

'Otterly adorable'?: Demand for cute selfies puts animals at risk

August 21 2019, by Nina Larson



The drive for cute selfies with otters could be posing an existential threat to the silky mammal, animal protection groups warn

Social media users are fuelling a burgeoning appetite for acquiring wild otters and other endangered animals as pets, conservationists say, warning the trend could push species towards extinction.

Popular Instagrammers posting selfies with their pet otter may simply be seeking to warm the hearts of their sometimes hundreds of thousands of followers, but animal protection groups say the trend is posing an existential threat to the silky mammal.

"The illegal trade in otters has suddenly increased exponentially," Nicole Duplaix, who co-chairs the Otter Specialist Group at the International Union for Conservation of Nature, told AFP.

All Asian otter species have long been listed as vulnerable or endangered after facing decades of shrinking habitats and illegal trade in their pelts.

But conservationists say the recent surge in social media hype around the creatures has sparked such a frenzied demand for baby otters in Asian countries, Japan in particular, that it could drive entire species towards extinction.

Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), currently in Geneva to evaluate and fine-tune the treaty that manages trade in more than 35,000 species of plants and animals, will consider proposals to hike protection of two particularly imperilled otter species.



Several 'otter cafes' have popped up in Japan

Dangerous 'cute factor'

The Asian small-clawed otter and the smooth-coated otter are already listed as threatened under CITES Appendix II, but India, Nepal, Bangladesh and the Philippines are asking that they are moved to Appendix I, which would mean a full international trade ban.

Conservationists insist the move is vital, after both species have seen their numbers plunge at least 30 percent over three decades, and with the decline believed to have accelerated significantly in the past few years.

"This is especially being fuelled by the desire to have otters as an exotic pet, and social media is really driving that," Cassandra Koenen, who heads the Wildlife Not Pets campaign at World Animal Protection, told AFP.

Paul Todd of the Natural Resource Defense Council (NRDC) agreed.

Citation: 'Otterly adorable?': Demand for cute selfies puts animals at risk (2019, August 21)
retrieved 24 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2019-08-otterly-adorable-demand-cute-selfies.html>

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