

## Final Evaluation Report

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Your Details	
Full Name	Rosario Ballester
Project Title	Protecting the Southern River Otter: Investigating their Distribution and Population Structure, and Promoting Public Awareness
Application ID	41189-1
Date of this Report	15/05/2025

**1. Indicate the level of achievement of the project's original objectives and include any relevant comments on factors affecting this.**

Objective	Not achieved	Partially achieved	Fully achieved	Comments
Update information on Southern River Otter's (SRO) distribution in north Patagonia.			x	
Study the genetic structure of Southern River Otters in north Patagonia:		x		We are waiting for the DNA amplification sequencing results that was sent to an external lab. With the sequencing we will be able to analyze the alleles
Survey the habitat quality at lake shores and riverbanks to inform the habitat suitability map			x	
Analyze Southern River Otter's diet			x	
Production of photographic and video graphic material for educational and outreach purposes:		x		We were able to photograph southern river otters tracks, a hole, its environment, high quality habitat and low quality habitat and threats the otter has. We were not able to photograph the species as it is very elusive.

**2. Describe the three most important outcomes of your project.**

- a). Updated information on Southern River Otter's distribution
- b). We organised activities with local in Chubut where the species is not known
- c). We were able to achieve a successful DNA extraction from SRO feces.

**3. Explain any unforeseen difficulties that arose during the project and how these were tackled.**

1. **Access to sites:** We encountered difficulties accessing some sampling sites because they were located on private property, and we were unable to obtain permission from the landowners.
2. **Difficulties in the lab:** DNA extraction from feces usually has a low rate of success. Several extraction and amplification protocols were tested until we successfully implemented one that allowed the amplification of the mitochondrial DNA of the samples.
3. **Production of photographic:** We were not able to produce photographic and video material as the species is very elusive.

#### **4. Describe the involvement of local communities and how they have benefitted from the project.**

One of the main strategies for involving local communities has been through the creation of high-quality educational and outreach materials. These materials are intended to support awareness campaigns and educational activities that help build a sense of identity around the SRO as a flagship species of Patagonia. Local communities are a key component of this project as the otter shares its habitat with areas undergoing rapid urbanization so we recognized the importance of community engagement for the long-term conservation of the species.

The project indirectly benefits local communities by promoting the conservation of the freshwater ecosystems. By protecting the SRO and its habitat, the project also contributes to the broader conservation of clean water sources, native vegetation, and biodiversity.

#### **5. Are there any plans to continue this work?**

Yes. The project will continue. We will continue to monitor the SRO colonization in the different basins. We will try to do a nuclear DNA extraction to achieve a more in depth understanding of its population structure, and will continue to work with local communities to produce educational campaigns and make the species better known.

#### **6. How do you plan to share the results of your work with others?**

The results of this project will be shared through a variety of channels to reach both scientific audiences and the general public. Scientifically, I plan to publish the results in peer-reviewed journals and present them at national and international conferences. One example is the recent presentation at the 2024 "*Jornadas Argentinas de Mastozoología*", where preliminary results were shared.

Locally, the information will be shared with stakeholders such as the National Parks Administration, provincial environmental authorities, and conservation NGOs like Aves Argentinas, with whom this project is being developed.

For broader outreach, the photographic and video material obtained will be used in educational campaigns aimed at raising awareness about the species and the importance of conserving its habitat. These materials will be made available to schools and community groups.

## **7. Looking ahead, what do you feel are the important next steps?**

Firstly, a key next step is to organize educational activities in local schools and community organizations to promote awareness and generate a sense of community and responsibility for the conservation of the Southern River Otter (SRO) alongside locals. Actively involving communities is essential for long-term support and conservation for the species and its habitat. In addition, establishing a long-term monitoring framework is essential to evaluate the recovery of Southern River Otter (SRO) populations over time and to assess the effectiveness of the conservation actions implemented. Moreover, the data collected will be used to identify priority areas for natural recovery as well as those that may require active management interventions.

## **8. Did you use The Rufford Foundation logo in any materials produced in relation to this project? Did the Foundation receive any publicity during the course of your work?**

Yes, the logo was used in:

- "XXXV Jornadas Argentinas de Mastozoología": a mammalogy congress where the project's preliminary results were presented in November 2024
- International Otter Day: an awareness and outreach event in Esquel, Chubut, dedicated to raising the profile of the Southern River Otter among local communities in May 2024
- Participation in the "IV Conservatorio de Agua" in the city of Zapala, Neuquén, organized by Viento Sur Zapala, where research progress was presented and work experiences were shared on June 2024.

## **9. Provide a full list of all the members of your team and their role in the project.**

Laura Fasola: My PhD supervisor.

Graciela Obregón: Fellow PhD student that helped with the lab analysis of the feces and field research.

Lucas Hormachea: Field technician.

Geronimo Cutolo: Field technician.

Gonzalo Pardo: Photographer.

Juan Ignacio Túnez: Investigator that coordinates the research lab where the feces were analysed.

Claudio Chehébar: Southern river otter specialist that helped with the logistics of the project

Hernán Pastore: Biologist from National Parks that helped with the logistics of the project

Leonardo Buria: Biologist from National Parks that helped with the logistics of the project

Ignacio Roesler: Investigator and Programa Patagonia Coordinator at Aves Argentinas that helped with the logistics of the project.

**10. Any other comments?**