

PRESS RELEASE

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Zoo calls on community: become an *otter spotter*! New study focuses on otters as indicators of ecological health

SEATTLE—Woodland Park Zoo is reaching out to the community to become *otter spotters* to help collect information on North American river otters, which are virtually unstudied in Washington waters.

Anyone can participate in the new community science project and become an otter spotter. Information and an otter spotter form can be found at www.zoo.org/conservation/otterspotter. Otter spotter tips and etiquette, and how to distinguish a river otter from a sea otter are included.

“This is a great opportunity for our community to get directly involved in science in our backyard. The more reports of sightings we can collect, the more data we’ll have on the range and behavior of river otters,” said Michelle Wainstein, PhD, a local ecologist and conservationist, and the field scientist for the project.

The zoo also is launching a new field study, **River Otters of Western Washington: Sentinels of Ecological Health**, which will focus on otter population biology and the contaminant loads in their scat along the length of the Green-Duwamish River. This river in particular traverses a diverse mosaic of habitats, including wildlands and parks; agricultural, industrial and residential areas; and the highly contaminated Lower Duwamish Waterway.

The Green River flows from undeveloped Washington wildlands through increasingly urbanized areas to become the Duwamish River—Seattle’s major industrial corridor since the early 1900s. According to Wainstein, river otters are an important species in aquatic ecosystems because they can serve as sentinels, telling us about the health of their local environment. Wainstein and the project team hope to determine if river otters are found along the entire 72-mile route of this important waterway.

Wainstein was at the zoo’s river otter exhibit today to introduce the study to [ZooCorps](#) teens and show them how to become otter spotters. She pointed out various behaviors such as foraging, feeding, and gliding while a pair of North American river otters demonstrated behaviors, naturally. “We hope this study encourages everyone of all ages to go outside and enjoy nature and our native wildlife,” said Wainstein. ZooCorps teens are Woodland Park Zoo volunteers who receive training and education to help engage guests in conservation action.

The final 5 miles of the river as it empties into Puget Sound is known as the Lower Duwamish Waterway (LDW) and has a complex history and challenging future. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has identified the LDW as a Superfund site for environmental remediation in response to long-term industrial pollutant exposure and urgent concern about contaminant levels.

The new study is a project of Woodland Park Zoo’s [Living Northwest](#) program that supports field conservation projects in the Pacific Northwest. “With conservation and education at the core of Woodland Park Zoo’s mission, this study is another important initiative we can support that focuses on wildlife and habitat right here in our own backyard,” said Fred Koontz, PhD, vice president of field conservation at Woodland Park Zoo.

[North American river otters](#) are amphibious members of the weasel family and live in water systems all over Washington state. Their habitat ranges over most of North America in coastal areas, estuaries, freshwater lakes, streams and rivers. Otters prey on what is readily available and easiest to catch, with a primary diet of fish, crayfish, amphibians and birds.



All otter species are considered threatened while five of the 13 species are endangered due to water pollution, overfishing of commercial stock and habitat destruction. To help Woodland Park Zoo contribute information to the captive breeding, husbandry and public awareness of the North American river otter, adopt the species through the zoo's [ZooParent](#) program.

Visit www.zoo.org or call 206.548.2500 for information about Woodland Park Zoo.

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