



PLEASE THINK OF THE OTTERS

Many local residents have had the pleasure recently of spotting Cape Clawless Otters along our coastline and capturing some striking photographs of the animals.

A large audience of otter enthusiasts turned up at the Whale Coast Conservation public talk on Cape Clawless Otters by Nicola Okes, a PhD candidate at UCT. Nicola's research was done on the Cape Peninsula, but her findings are almost certainly true for our coastline as well. She will involve locals in a citizen science "otter spotting" project to monitor otters here in the near future.

There are many different otter species around the world but only one, the clawless otter, occurs around our coast. Their footprints are therefore easily distinguished from that of a dog in that you will see no claws in the prints. Nicola's research showed that otters favour river mouths and wetlands near protected coastlines where riverine vegetation provides shelter.

This is not surprising as they hunt in both fresh and salt water. A marine protected area provides ample food in the form of crabs, rock lobsters and urchins. But they are dependent on fresh water to wash the salt off their very thick fur that protects them from the cold water.

It is surprising that otters will inhabit these prime locations, alongside humans who also favour these very locations. Human activity, pollution and the presence of other animals such as dogs, are some high threats posed to otters. However, such threats are far outweighed by the otters' need for the freshwater/seawater interface. Otters hunt at dawn and dusk when they can be spotted crossing the beach to and from the sea. This is the very time that the proposed new legislation on dogs will allow dogs to be off-lead. Otters can seriously injure dogs if they attack the otters, but they will avoid dogs if they can. So dogs running loose near their hunting grounds can cause

them to miss their morning hunt or stay out at sea much longer in the evening, which can cause serious hypothermia.



Morgan Hendricks is a 10-year-old eco-kid. She is seen above with mom Tertia Hendricks, WCC educators Sheraine van Wyk and Shirley Mgoboza, and Nicola Okes.

Morgan loves dogs. She loves otters. She is also the Whale Coast Conservation Junior Reporter. Morgan attended Nicola's talk on Cape Clawless Otters and then joined an expedition led by Nicola to try to find some otters at dawn the next day.

Along with Whale Coast Conservation, Morgan has a special request for people walking their dogs at these times. "Please help to protect our otters. Be sure to keep dogs on the lead when you walk along the coast near a river mouth or wetland in the early morning or evening".



Morgan is here with fellow adventurers Nicola Okes, Sheraine van Wyk, Michael Raimondo and Justine du Toit.

Morgan's dawn adventure going otter spotting inspired her to write a poem about it.

The Otter Spotter

Near to the sea he will be,
Along the wetland, he plays on the sand,
He digs a burrow in the reeds,
To have a home is all he needs.

Otter scat, what is that?
It's otter poop! What a scoop!
It smells a little yucky, It's also quite mucky!
I don't mind, it's a good find!

Stop, halt! It's a holt!
An otters' house, can you see its spouse?
See the babies, they're in there too,
Listen to them and hear them coo.

First he'll crawl, then he'll grab,
Soon Otter will be eating a crunchy crab,
When he's done, he spots a lobster,
To him it's a small rock monster...

"Yum, yum, yummy, yummy,
That will be delicious in my tummy,
Next I'll have shark liver for dinner,
Then I will be really full in my inner."

Oh tamati smoor! Here's an otter spoor,
It's an otter track, leading forward, not going back,
Follow it, follow it, there it goes,
Into the bush, I can see the otter's toes,

Let her be so she can see,
She's free to run wild with her child.



Morgan showing the otter scat that gave clues about what they were eating.

Local resident Lane Croeser attended Nicola's talk and decided to go down to his favourite otter spot to check on them. A juvenile immediately came to ascertain his intentions, watched by four adults from a distance.



What a privilege, Lance!

The WCC talk and adventure was funded by the National Lotteries Commission.