



“Restoration of the Lower Shannon SAC (Mulkear River) for Sea Lamprey, Atlantic Salmon and the European Otter”

## Press Release

31<sup>st</sup> July 2012

### 3rd Annual Catchment Wide Survey for Otter Completed

Following earlier postponements, the third annual catchment wide rapid assessment survey of otter (*Lutra lutra*) took place on Friday and Saturday of last week (27th and 28th July 2012). In total 86 sites were included in the comprehensive survey which covered the entire catchment of 650sq Km. The work was undertaken by a total of nine teams over the two days, with a minimum of two and up to three per team. In addition to MulkearLIFE staff, the teams included colleagues from Inland Fisheries Ireland, the National Parks & Wildlife Service and a large number of Mulkear Conservation Volunteers (MCV). The survey was preceded by an otter workshop on the Wednesday 25th July which provided in-house and field based training in otter survey methodology and identification for MCV members. The workshop also served as a useful refresher course for those who had surveyed previously.

The otter population in Ireland is of national and European importance. One of Ireland's most elusive mammals, the otter is protected under the Irish Wildlife Acts (1976 & 2000) and is also listed on Annexes II and IV of the EU Habitats Directive. This obliges Ireland to protect the species and undertake regular surveillance and to report regularly on the conservation status of otter in Ireland. While otter are found throughout Ireland, the species was deemed to be in poor conservation status in the most recent Article 17 report.

The Mulkear Catchment, as part of the Lower Shannon SAC, has been designated as part of a network of 44 SACs specifically designated for otter. Anyone found guilty of killing or causing injury to an otter, hunting or wilfully interfering or disturbing an otter breeding site may face fines of up to €63,487 or two years' imprisonment. MulkearLIFE's catchment wide survey gives an exceptional amount of detail on the population patterns (density and distribution) of otter in the catchment. It provides the project and our project partners, and the NPWS in particular, with an up to date understanding of otter distribution together with an assessment of habitat usage in the catchment. This evidence will be used to inform the project's work in the construction of artificial otter holts and the creation of riparian habitat for otter. In addition, the project also surveys for mink and thus a snapshot of the prevalence or otherwise of this problematic non-native species is achieved.

At a national level, the work is amongst the most comprehensive otter survey work undertaken anywhere in Ireland on a catchment basis. The work will greatly assist in giving an estimate of the national adult otter population and a better understanding of the population trend. It will also help inform the progress Ireland is making on reaching the population targets set in the Threat Response Plan for the otter, namely a national population of 15,000 with 88% of all SACs having a favourable conservation status. It may also be of considerable assistance to the NPWS in gaining a better understanding of regional variation in otter populations.

Despite the fact that this year's survey work was undertaken in near perfect weather conditions, the unprecedented rainfall in the seven weeks preceding the survey impacted negatively on the overall findings. Given the fact that the heavy rain from 1st June resulted in rivers and streams throughout much of the catchment being in flood, much of the evidence one would normally expect to find was simply washed away. This notwithstanding excellent evidence was found in a large number of sites especially in the upper catchment.

The 86 sites included the following rivers, tributaries and streams: Mulkear, Bilboa, Dead, Newport, Killeengarrif, Clare, Annagh, Reask, Pope's, Cauteen, Cahernahallia, Dooglasha, Small, Cully, Ahboy and Glaisclluainarbhaoile. Other smaller streams were also included. The vast majority of sites were bridges, weirs, fords, culverts, along river banks or along drainage channels.

The full results of the survey will be available over the next number of weeks and will help guide MulkearLIFE's work with otter. In particular, the survey findings will help with the continuation of the project's work in terms of the placement of artificial otter holts and the creation of habitat for otter.

A Big thank you to all who helped in the survey and especially to the members of the Mulkear Conservation Volunteers, who not only attended the otter training workshop, but who gave so generously of their time on Friday and Saturday. We especially thank the new members who joined us this year.

It is expected that a summary of the survey findings will be posted in the next number of weeks.

#### Notes for Editors

1. High Resolution Digital Images are available to accompany this Press Release.
2. Interviews can be arranged with the Project Manager by using the contact details below.
3. MulkearLIFE is a new €1.75 million European Commission funded LIFE Nature project working on the restoration of the Lower Shannon Special Area of Conservation (with a focus on the Mulkear River catchment) for Atlantic Salmon, Sea Lamprey and European Otter. Further details may be viewed on the project website [www.mulkearlifecom](http://www.mulkearlifecom)
4. Inland Fisheries Ireland (Limerick) is lead partner together with the OPW and Limerick County Council. Additional funding support comes from National Parks and Wildlife Service. Other supporters include Teagasc, IFA, ICMSA, and local angling groups.
5. The project is one of the first and most important integrated catchment management projects in Ireland. It is a flagship EU LIFE Nature project –covering some 650 sq km which contain a variety of habitats and protected species. Much of the area is designated as a Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) under the EU Habitats Directive and forms part of the Natura 2000 Network.

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