

Observation of an interaction between a domestic cat and a group of Eurasian otters in Aberdeen (UK)

Observación de una interacción entre un gato doméstico y un grupo de nutrias euroasiáticas en Aberdeen (Reino Unido)

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Eurasian otters *Lutra lutra* (Linnaeus, 1758) and cats *Felis catus* Linnaeus, 1758 are two common and widespread mammalian carnivores in Europe (Mitchell-Jones *et al.* 2009). On 22 January 2020, I observed a free-roaming cat and a family of Eurasian otters engaging in an interaction in an urban section of the river Don in Aberdeen (Scotland, UK; Fig. 1). At around 2:30 pm, a collared tabby cat approached a group of three Eurasian otters (an adult and two cubs) that were fishing and playing in the banks of the river. The cat was very inquisitive of the otters (Fig. 1): it followed them along the bank of the river as they were moving up and down the river and looked at them while standing quiet at a distance as if stalking the otters. The otters were less interested in the cat. They looked at the cat often when the latter was close to them (Fig. 1). It was particularly noticeable that the cat was more confident in approaching the smallest cub. The interaction lasted for *c.* half an hour, after

which the cat left for a group of buildings about 30 metres away. The cat and the otters never interacted physically with each other.

Novel ecosystems, particularly urban environments, have brought together species that will otherwise rarely, if ever, encounter each other in the wild. This poses both challenges and opportunities for conservation and ecology in the Anthropocene where novel ecosystems are widespread (Hobbs *et al.* 2006). My observation highlights these two aspects. Eurasian otters suffered a substantial decline during the second half of the 20th century due to the impacts of pollution, habitat loss, and hunting (Kruuk 2006). Eurasian otters were restricted to relatively pristine and undisturbed habitats. Nowadays, they can be found breeding in urban areas whose rivers were heavily polluted from the typical 20th century industrial activity. This does not mean that there is no pollution currently, but it is a good indicator of progress. Free-roaming



Figure 1. Two photographs of the interaction between a cat and a group of Eurasian otters witnessed in Aberdeen (UK) on 22 January 2020.

cats are omnipresent in urban and suburban areas, where they exert an important predation pressure on small vertebrates with negative consequences for these preys (Loss *et al.* 2013, Trouwborst *et al.* 2020). Eurasian otters are larger (average *c.* 65 cm without tail) and heavier (average *c.* 7 kg) than a domestic cat (*c.* 45 cm and 4 kg, respectively). This body size differences mean that it is unlikely that a domestic cat will pose any physical threat to Eurasian otters. However, cats are well-known reservoirs of *Toxoplasma gondii*, the protozoan responsible for toxoplasmosis (Afonso *et al.* 2006, DeWeerd 2017). Eurasian otters in the United Kingdom carry this protozoan and otter health surveillance has been recommended to ensure that this disease does not negatively impact the species (Chadwick *et al.* 2013). Therefore, free-roaming cats may pose an indirect threat to Eurasian otters.

Last but not least, I was not the only human absorbed with the cat and otters, between three and eight people, most of them casual passerby, were there watching and photographing the animals. This is an example of the interest of urban dwellers in nature and wildlife, the role of natural settings in urban environments in maintaining a connection between humans and nature (US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service 2018), and a three species interaction (cat-otters-humans) characterising a novel ecosystem.

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