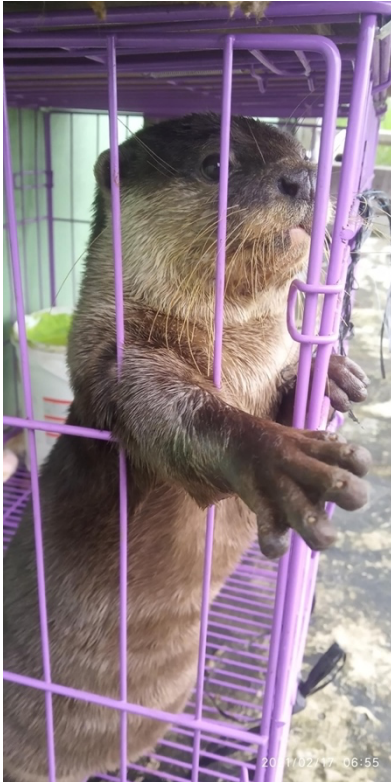


# Otters and Social Media: How zoos should encourage bold changes to social media habits to positively impact a conservation crisis

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Cute and fluffy, snuggled up in blankets, dressed in children's clothes, splashing in the bath, or juggling cat toys in someone's flat. Pet otters have become a social media craze with #otter being viewed 4.1 billion times on TikTok at the time of writing. Even though this is a generalised hashtag, it is difficult to find any footage showing wild otters when sifting through the top results.

This trend has a hugely damaging effect on the population of wild otters. The Asian short-clawed otter (*Aonyx cinereus*) population has declined by at least 30% in the last 30 years and this trend is expected to continue in the next 30 years (Wright *et al.*, 2021). Much of this decline is due to poaching for the exotic pet trade, as more people fall in love with the cute animals they see on TikTok.

Zoos are an essential part of the protection of the Asian short-clawed otter, the species of otter most regularly poached for the pet trade. Thanks to recent comprehensive research, globally, their genetic background is now much better known and greater care has been taken when breeding Asian short-clawed otters, particularly in Europe, where studbook data was most lacking (Palmer, 2023). However, with new evidence suggesting that social media fuels poaching, it is time for zoos to change tack. Zoos must approach the conservation of otters, and other animals affected by the exotic pet trade, by delving further into their own portrayal of human-animal interaction.

Conscious efforts have been made to change the way zoos portray their animals on social media. Many collections have excellent social media policies which protect themselves from controversial public opinions about their existence, ensuring animals are always shown looking healthy and living in clean, spacious environments. This is of course, very important, however it is more difficult to prevent visitors from sharing footage that could be misinterpreted from their own social media accounts. Interaction between zookeepers and their animals is seen by visitors every day. This is a potential risk, because zoos cannot control what is shared and how it is perceived by the unregulated viewership on social media.

In the case of non-human primates, best-practice guidelines have been published which help organisations to develop social media policies ensuring responsible posting. The impetus is the importance of considering how the message is perceived, rather than the messenger's intention (Waters *et al.*, 2022). The guidelines acknowledge the impact that a misconstrued photo can have:

*"Images of humans holding primates on social media negatively influence public perceptions of primates (Ross et al. 2011; Nekaris et al. 2013; Leighty et al. 2015; Clarke et al. 2019). Images of people holding or physically very close to primates give the false impression that touching primates is not physically dangerous, poses no risk to health of human or primate and that primates make appropriate pets. These behaviours can lead people to perceive primates as merely sources of entertainment, and thereby underestimate their biodiversity value and threatened status, which can then undermine conservation efforts especially in range countries (Ross et al. 2008; Schroepfer et al. 2011; Leighty et al. 2015, Morrow et al. 2017; Aldrich 2018)."*





While there is clear evidence that social media plays a negative role in the conservation of wild animals, it is still a relatively new area of interest with limited data. Even less researched however, is the way in which social media can be used to improve the conservation of an animal, due to a lack of case studies, data limitations and the time consuming process of obtaining and analysing metadata (Harrington *et al.*, 2019). Zoos have an opportunity to change this. Many have an extensive reach on social media, and could use this to push a message about how *not* to behave on social media in order to create a positive behavioural change within its audience.



Figure 2: Signage outside the otter enclosure at Battersea Park Children's Zoo

At Battersea Park Children's Zoo, educating the public about the risks of poor social media usage is at the heart of both daily husbandry as well as educational and conservation work. Otters are strictly protected contact, so the public never sees keepers in close proximity with the them. The twice-daily feeding time talk takes place from outside the enclosure, and has a heavy focus on the conservational problems caused by the exotic pet trade, as well as how to spot and react to inappropriate posts on social media. Signage is placed at the enclosure explaining the problems caused by social media. The zoo Instagram, Facebook and TikTok regularly post on the topic, and events are held by the education team on World Otter Day, bringing a greater focus on the plight of Asian short-clawed otters. The zoo also works with the IUCN otter specialist group and the International Otter Survival Fund. The curator, Jason Palmer, is the WAZA, ISB and EAZA coordinator for Asian short-clawed otters, as well as an IUCN global species advisor.

What zoos can do	What keepers can do
Identify species whose conservational issues involve the exotic pet trade. Adapt husbandry accordingly; is it feasible to apply protected contact rules to these species?	Do NOT like, comment, share, or where possible, view, posts which feature wild animals being kept as pets.
Ensure that animal experiences do not offer an opportunity for the public to have photo opportunities that could be misconstrued.	Do not post photos on own social media accounts of close interaction with species whose wild counterparts are at high risk of poaching for the exotic pet trade.
Create a social media policy which ensures no photos are posted from the zoo account which show staff physically interacting with animals identified as being at high risk of misinterpretation.	Ensure own knowledge of the wild threats of the species within own care is up to date and make appropriate changes to behaviour based on this knowledge.
Create signage educating the public on how to navigate the exotic pet trade on social media.	Modify behaviour within enclosures to reduce the opportunity of photos being taken by the public which could be misconstrued.
Modify feeding time talks so that a conservational focus on the exotic pet trade flows throughout.	Start dialogue with friends and family about the risk of interacting with posts which may fuel the exotic pet trade.

The responsibility of zoos to care for wild species is no longer limited to the husbandry that takes place within the confines of the collection. It must now extend into the metaverse. Zoos have an extensive social media outreach, allowing them an opportunity to take charge of a resource which has the potential to both help and hinder conservation. It is no longer enough to use social media to encourage people to visit the zoo, it must now be part of the conservational and educational armoury. With a source of information as unregulated as social media, the only way of combatting its potential to play a part in the extinction of endangered species is to make it socially unacceptable to interact with posts that show wild animals being kept as pets. Zoos can start this change by adapting as organisations when considering enclosure design, signage, social media policy, education and husbandry. Individuals working within zoos can make changes within their own personal routine, such as positively manipulating the public perception of the relationship with their animals, and changing their own behaviour on social media. There are opportunities to follow in the footsteps of global campaigns started by organisations such as the Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition (SMACC), to encourage the public to help the conservation of their favourite species by doing nothing (through *not* interacting with high risk posts on social media) (SMACC, 2022). If all zoos committed to this dialogue, they could play a huge part in protecting animals such as Asian short-clawed otters through social and behavioural change in the hope that, in time, we will see a reversal in this modern, detrimental craze.

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