operations. However, recent observations show significant habitat degradation that locals attribute to a series of droughts exacerbated by climate change starting in 2017 that dried the area's river system, including Ain Anjar spring (Figure 1). The surviving waterways of the Hima Anjar Kfar Zabad are mostly stagnant, algae-covered channels (Figure 2) with poor water quality and flow that are not suitable for *L. lutra*. Several locals interviewed mentioned that increased foreign military activity (e.g. drones, bombings) have also discouraged local and international environmentalists from participating in conservation projects in the area.



Figure 1 (Left). Dried natural spring at Ain Anjar, Beqaa Valley, Lebanon
Figure 2 (Right). Stagnant channels with algae growth in Anjar Kfar Zabad wetland

FINDING THE SPECIMEN

On August 12, 2025, during a field expedition following Loy et al.'s (2015, 2016) conservation plan survey sites, I interviewed an Armenian-Lebanese fish farmer at his former fishery in Anjar. The owner reported shooting an otter approximately 25 years ago. At the time of the incident, he mistook the animal for a "demon fish" that had been attacking the fish of his pond. He then preserved the specimen through a local taxidermist.

The preserved specimen measures approximately 142 cm in total length (Fig. 3), though it appears to be stretched from its original body length during the taxidermy process (Fig. 5, 6). The specimen displays characteristic *L. lutra* features including a distinct pale throat and chest patch contrasting with darker brown dorsal fur, webbed feet adapted for swimming (Loy et al., 2024), and teeth (Fig. 4) matching the dental formula and morphology of *L. lutra* (AlShukri et al., 2025). The body proportions, though distorted by taxidermy choices, are consistent with descriptions of Eurasian otters from neighboring populations in the Middle East and Caucasus regions (du Plessis et al., 2023). This represents the first time the owner has shared this specimen publicly, and to our knowledge, it may be one of the only preserved Eurasian otters currently held in private hands in Lebanon.



Figure 3 (Top Left). Measurement of specimen with tape measure
Figure 4 (Top Right). Preserved *Lutra lutra* specimen head close-up
Figure 5 (Bottom Left). Preserved *Lutra lutra* specimen full body
Figure 6 (Bottom Right). Preserved *Lutra lutra* specimen and researcher

GENETIC SAMPLING OPPORTUNITY

Following this discovery, otter specialist colleagues expressed interest in obtaining genetic samples from the specimen for DNA analysis which could provide valuable information about *L. lutra* populations (du Plessis et al., 2025). The sampling process would require minimal invasive procedures (e.g., nail or toe drilling) causing limited damage to the preserved specimen.

CONCLUSIONS

This preserved specimen provides rare physical evidence of *L. lutra* presence in the Beqaa Valley region and offers potential genetic data that could contribute to better understanding otter populations in Lebanon. The circumstances of its collection, persecution due to fishery conflict, highlight the ongoing human-wildlife conflict challenges facing otter conservation in Lebanon and the world. Current habitat conditions at the site, showing significant degradation from the historical wetland system, emphasize the urgency of conservation action outlined in Loy et al.'s (2015, 2016, 2022) plans. Coordination with local communities and stakeholders remains essential for effective otter conservation in Lebanon's remaining suitable habitats.

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