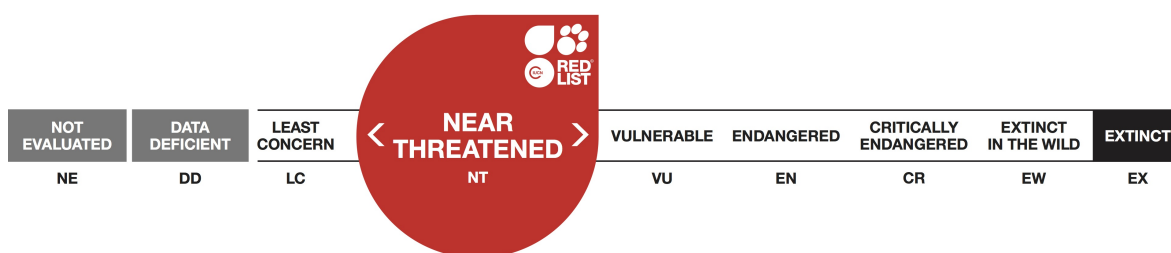


Aonyx congicus, Congo Clawless Otter

Assessment by: Jacques, H., Reed-Smith, J., Davenport, C & Somers, M.J.



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Taxonomy

| Kingdom | Phylum | Class | Order | Family |
|----------|----------|----------|-----------|------------|
| Animalia | Chordata | Mammalia | Carnivora | Mustelidae |

Taxon Name: *Aonyx congicus* Lönnberg, 1910

Common Name(s):

- English: Congo Clawless Otter, Cameroon Clawless Otter, Small-clawed Otter, Small-toothed Clawless Otter, Zaire Clawless Otter
- French: Loutre à joues blanches du Cameroun, Loutre à joues blanches du Congo, Paraonyx tacheté
- Spanish: Nutria Inerme de Camerún

Taxonomic Notes:

Allen (1924) and Davis (1978) treated *A. capensis* and *A. congicus* as being conspecific, arguing that they represent clinal variations of the same species. However, mainly based on tooth size and skin differences, Rosevear (1974), Van Zyll de Jong (1987), Wozencraft (1993), and Larivière (2001) considered *A. capensis* and *A. congicus* as separate species, but this remains debated, and Wozencraft (2005) did not retain *A. congicus* as a valid species, contrary to the opinion of the IUCN SSC Otter Specialist Group (www.otterspecialistgroup.org) (Jacques *et al.* 2009). The name *Aonyx congica* is often found in the literature but *A. congicus* is the correct spelling as *Aonyx*, from the Greek *onux*, is masculine (Van Bree *et al.* 1999).

Assessment Information

Red List Category & Criteria: Near Threatened [ver 3.1](#)

Year Published: 2015

Date Assessed: January 17, 2014

Justification:

All Africa's otter species are threatened by alteration or degradation of freshwater habitats and riparian vegetation which are the preferred settlements of human population. Congo Clawless Otters have been protected by the remoteness of the Congo forest and the difficulty of catching them. However, firearms are growing in prevalence in the region, providing a possible 10-fold increase in hunters' success rate over traditional practices (Levi *et al.* 2009). Road-building opening up the forest for timber exploitation and construction of large hydroelectric projects could also reduce the protection afforded to date.

Habitat loss by direct causes (clearing, inundation) and indirect causes (pollution, invasive species introduction) and competition for fisheries is increasing with the growing human population in concert with declining returns from an unsustainable bushmeat trade (Wilkie *et al.* 2005). These combined factors predict a severe reduction of otter habitat and populations. Increased global temperature and resultant climate change may also increase periods of drought, with additional losses to otter populations (Davenport *et al.* 2011). Consequently, all African otter species are likely to be more affected in the next 20 years (generation length 6.5 as proposed by Pacifici *et al.* 2013). Thus the species

is assessed as Near Threatened based on a suspected 25% decline over the next three generations due to the expected decline in habitat quality and other threats to the species. It almost qualifies as threatened under criterion A3cde; this is a precautionary listing.

