

Abstract on Food Habits: Prepared by Jon Klingel, New Mexico River Otter Working Group

Proposals to restore river otters to areas where they have been extirpated often generate questions about their food habits. Fishermen wonder if otters will damage game fish populations, especially trout. Food habits of otters have been extensively studied in North America. Fish, and crayfish where abundant, are the primary foods although otters are opportunistic and eat some amphibians, reptiles, insects, birds and even mammals.

Preferred fish are those that are abundant and slow swimming, which are mostly non-game species. Carp, catfish, suckers, daces, shiners, sunfish and bass are the most common prey. Trout are not an important part of the otter's diet. Fish 6-7 inches long are the preferred size and otters have difficulty catching fish smaller than 4 inches and larger than 7 inches. However, otters can take fish from 1-20 inches long. In New Mexico, most of the warm water fish species that might be preferred otter food, occur in reservoirs. Otters tend to avoid reservoirs, apparently because of the lack of cover along the waters edge.

Crayfish, where they are abundant, can be the preferred food and comprise up to almost 100% of the diet. In New Mexico, crayfish are non-native except in the Canadian drainage near the Texas border. The effects of non-native crayfish in southwestern aquatic systems have been studied in Arizona, where extreme impacts have been documented in some streams. There, crayfish have caused severe declines in aquatic insects, amphibians, reptiles, mollusks, and aquatic vegetation. Impacts to fish have not been studied yet but the loss of aquatic insects and vegetation is likely impacting fish as well. Very little is known about the distribution and abundance of crayfish in New Mexico but they are established and appear abundant in some of the potential otter restoration areas.