

## Otter Survey at Lochboisdale

### The survey

The survey was commissioned by Stòras Uibhist in connection with the proposed Loch Boisdale Regeneration Scheme.

The aim of the survey was to determine whether otters use the area in the vicinity of the proposed access road round the shore of Lochboisdale, across Rubha Bhualite to Gasay.

### The proposed development

Stòras Uibhist proposes to build an access road to deep water on the south side of Gasay as the first phase of the proposed Lochboisdale Regeneration Scheme.

### Legislation

Otters and otter habitat are protected by a raft of legislation, including the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the Nature Conservation Act, the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and EC Habitats Directive. A licence is required to undertake construction works at or near otter holts and lie-ups.

### The Uists and Otters

The islands of the Uists offer a wide range of habitats to otters, on the west coasts there are sandy beaches and rocky headlands, inland there are freshwater lochs, with a range of pH from high in the machair lochs to low in the acid moorland lochs, and on the east coast are rocky seashores. Otters can be found in all these habitats, but the majority live in the vicinity of rocky seashores where there is the full range of intertidal and sub tidal brown seaweeds; here they forage amongst the seaweed for prey. Otters also roam in the freshwater habitat in the warmer months of the year hunting for eels (*Anguilla anguilla*) in the lochs and in November and December they follow fish migrating to the spawning beds in the headwaters of rivers and streams. When travelling overland from freshwater loch to freshwater loch these animals use the complex network of otter runs which connect adjacent lochs and lead to the sea.

Loch Boisdale is a sheltered east coast sea loch with areas of shallow water and extensive areas of intertidal and subtidal seaweeds which are ideal otter foraging and feeding areas. The undisturbed islands and other shorelines are ideal locations for otter holts.

## **Area surveyed**

The areas surrounding the proposed access road across Rubha Bhualite and Gasay were surveyed.

## **Survey methods**

The survey was carried out on 31 January and 1 February 2009 using standard methodology developed by the author since 1978.

The survey area was walked over and examined for signs of otters. All the signs of otters (runs, sprainting sites and holts) were marked on a map.

## **Results of the survey**

The survey was carried out in August 2009 when the bracken and other vegetation were high; consequently it was difficult to find all the signs of otters. It was impossible to determine the extents of the holts without causing undue disturbance; hence the locations only of the holts were noted. The survey must be repeated once the vegetation has died down.

There is considerable otter activity on Rubha Bhualite and also some on Gasay; the locations of the holts, wet holes, sprainting sites and runs are marked on the accompanying map.

There will be an increase in otter activity in this area in the colder months of the year.

## **Recommendations**

Great care must be taken to avoid disturbing otter holts and other places used by otters both during the construction phase and afterwards.

1. The road across Rubha Bhualite should be realigned to avoid destroying the holt at the south east end of the peninsula. A possible new track for this road is shown on the accompanying map.
2. Otter passes should be built into both ends of the causeway.
3. Otter passes should be constructed under the road at the points where otter runs cross the track of the proposed road.
4. Speed bumps should be incorporated into the road at frequent intervals, including one on either side of the otter passes both under the road and in the causeway.
5. Pedestrian access to Eilean Dubh should be realigned to prevent destruction of a holt.
6. Consideration should be given to the construction of an otter hide where the public can view otters without disturbing them.