Previously Published Red List Assessments

2008 – Least Concern (LC)

2004 – Data Deficient (DD)

2000 – Data Deficient (DD)

1996 – Lower Risk/near threatened (LR/nt)

Geographic Range

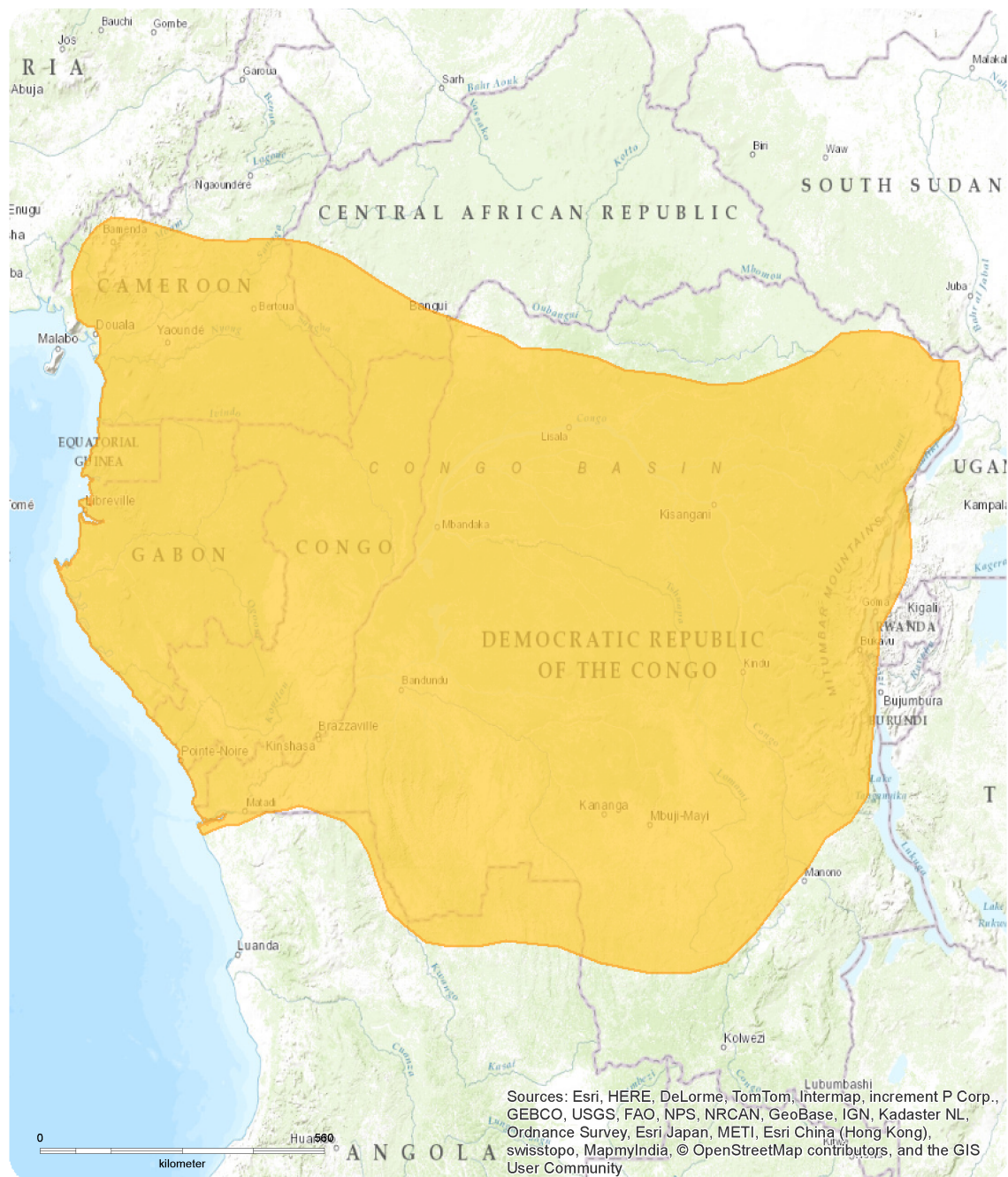
Range Description:

The Congo Clawless Otter occurs in the rainforests of the Congo basin including Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as southern Cameroon, southern Central African Republic, northern Angola, and extending eastward to the forests and the wetlands of Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda (Rowe-Rowe 1990, Larivière 2001, Jacques *et al.* 2009). The limits of the species' distribution range are still unclear, partly due to the species' possible confusion with the Cape Clawless Otter; there are, as yet, no confirmed records from Nigeria (Jacques *et al.* 2009).

Country Occurrence:

Native: Angola (Angola); Cameroon; Central African Republic; Congo; Congo, The Democratic Republic of the; Equatorial Guinea; Gabon; Rwanda; Uganda

Distribution Map

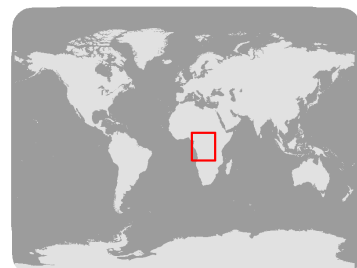


Aonyx congicus

Range

Extant (resident)

Compiled by:
IUCN (International Union for
Conservation of Nature)



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply any official endorsement, acceptance or opinion by IUCN.



