

# Otters play a vital role in ecology of rivers

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.26.20

Word Count **458**

Level **400L**



Image 1. A river otter named Mary has been at the Maryland Zoo since 2001 when she arrived as an orphaned pup. Here, she enjoys some fish. An otter's strong jaws can bite through bones and even turtle shells. Photo: Ann Cameron Siegal/Washington Post

North American river otters are playful animals. They like to slide down riverbanks. They play in water. They also make squeaking noises.

Seeing otters is fun. It is a good sign for the environment, too.

Otters show how healthy an environment is. If there are many otters, rivers are healthy. Many otters died in the 1900s. This was because of pollution. People also trapped them. They wanted their fur. The population grew back, though.

The animals travel miles over land. They also travel through rivers. They look for places to live. Otters want homes with clean water and healthy fish.

River otters eat fish, snakes, turtles, birds and more. Their poop is called spraint. Scientists study it. This helps them learn. The spraint tells them about the health of the environment. It also shows what food is in the area. Scientists look for poisons in it, too. Then they know there are poisons in the environment.

## The Poop Dance

These otters do a funny dance. They dance when they poop. They move their back legs. At the same time, they raise their tails. They also wiggle their behinds. This is called "the poop dance." It lets out poop. Scientists then look for the poop. It helps identify otters.

Karen Sheffield works at Huntley Meadows Park. It is in Virginia. She said you never know if you will see an otter. Tracks and poop show they have been around, she said.

The Elizabeth River flows between Norfolk and Portsmouth, Virginia. It used to be called a "dead river." It had poison and pollution. The river is clean now. People have worked for 10 years to keep it clean.

Groups are trying to teach people about otters. They want them to understand why river otters are important.



## Looking Out For Otters

The Elizabeth River Project is one group. Marjorie Mayfield Jackson runs it. She said they have seen more otters in the past five years. It means they are helping the otters, she said.

The Elizabeth River Project made an otter display. It is in Norfolk. People see wild otters there. There is an "Otter Spotter" program. People can share if they have seen otters.

Karen McDonald is in the Chesapeake Bay Otter Alliance. It is a project that helps people understand otters. It teaches the importance of otters. Anyone can email signs of otters.

Everyone can help otters have a good home.

"We need to be good neighbors," Ms. McDonald said.