

Book reviews

The Mammal Species of the World

James Honacki *et al.* (Editors)
Allen Press Inc./Ass. Syst. Collections,
1982, \$55.00

This checklist was compiled for the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) to provide a standard reference to mammalian nomenclature. Unfortunately, since hardly anyone present at the meeting of the Parties has any real understanding of the problems of nomenclature and systematics, it is probably an impossibility to produce a standardised taxonomy which will be universally accepted. The present volume was compiled by some 140 contributors, many of whom are not practising taxonomists, while many acknowledged experts were not consulted. Since taxonomies reflect the opinions of taxonomists, and few taxonomists are familiar with the workings of CITES, it is difficult to see how a 'standardised' nomenclature will be either acceptable to the scientific community or useful to CITES.

I find it difficult to assess what benefits will accrue from using the present work instead of Corbet and Hill's *World List of Mammalian Species*, which is much simpler, more widely available, and already published—thereby saving a lot of effort and expense. Much of the effort involved in producing this mighty force is certainly wasted. For example CITES does not require a standardised taxonomy for *Pitymys* (pine voles) and by the time it does (if ever) this one will certainly be out of date. CITES does not need the detail given—such as type locality and 20 figure 'ISIS' numbers—quite what ISIS numbers are is not fully explained anywhere.

However, despite numerous reservations, this volume will certainly be very useful to libraries, museums and other institutions.

John A. Burton

The River Wolf

Keith and Liz Laidler
Allen and Unwin, 1983, £8.95

The giant otter, *Pteronura brasiliensis*, is as dramatic as it is intriguing. The largest surviving

otters, these South American 'river wolves' may measure seven feet in length, will charge an inquisitive human paddling a frail canoe and emphasise their irritation by a gaping threat which exposes a violently red mouth. What is more, the giant otter is highly social and endangered (a single pelt may fetch US\$500). Why the giant otters travel in groups is unknown and it was to study this and other questions, and to contribute to their conservation, that Keith and Liz Laidler spent more than a year, largely afloat, in Guyana. *The River Wolf* is the story of their expedition, from its inception in a London pub, through Keith's attempt to film the otters and Liz's to study them.

It is, I believe, an important task for biologists to package their findings in a way that is palatable to a wide readership and these authors have clearly sought to do this. One can read the book at two levels, on the one hand following the authors' adventures, on the other gleaning fragments of giant otter biology. There are some interesting observations in the book, disclosed particularly as the Laidlers follow one group whose patriarch is known as Spotted Dick in reference to the pattern of dots on his throat. The otters lived in family groups occupying home ranges within which they fished on a rotational basis, visiting given areas every two weeks or so. Home ranges of neighbouring groups overlapped widely, but each probably maintained an exclusive core area. Groups seemed to avoid each other and this avoidance may have been maintained through the use of riverside latrine sites. The authors' intensive observations were rewarded with the intriguing discovery that, as Spotted Dick's two offspring matured, their group was doggedly followed by a singleton otter, presumably a suitor to either the male or female adolescent.

Although the otters, Guyana, the enquiry and the adventure are all potentially enthralling I found the book difficult to read, partly due to poor continuity and partly to an enforced jollity of style. Some of the direct speech is irksomely improbable and, for example, I found it jarring that no more lucid a simile could be conjured to describe an otter's sighing vocalisation than that it was like a 'pissed-off human'. There were, however, some pleasing quips such as the conclusion that the lack of scent marking by juvenile otters was a case of children being seen but not smelt.

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