Population

This is a very poorly known species. It may be common in certain undisturbed rainforest locations, but is otherwise thought to be rare to very rare (Jacques *et al.* 2009). In certain places, locals attest that they see fewer “big otters” (*A. congicus* versus *H. maculicollis*) (Jacques 2002b,c; Jacques *et al.* 2002a; Jacques 2003, 2006; Davenport *et al.* 2011). A number of documented cases of *A. congicus* (including mother and cub) being killed by locals in Cameroon, Gabon, Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo would suggest that although otters are rarely seen and are difficult to catch, otter populations may suffer from hunting pressure in Congo Basin (Jacques 2002b). This will likely increase in the future as human population grows and preferred bushmeat species become scarce.

Current Population Trend: Decreasing

Habitat and Ecology (see Appendix for additional information)

The Congo Clawless Otter occurs in rain forests and lowland swamps of the Congo River basin (Larivière 2001, Jacques *et al.* 2009). They are observed in swampy forest clearings (bais), for example, at Langoué Bai in Gabon, and Mbeli Bai in Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park (N.P.) and in Odzala N.P. in the Republic of the Congo (Jacques *et al.* 2009). They also inhabit some rivers, for example Dji Dji River (Gabon) (Davenport *et al.* 2011), and Sanaga River (Cameroon) (Jacques 2006). They are recorded up to 2,200 m on the Kahuzi Massif (Rahm and Christiaensen 1963). With one exception (Davenport *et al.* 2011), all records report the presence of only one young with the mother (Jacques 2002b).

Systems: Terrestrial, Freshwater

Use and Trade (see Appendix for additional information)

Otters are occasionally hunted for meat, but have the reputation of being quite difficult to catch. They are seldom recorded in bushmeat reports (S. Lahm and A. Willox pers. comms., Jacques 2002b). The price is quite similar to other bushmeat. While meat is sought after in Congo and Cameroon, this is not the case in Gabon.

Moreover, in Gabon, otters are sometimes considered dangerous, giving an electrical shock when caught with a spear. In Central and West Africa, their meat has the reputation of being an aphrodisiac (as it is with many other species). In some areas, the otter is said to possess magical powers: by wearing a piece of fur one can become invisible to an opponent, or escape an enemy as otters escape fish traps.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), killing has exponentially increased over the recent decade with the proliferation of weapons and munitions, making the shooting of otters from pirogues and the river bank much more common (Thompson pers. comm.). Skins of *A. congicus* are used in Cameroon to make drums (Alary *et al.* 2001). According to Carpaneto and Germi (1989), Mbuti pygmies in northeastern DRC use the skins of Congo Clawless Otters to make hats.

Threats (see Appendix for additional information)

Aonyx congicus may not be under threat where the forest is still well preserved (Gabon and parts of Congo). Nevertheless, road opening for wood exploitation could adversely affect the sustainable use of the forest with hunters using these roads for their illegal activities. Deforestation has dramatically

increased in Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and will probably be an even bigger problem in future. As a result of the high human density, lakes and rivers are subjected to pollutants from human activities such as washing, agricultural run-off and soil erosion.

Overfishing has become a critical threat to otter populations as fish community structure has been decimated across the central Congo Basin. Fishes contribute from 23 to 50 per cent of the animal protein trade in Central Africa (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/t6800e/t6800e03.htm>) and studies of morphometric measurements have documented the evidence of widespread overfishing for human consumption.

In addition to escalation of hunting for bushmeat and skins, habitat loss and degradation, and overfishing, otter populations in Central Africa are also susceptible to pressure from the development of hydro-electric power projects, under-representation of otter habitat in Protected Areas, fishermen using nylon fishing nets, a growing prevalence of arms and munitions, as well as a dramatic decline in other species (such as the Common Hippopotamus) that contribute to the aquatic-ecosystem functioning and which support otter food supplies. Some of these threats are major, but more important is the dramatic combined effect of threats on the otters.

