

Otter versus koi: the battle that has gripped Canada

November 29 2018, by Alia Dharssi



Members of Aquaterra Environmental and the Vancouver Aquarium removing Koi fish from a pond which had become a wild otter's hunting ground

An epic battle has been playing out in a classical Chinese garden in

Canada's Pacific coast city of Vancouver between a ravenous wild otter and prized ornamental carp, cheered on by locals who have declared themselves for "Team Otter" versus "Team Koi."

Suspense built over several weeks as the mischievous [otter](#) continued to evade capture—even after a wildlife expert was brought in, and the pond was drained—while feasting on 11 of the garden's 14 adult koi.

As of Thursday, three of the surviving adult koi and more than 300 juveniles had been evacuated from Sun Yat-Sen Park and Classical Garden in the city's historic Chinatown neighborhood to the Vancouver Aquarium.

The fish relocation was ordered as a last-ditch measure to save the koi, in a saga that began mid-November when visitors spotted the otter scrambling over rocks around the pond.

Gutted koi carcasses would later be found littered around the garden.

"We're very happy that we were able to get the (remaining) koi out," the garden's spokeswoman Deanna Chan told AFP.

After staff struggled to catch the fish by wading into the pond, the park authorities lowered the water level and rescued them with a net.

Vancouver Parks Board director Howard Normann told a press conference the koi would likely be returned to the pond in the spring of 2019.

Meanwhile, the entrance to the garden was to be reinforced with grates and plates "to prevent the otter or any of the otter's friends from revisiting the garden," he said. Surveillance cameras would also be installed.

The koi had distinct personalities and coloration, said Chan, who noted that an orange 50-year-old named Madonna could be recognized by two black dots on her forehead and a crooked spine.

"They mean a lot to people in the community who have been seeing the fish grow up. They mean a lot to staff in the garden. The koi are part of our team."



An otter's raids on this koi pond in Vancouver's Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden hunting ground has become an epic battle between supporters of the prize carp and the wiley otter

'Koi is the underdog'

The otter had scampered across busy downtown streets to reach the garden, which is enclosed by high white walls topped with dark roof tiles and occupies about half a city block. Park staff and the hired wildlife relocater set seven traps with trout and salmon for the coy critter, but it hasn't taken the bait.

The garden is "designed to have hidden views and you're not supposed to be able to see the whole garden from one vantage point, so that does create some challenges," said Chan.

If the otter is captured, it will be transported to nearby Fraser Valley on the outskirts of the city.

In the meantime, the cunning otter's antics have captured the hearts of Vancouverites, who cheered #TeamOtter and #TeamKoi on social media. Someone even made the otter his own Twitter account.

The struggle has all the trappings of a Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner cartoon, commented the Globe and Mail.

When civic advocate Melody Ma saw the otter winning support, she took a stand for #TeamKoi with an editorial in The Tyee, a local news website.

"The koi is the underdog here," said Ma, who feels "a tinge of sadness." The garden's koi helped her connect with Chinese culture as a child, she said.

Louis Lapprend, a French web developer who immigrated to Canada 10 years ago, waded into the frenzy by printing batches of buttons with animated otters and koi. The first 150 sold out, but another shipment is

on the way.

"When just the first two koi were lost, I was amused," said Lapprend, who runs a website called Chinatown Today and plans to donate proceeds from button sales to the [garden](#).

"But then as time passed, and nobody was able to capture the otter and all the koi were dying, one after the other, I started really feeling the tension from people in the neighbourhood who are really concerned."

Even so, he laughs at the situation's surreality. "I'm keeping my family back in France updated and they can't believe it," he said. "They think I'm joking."

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