

NATIONAL OTTER SURVEY

A research project, funded by the Southern African Nature Foundation, is being carried out by the Department of Zoology at the University of Stellenbosch on the rôle of otters in the maintenance of freshwater ecosystems. The Mazda Wildlife Fund has assisted by donating a light delivery vehicle for the project, and additional funds are provided by the University of Stellenbosch.

The two South African species of otter, the Cape clawless and the spotted-necked, are top predators in freshwater habitats and therefore indicative of water quality, but very little is known about their rôle in freshwater ecosystems. Part of the aim of the project is to produce an up-to-date distribution map of the two otter species and their status, in relation to habitat variables such as pollution; to determine the effect of these habitat variables on otter distribution and abundance; and to use otter presence and abundance for quantifying freshwater habitat quality.

Information would be greatly appreciated on the presence or absence of otters or their faeces and spoor in specific rivers or dams; the disturbance and pollution levels at these sites; any



Photo: Michael Somers

detrimental effects otters have on farming or other activities, and the causes thereof; the seasonality, if any, of these sightings or problems, and the species of otter concerned.

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MOTOR OIL DUMPING

Every year between 16 and 20 million litres of used motor oil is illegally dumped by South Africans. This pollutant seeps through the soil and flows into storm water and domestic drains, contaminating the country's underground water supply. The alarming implications of this have led BP Southern Africa to launch a major public awareness campaign to minimise the environmental impact of oil dumping.

As part of this campaign the company's Commercial Brand Manager,

Anthony Kent, has sent a letter to all BPSA oil re-sellers throughout the country in which he warns that one litre of oil can pollute up to one million litres of fresh water and up to a hectare of surface water. The letter points out that "do-it-yourself" oil change motorists and farmers account for nearly 65 per cent of the total used motor oil dumped in South Africa. In the Western Cape, particularly, it is common practice for motorists to buy oil from a supermarket, drive to a spot on the Cape Flats, dig a hole in the sand, and then drain their car's sump straight into the ground before putting in the new oil. Such behaviour is absolutely forbidden

by law in Europe. "In Austria, for example, no one can buy less than 30 litres of oil from any supplier unless the oil change takes place on the premises of the supplier." In South Africa few oil re-sellers – and certainly no supermarkets – have such facilities. Although it has been illegal to dump oil in South Africa since 1977 in terms of the Petroleum Products Act, the law is largely ignored.

BPSA has established a network of 180 BP re-sellers countrywide, who have volunteered to receive used motor oil at no charge to the customer and to store it until it can be collected for recycling. ■

DENTAL RECORD SYSTEM FOR RHINOS

A unique dental record system was used recently in Namibia's Etosha National Park to determine the age of rhinos. The Ministry of Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism teamed up with local dentist, Dr. Martine Wucher, during the capture of six black rhino to be sold at a game auction in the Waterberg Plateau Park. During the capture

Dr. Wucher used a self-designed "gag" to open the mouth of each immobilised animal and enable him to place a special tray in the rhino's mouth to obtain an impression of its teeth. After about two minutes the tray was removed and the impression cast in plaster. Dr. Wucher then referred to a series of scientific papers which enabled him to determine the age of each animal. This method, designed to age skulls, had not in the past been successful for live

animals as the capture experts had lacked dentistry experience. This time the technique proved so successful that Dr. Wucher intends to write about it for the benefit of other scientists interested in obtaining dental records from live animals. "The method is similar to fingerprinting an animal," he explained. "Permanent records are immediately available and serve as identification for individual animals." ■