The Congo Clawless Otter seems to average one pup in a litter and may abandon any area of occupancy with high human activity. In one study on the Dji Dji River in Gabon (Davenport *et al.* 2011), reproductive Congo Clawless Otters disappeared from a site previously observed to harbour high densities of the species (alongside *Hydrictis maculicollis* which did decline to the same degree). Low rainfall in the previous wet season was thought to be the reason, but nothing is known about the adaptability of otters, their seasonal movements or the whereabouts of Congo Clawless Otters in response to drought conditions. As global climate change is predicted to increase the frequency and severity of droughts, these conditions may impact survival and reproduction of the species in the future.

Conservation Actions (see Appendix for additional information)

Congo Clawless Otter is present in several protected areas across their range, including Dzanga-Sangha N.P. in Central African Republic, Ivindo Gabon, and Nouabalé-Ndoki and Odzala National Parks in Congo Republic (Jacques *et al.* 2009). Thus they are incidentally conserved with other target species..It is listed on CITES Appendix II (as *Aonyx capensis*). Appendix II lists species that are not necessarily now threatened with extinction but that may become so unless trade is closely controlled. There is a need for a detailed study on the biology, ecology, and distribution of this species.

In addition to threats already cited, Congo Clawless Otters likely to suffer from a general lack of awareness of their presence and conservation needs by the institutions in charge of wildlife conservation in most African countries. The initiative of the Wildlife Conservation Society to include otters in their document 'Setting conservation and research priorities for larger African carnivores' (Ray *et al.* 2005) could aid in greater awareness and promotion of more research on African otters. Otters could be used as symbols of water quality and preservation, and this may contribute to environmental education. The Congo Clawless Otter should be totally protected in Gabon, Congo, DRC and Cameroon until more information is collected about its status.

Credits

Assessor(s): Jacques, H., Reed-Smith, J., Davenport, C & Somers, M.J.
Reviewer(s): Hussain, S.A. & Duplaix, N.
Contributor(s): Hoffmann, M.

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External Resources

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Appendix

Habitats

(<http://www.iucnredlist.org/technical-documents/classification-schemes>)

| Habitat | Season | Suitability | Major Importance? |
|---|----------|-------------|-------------------|
| 1. Forest -> 1.6. Forest - Subtropical/Tropical Moist Lowland | Resident | Suitable | Yes |
| 1. Forest -> 1.7. Forest - Subtropical/Tropical Mangrove Vegetation Above High Tide Level | Resident | Suitable | Yes |
| 1. Forest -> 1.8. Forest - Subtropical/Tropical Swamp | Resident | Suitable | Yes |
| 5. Wetlands (inland) -> 5.1. Wetlands (inland) - Permanent Rivers/Streams/Creeks (includes waterfalls) | Resident | Suitable | Yes |
| 5. Wetlands (inland) -> 5.2. Wetlands (inland) - Seasonal/Intermittent/Irregular Rivers/Streams/Creeks | - | Suitable | No |
| 5. Wetlands (inland) -> 5.3. Wetlands (inland) - Shrub Dominated Wetlands | - | Suitable | Yes |
| 5. Wetlands (inland) -> 5.4. Wetlands (inland) - Bogs, Marshes, Swamps, Fens, Peatlands | Resident | Suitable | Yes |
| 5. Wetlands (inland) -> 5.5. Wetlands (inland) - Permanent Freshwater Lakes (over 8ha) | Resident | Suitable | Yes |
| 5. Wetlands (inland) -> 5.6. Wetlands (inland) - Seasonal/Intermittent Freshwater Lakes (over 8ha) | - | Suitable | No |
| 5. Wetlands (inland) -> 5.7. Wetlands (inland) - Permanent Freshwater Marshes/Pools (under 8ha) | Resident | Suitable | Yes |
| 5. Wetlands (inland) -> 5.8. Wetlands (inland) - Seasonal/Intermittent Freshwater Marshes/Pools (under 8ha) | - | Suitable | No |
| 5. Wetlands (inland) -> 5.13. Wetlands (inland) - Permanent Inland Deltas | - | Marginal | - |
| 15. Artificial/Aquatic & Marine -> 15.2. Artificial/Aquatic - Ponds (below 8ha) | - | Marginal | - |
| 15. Artificial/Aquatic & Marine -> 15.9. Artificial/Aquatic - Canals and Drainage Channels, Ditches | - | Marginal | - |

Use and Trade

(<http://www.iucnredlist.org/technical-documents/classification-schemes>)

| End Use | Local | National | International |
|-------------------------------|-------|----------|---------------|
| Food - human | Yes | No | No |
| Medicine - human & veterinary | Yes | No | No |
| Wearing apparel, accessories | Yes | No | No |

| End Use | Local | National | International |
|------------------------------|-------|----------|---------------|
| Handicrafts, jewellery, etc. | Yes | No | No |

