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Otters and a New Road

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Abstract

The river Wye was once one of Wales's cleanest rivers but now suffers the depredations of domestic and agricultural pollution and a concomitant loss of biodiversity. Its once strong otter population has seemed, in the last few decades, to be recovering from almost complete loss, due largely to pesticides, to a position of relative strength. More recent studies, however, have found that it is no longer as abundant as it once was.

Otters have always seemed to use the Wye as a main highway, diverting into its hinterland as conditions and season demand. Long-term studies have found evidence that otters search out isolated pools and ponds during the spring for breeding amphibians, particularly so now that food such as salmonids, eels and crayfish are no longer readily available and it is probable that they sometimes breed in nearby reed beds and boggy areas.

The old A470, which is the main north to south road through mid-Wales, ran almost parallel to the Wye for some eight kilometres, to be replaced, about a decade ago, by a larger, straighter, faster road with numerous underpasses. Prior to the new road, wildlife road casualties were frequent including otters, but the new road, over the last decade, has had no recorded otter road casualties. However, the underpasses, from spraint (faecal) surveys, show regular otter use. This has helped quantify the seasonal movement of the animals and has helped verify that usage, and by implication animal abundance, has changed since the road was built. Observations on one group of isolated ponds in this area, over a 30-year period, usually recorded several visits by otters (as noted by fresh spraint), but in the last few years visits have declined seemingly as Great Crested Newt (*Triturus cristatus*) populations have increased and the possible implications are discussed.