

PREFACE

I have never written a preface to a book. Neither am I a perfect English speaker. Perhaps, therefore, my preface to this book about semiaquatic mammals, put together by my Spanish colleagues, will not be up to standard.

I have therefore decided to follow the first idea that came into my head. Thinking about the preface, and about the people involved in studies on semiaquatic mammals and the management of the species' populations, I for some reason remembered Dr. Claus Reuther, our time together and our heated discussions in the wilderness of an extensive forest in northern Belarus. The story of my personal relationship with Claus will be a background for the main theme I would like to address in this preface, but first a little bit about Claus.

Claus was a well-known and extraordinary person, who took part in many studies on semiaquatic mammals and the management and conservation of their populations. It is worth mentioning that he also organised numerous conferences (mainly concerning the European Otter *Lutra lutra*) and subsequently prepared and printed the respective proceedings. This work really pushed forward the study and conservation of endangered species in Europe. Direct contact between people was essential in this process and Claus himself did a tremendous amount of work on both otters and their conservation. He led the IUCN/SSC Otter Specialist Group for many years and put a great deal of time and effort into the recovery of otters in Europe. Whilst doing both practical and scientific work, Claus seemed to prefer investing his huge energy in the restoration of the otter population in Europe and in the Otter Centre at Hankensbüttel in Germany. I am sure that many of those who were involved in the creation of this book knew Claus, and still remember him warmly.

When I first met Claus I was working as more or less an ordinary zoologist in Belarus, specialising in studies on the European Otter and both species of mink. Faced with local inability in terms of conservation efforts directed towards semiaquatic carnivores in the late Soviet period, I preferred to utilise my energy by carrying out scientific projects with the aforementioned species. The situation where I worked, in the Institute of Zoology at the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, also favoured this approach.

Talking with Claus at several conferences, about otters and the efforts being made with the species, I felt his sympathy, but it was obvious to me that some kind of disagreement also existed. Everything became clear when Claus visited me for ten days to take part in a study on otters in northern Belarus. On our very first evening together we got into a heated argument about the balance between scientific research and the efforts to conserve the otter, and indeed European wildlife in general. My choice of a more scientific path, mixed with some kind of ill-timed negativism directed towards the dominance of conservation, contrasted sharply with Claus's belief that in the modern world sponsorship should be mainly directed towards animal conservation circles, for carrying out straightforward conservation activities and conservation-directed studies only. He kept insisting that we knew enough about vertebrates and that we did not need to perform more expensive research that would not provide answers to hot questions on animal

conservation ecology. He stated that any investment in species conservation, even not particularly well-designed programmes, would push forward the conservation of endangered species more effectively than in-depth research. I opposed him by saying that species' population declines might be very complicated and the causes of such declines might be deeply hidden. For instance, the reasons for the demise of the European Mink, in connection with the American mink expansion, were more or less evident, despite the many contradictive hypotheses elaborated. It was not hard to design an efficient research project and to find out the causes in that case. Nevertheless, another example, which related to the detrimental impact of the naturalised American Mink on aboriginal fauna was quite unclear. In Belarus we were faced with a decline in many predator species. Populations of the Eagle Owl, Great Grey Owl, Polecat, Stoat, Greater Spotted Eagle and Short-eared Owl all gradually declined at the same time. There seemed to be no relevant explanation for the simultaneous reduction in all those predator species. Their prey appeared to be different. Only a huge amount of work, and quite expensive studies, revealed that the Water Vole was a crucial prey species for all of these predators during fairly short seasonal periods, either late winter or the period during which they were raising relatively large young. The American Mink, an additional and common predator, destroyed the Water Vole population hence the populations of the above-mentioned predator species declined. How could we have uncovered such a hidden influence without substantial research?

Claus said that the lobby of researchers might spend all the financial resources available for vulnerable species at a community level, by instigating more and more seemingly worthwhile but expensive projects. He added that, since we already knew a lot about vertebrates, there should be a clear line drawn between limited access to funding for theoretical studies, with strong competition between research groups, and the main financial aid that was needed for conservation activities. Our disagreement was getting more intense. Claus began to analyse my studies, emphasising the obvious mistakes, and I replied in a somewhat barbed way, trying to weaken his argument. Suddenly, whilst mending the fire, I touched an extremely hot stone and burnt myself. Claus called me a boy and said that I should have used a stick instead of my hand. Fifteen minutes later Claus went out to get some firewood. Whilst trying to fell a partly rotten pine, he shook the tree, and some quite heavy pieces fell down on his head, leaving it bleeding. Perhaps both of us felt upset and sorry about the argument. On the afternoon of the following day we reached the local hospital, where the surgeon closed the wound with stitches, without using any anaesthesia. I stood close to Claus, translating his words during the procedure.

The remaining days of our trip were surprisingly amicable. Claus even stayed for a few days longer than he had intended to. Friendship and mutual understanding were evident in all of our future meetings. Our contradictions seemed to disappear and something forced us to try to understand the merits of each other's standpoint. It was so easy and natural. We were even going to launch a joint project on otters in Belarus with some implications for the situation with the species in Germany. We prepared a proposal but then Claus died, suddenly and unexpectedly.

Since then I have always tried to assume that any opponent's point of view in any contradictive situation has its merits and I have always made an effort to work out why the opponent is so persistent in his opinion. I have observed many disputes between nature conservation specialists and scientifically-orientated zoologists. There have always been arguments similar to the ones Claus and I were involved in. In such situations conservationists blame scientists for spending money to satisfy their own inquisitiveness, i.e., from their point of view for nothing, whilst scientists criticise conservationists for oversimplified projects, which aim to find out the cause of a decline

and either restore the population or stop further losses. Quite often such a situation prejudices the interests of both circles and, above all, professional interests, i.e. learning about the species and their conservation.

This book, as well as the respective conference, combines the involvement of both nature conservation specialists and zoologists who specialise in the study of semiaquatic mammals. Thus, it is an important step in overcoming possible misunderstandings, which will encourage the tight collaboration of both groups in the management and conservation of semiaquatic mammals.

Prof. Dr. Vadim Sidorovich,

Leader of the Vertebrate Predation Research Group in the Institute of Zoology,
National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, vadim.sidorovich@gmail.com