Threats

(<http://www.iucnredlist.org/technical-documents/classification-schemes>)

| Threat | Timing | Scope | Severity | Impact Score |
|--|-----------|---|----------------------------|---------------|
| 4. Transportation & service corridors -> 4.1. Roads & railroads | Ongoing | Minority (50%) | - | - |
| | Stresses: | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.1. Ecosystem conversion 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.2. Ecosystem degradation | | |
| 5. Biological resource use -> 5.1. Hunting & trapping terrestrial animals -> 5.1.1. Intentional use (species is the target) | Ongoing | Minority (50%) | Slow, significant declines | Low impact: 5 |
| | Stresses: | 2. Species Stresses -> 2.1. Species mortality | | |
| 5. Biological resource use -> 5.3. Logging & wood harvesting -> 5.3.3. Unintentional effects: (subsistence/small scale) | Ongoing | Minority (50%) | - | - |
| | Stresses: | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.1. Ecosystem conversion 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.2. Ecosystem degradation | | |
| 5. Biological resource use -> 5.3. Logging & wood harvesting -> 5.3.4. Unintentional effects: (large scale) | Ongoing | Minority (50%) | - | - |
| | Stresses: | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.1. Ecosystem conversion 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.2. Ecosystem degradation | | |
| 5. Biological resource use -> 5.4. Fishing & harvesting aquatic resources -> 5.4.3. Unintentional effects: (subsistence/small scale) | Ongoing | Majority (50-90%) | - | - |
| | Stresses: | 2. Species Stresses -> 2.1. Species mortality 2. Species Stresses -> 2.3. Indirect species effects -> 2.3.8. Other | | |
| 9. Pollution -> 9.1. Domestic & urban waste water -> 9.1.2. Run-off | Ongoing | Minority (50%) | Slow, significant declines | Low impact: 5 |
| | Stresses: | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.2. Ecosystem degradation | | |
| 11. Climate change & severe weather -> 11.2. Droughts | Future | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown |
| | Stresses: | 1. Ecosystem stresses -> 1.2. Ecosystem degradation | | |

Conservation Actions in Place

(<http://www.iucnredlist.org/technical-documents/classification-schemes>)

| Conservation Actions in Place |
|--|
| In-Place Research, Monitoring and Planning |
| Action Recovery plan: No |

| |
|---|
| Conservation Actions in Place |
| Systematic monitoring scheme: No |
| In-Place Land/Water Protection and Management |
| Occur in at least one PA: Yes |
| Area based regional management plan: No |
| In-Place Species Management |
| Harvest management plan: No |
| Successfully reintroduced or introduced benignly: No |
| Subject to ex-situ conservation: No |
| In-Place Education |
| Subject to recent education and awareness programmes: No |
| Included in international legislation: Yes |
| Subject to any international management/trade controls: Yes |

Conservation Actions Needed

(<http://www.iucnredlist.org/technical-documents/classification-schemes>)

| |
|--|
| Conservation Actions Needed |
| 1. Land/water protection -> 1.1. Site/area protection |
| 3. Species management -> 3.2. Species recovery |
| 3. Species management -> 3.4. Ex-situ conservation -> 3.4.1. Captive breeding/artificial propagation |
| 4. Education & awareness -> 4.1. Formal education |
| 4. Education & awareness -> 4.3. Awareness & communications |

Research Needed

(<http://www.iucnredlist.org/technical-documents/classification-schemes>)

| |
|--|
| Research Needed |
| 1. Research -> 1.1. Taxonomy |
| 1. Research -> 1.2. Population size, distribution & trends |
| 1. Research -> 1.3. Life history & ecology |
| 1. Research -> 1.5. Threats |
| 3. Monitoring -> 3.1. Population trends |

Additional Data Fields

| |
|---|
| Distribution |
| Estimated extent of occurrence (EOO) (km ²): 460000 |
| Continuing decline in extent of occurrence (EOO): Yes |
| Extreme fluctuations in extent of occurrence (EOO): Yes |
| Lower elevation limit (m): 0 |
| Upper elevation limit (m): 2200 |
| Lower depth limit (m): 0 |
| Upper depth limit (m): 0 |
| Population |
| Population severely fragmented: No |
| Habitats and Ecology |
| Continuing decline in area, extent and/or quality of habitat: Yes |
| Generation Length (years): 6.45 |
| Movement patterns: Not a Migrant |

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