

Title: Building stake to conserve river related biodiversity using Otters as flagship species in the Cauvery river basin in Karnataka

Summary: The River Cauvery a major river of peninsular India is a very important ecosystem for endangered fish such as the Mahseer and could be one of the last remaining strongholds of the Smooth-coated otters, *Lutra perspicillata*.

Of the over 300 km of river length in Karnataka, less than 75 km is protected under the PA network. The rest flows through plantations, agricultural fields, towns, cities, industries where pollution, extraction and disturbance of various forms are present, that have severely affected otter populations. There are also numerous barriers to fish movement such as check dams, mini hydel projects and a major dam, as well as anecdotal evidence of the impact of exotic carnivorous fish, all of which have led to decrease in fish populations over the years. Declining fish catch has led to conflict between otters and fishermen as otters are considered pests and the role they play in maintaining the riverine ecosystem is not known to most people. Organised otter poaching has also been witnessed in the recent past, by poaching tribes specialised in it.

Therefore, there is an immediate requirement to seek long term solutions by initiating a dialogue between various stakeholders including farmers, plantation owners, fishermen, youth, anglers and to raise awareness to promote a better understanding of the otter, its habitat and symbiotic relationship with prey (which is where the 'competition' with fishermen occur). Conserving otters will have the important benefit of leading to a sustainable management and protection of the river itself. Since the entire stretch of the river cannot be protected by legislation, peoples' participation is essential to conserve the species outside protected areas. To achieve this, various stakeholders have to be engaged with thorough meaningful discussions, participatory mechanisms, concrete information and solutions that address their interests.

Clarification regarding CEPF safeguards:

This is to acknowledge that the project does not involve working in any protected areas (PA) along the River Cauvery, and would not require permits from the forest department.

This study does not infringe on any territories of indigenous groups of people or even deal with them (directly). There are no such indigenous groups along our targeted study area and all communities are mainstream rural communities. The Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary is home to a population of the Soliga tribe but this is beyond our study area and we will not be engaging with them.

This project also does not entail creation of any new PAs or Conservation Reserves along with local communities, and in any way restrict their access to natural resources.