

Status of Mustelids, Viverrids and Herpestids of Orissa

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THE FURS OF MUSTELIDS and musk-like secretions of viverrids are in demand throughout the world. The herpestids famous for their snake-killing habits are kept as pets by many people to get rid of snakes and other pests like rats, scorpions and insects from their houses. In India, the largest civet-keeping in captivity perhaps occurs in Kerala where the small Indian civet or its products have been traditionally utilized primarily in religious rituals and medicinal preparations (Xavier 1993). Unlike the large mammals, these small carnivores are least known and have not attracted attention though they have considerable influence on the ecology of the areas of their occurrence. Eighty-six species of wild mammals are found in Orissa including 22 species of carnivores (Mishra *et al.* 1996). Only two of the 16 species of Indian mustelids and three of the nine species of Indian viverrids are known to occur in Orissa. Similarly, only three of the seven Indian species of herpestids have been reported to occur in Orissa. Information on the occurrence and current status are discussed in brief in this communication.

MUSTELIDS

Ratel or Honey badger *Mellivora capensis*

According to Behura & Guru (1969) this species is found only in Ganjam district. One specimen of this species was collected for Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) from Khurda (Khurda district) in 1912 (Das *et al.* 1993). The ratel is found throughout the state of Orissa (Mishra *et al.* 1996). During the period from August, 1967 to September,

1999 seventeen specimens of ratel were received at the Nandan Kanan Zoological Park, Bhubaneswar (NKZP) from different parts of Orissa, both from within and outside the Protected Areas, suggesting that they are distributed throughout the state. Interestingly 16 of these were males and only one was female. On September 30, 1999 there were five specimens (4 males and 1 female) on display at NKZP. This animal is believed to be rare in the state.

Smooth-coated otter *Lutra perspicillata*

The smooth-coated otter is distributed all over the state including mangrove swamps and coastal plains (Mishra *et al.* 1996). One specimen was collected for ZSI from Barkul in Khurda district (Das *et al.* 1993). Behura & Guru (1969) stated that this animal occurs in Orissa. During the period from April, 1964 to September, 1999, eleven young specimens of both sexes of smooth-coated otters were received at NKZP mostly from nearby water bodies like river Mahanadi and its tributaries, Puri main canal originating from river Mahanadi, lakes and large ponds. It is understood that a good population of this otter occurs in Bhitarkanika National Park. There was only one male specimen on exhibition on September 30, 1999 at NKZP. It appears that it is not as common as it was earlier.

VIVERRIDS

Common palm civet *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*

The occurrence of common palm civet in Orissa is reported by Behura & Guru (1969).

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It is distributed all over the state including coastal areas (Mishra et al. 1996). The occurrence of this species in Kalahandi district (Das et al. 1993), Mayurbhanj district (Acharjyo & Tripathy 1974) and Puri district (Saha 1995) has been described. Fifty specimens of common palm civet of both sexes were received at NKZP from different parts of Orissa during April, 1961 to September, 1999. Seven of these were collected from inside the zoo premises itself while they were trying to attack the birds through the wire netting barriers. This is the most common civet of Orissa found all over the state, both inside the forests as well as near human habitations. There were four specimens (3 males and 1 female) on display at NKZP on September 30, 1999. Because of its ability to adopt to various habitats, there appears to be no danger to this species in near future.

Small Indian civet *Viverricula indica*

There were records of occurrence of this species in Ganjam district (Behura & Guru 1969), Puri, Mayurbhanj and Angul districts (Das et al. 1993) and Khurda and Puri districts (Saha 1995). Mishra et al. (1996) stated that small Indian civet is distributed all over the state except mangrove swamps. The NKZP has received 24 specimens of this species from different parts of the state including 6 animals trapped from inside the zoo premises. They frequently attack the zoo birds in the night through the cage barriers. There are occasional reports of their sighting/occurrence both in the forests and in towns and villages. The local people believe that their scent glands have medicinal properties. So at times they are killed for collection of their scent glands. This species has adapted well to various habitats and so there appears to be no immediate threat to it.

Large Indian civet *Viverra zibetha*

Acharjyo & Patnaik (1987) reported the occurrence of this civet for the first time in

Orissa based on the receipt of a live specimen at NKZP from Fulnakhara in Cuttack district on January 12, 1986. One male specimen of this species was collected from Satpara in Puri district on December 9, 1986 for ZSI (Saha 1995). No specimen of this species is available at NKZP at present. Nothing is known about its status in the state as there were only two reports of its occurrence.

HERPESTIDS

Common mongoose *Herpestes edwardsii*

This species is known to occur in Orissa (Behura & Guru, 1969). Mishra et al. (1996) stated that it occurs all over the state. According to Das et al. (1993) it occurs in Balasore, Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Kalahandi and Puri districts of Orissa. Das & Agrawal (1973) collected a specimen for ZSI from Gopalpur in Keonjhar district. During the period from February, 1962 to August, 1992, 49 live specimens of this species were received at NKZP from different parts of Orissa including 15 specimens collected right inside the park premises. They are very common throughout the state both in the forested areas as well as areas adjoining human habitations. This species is very common inside NKZP premises and they frequently enter the enclosures of carnivorous animals to steal remnants of beef / mutton / fish, etc. Only two specimens were on exhibition at NKZP on September 30, 1999. This is very common throughout the state and there appears to be no danger to this species in near future.

Small Indian mongoose *Herpestes auropunctatus*

The occurrence of small Indian mongoose in Orissa has been reported by Behura & Guru (1969), Mishra et al. (1996) and Prater (1998). Saha (1995) reported the collection of four specimens of this species from Barkul in Khurda district and Satpara in Puri district for ZSI during 1986 and 1987. Four specimens of this species were procured for

Only two species of mustelids and three species each of viverrids and herpestids occur in Orissa.

NKZP from different parts of Orissa, including one specimen collected from the park premises during the period from February, 1967 to August, 1992. This species has also been encountered inside the park premises. At present no specimen is on display at NKZP. Though it is present all over the state, it is less frequently seen than the common mongoose.

Striped-necked mongoose *Herpestes vitticollis*

Mishra *et al.* (1996) reported that this species of mongoose is restricted to Similipal forest of Mayurbhanj district and Bhitarkanika in Orissa. But it appears that this report is not based on collection of live or dead specimen or its skin or photograph. According to Prater (1998) the species is distributed in the Western Ghats from north Kanara southwards to some of the adjoining southern Indian hill ranges and Sri Lanka. There are no other reports on the occurrence of this mongoose in Orissa. Not a single specimen of this mongoose was ever received at NKZP during its 39 years of existence. The single report might have been based on mistaken identity which should be eliminated by further investigation and substantiated with photographs, skins, dead or live specimen. This species was never exhibited at NKZP. Its occurrence in Orissa is doubtful.

CONCLUSIONS

The main threats for the survival of these animals include habitat destruction and ignorance of the common man about their beneficial role in the ecosystem. There is a need to carry out an intensive survey to ascertain their status and abundance in different regions of the state. All attempts should be made for conservation of their

natural habitats and to create awareness among the public for their conservation.

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There is a need to carry out intensive survey of small carnivores in Orissa to ascertain their status.
