

River Otters

Having been extirpated from Iowa, with the possible exception of northeast Iowa, the otter was re-introduced in the wild in Iowa in 1985. It appears that the introduction has been very successful and that the otter has spread across the state, particularly along the major rivers. Given few natural predators, the population has been successful in increasing its population size. Population numbers are hard to estimate.

When representatives of the Iowa Chapter attended public hearings when the first season was proposed in 2006, some members of the public were predicting dire consequences if the population of otters was not significantly reduced, including loss of native fish and destruction of fish at the state fish hatcheries. Neither of those two things have occurred as the population of otters has increased.

The trapping season for river otters runs from early November through late January. Each trapper is allowed to harvest three otters. There are no quotas for the maximum number of otters that can be harvested in a season.¹ The Iowa Department of Natural Resources keeps track of the annual harvest of river otter.

Year	Quota	Total harvested	Number of otter each trapper can harvest
2006	400	469	2
2007	400	424	2
2008	500	495	2
2009	500	519	2
2010	500	515	2
2011	650	755	3
2012	850	973	3
2013	None	1165	2
2014	None	835	2
2015	None	692	2
2016	None	556	2
2017	None	822	2
2018	None	576	2
2019	None	771	2
2020	None	853	3
2021	None	822	3



Photo by Iowa Department of Natural Resources

¹ Check with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources for more details on the trapping season for otters.

In 2013, the quotas were removed along with reducing the number of otter that each trapper can harvest. That year trappers harvested significantly more otter than in the past seasons. That year was followed by significant decreases in the number of otter that have been harvested. Although many things can affect the over-all trapping numbers, including weather and prices for pelts, the overall numbers of otters in the wild can also be an issue. The logical conclusion is that the population cannot sustain an unlimited harvest season year after year.

The market for furs is variable. When prices paid for furs increase, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) faces pressure to increase the number of otters that can be harvested. Likewise the number of trappers increases. That can result in an over-harvest. If there is an over-harvest, the river otters may have difficulty compensating and sustaining their population. Adequate and proper monitoring must be pursued so that the river otter is not extirpated a second time.

Clearly the Sierra Club does not want to see the otter extirpated from the state a second time.

The Iowa Chapter understands that the fur of the otter is better quality once the weather becomes colder and that the fur becomes poorer in quality due to singeing and wearing toward the end of the winter. Given that Iowa winters generally are not cold enough to produce the high-quality fur until December or January, it appears that the season starts too early.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Chapter supports a sustainable harvest of river otters, including:

- delaying the opening of the season until December 1 so harvesters can take advantage of better quality pelts
- developing a management plan for the river otter
- funding scientific studies on the otter population in Iowa and what is necessary to maintain a sustainable population. The Iowa Chapter is aware that the bow hunter survey counts otters, but more than likely undercounts the otter.
- the DNR needs to be prepared to close the season should the otter become unable to sustain its population
- Without a management plan and without the scientific studies, the Chapter believes that the Department of Natural Resources is unable to set an extended open season on the otter without quotas.

You can write to the Natural Resources Commission about the river otter harvest at Natural Resources Commission, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Wallace State Office Building, 502 E 9th Street, Des Moines, Iowa 50319

The Natural Resource Commission (NRC) is the board that sets the hunting, fishing, and trapping policy for the Department of Natural Resources. Section 481A.39 of the Iowa Code requires the DNR and the NRC to base those decision "in accordance with sound fish and wildlife management principles."

Unsustainable hunting and trapping will cause the river otter to be exterminated a second time. With sustainable hunting trapping regulations, the river otter will remain in Iowa.