

# Present status of *Lontra felina* in Argentina



**Marcelo H. Cassini**

GEMA group, DCB &  
CONICET, University of  
Luján, Rutas 5 y 7, 6700 Luján,  
Argentina

Argentina is the country with the highest diversity of Lutrinae species, with four of the 16 species of the world. The 'chungungo' or Patagonian marine otter *Lontra felina* is the only South American otter that uses marine habitats exclusively. Its geographical range includes the Pacific coasts of Peru and Chile and a small portion of Argentinean coasts. Mains threats to these populations are habitat destruction, water pollution, poaching, and mortality due to bycatch (IUCN 2009). There were no studies that assess quantitatively the extinction risk of this species. Some authors mention that *L. felina* is relatively common and easy to observe in several points along the Chilean coast (e.g., Medina et al. 2006), which suggest local recovery of some populations.

In Argentina, the situation regarding this species is critical, as there are no recent records of its presence. The last confirmed records were from the De los Estados Island, a small island located at 30 km from Tierra del Fuego, which Juan Carlos Chebez took more than 25 years ago (Massoia & Chébez, 1993). In the 1990s, Parera and collaborators conducted an expedition to this island where they recollected otter feces, however, could not differentiate between *L. felina* and *L. provocax* (Parera et al 1997). Recently, these samples were analyzed genetically and those with enough DNA to identify were not from *L. felina* (Centrón et al 2008). The only record of chungungos in the southern coast of Tierra del Fuego was confirmed by Massoia & Chébez (1993) from a specimen found in Punta Segunda, but they did not offer other information. Chilean researchers conducted two surveys of the Beagle Channel: Castilla (1982) observed only one chungungo in 25 km of Chilean coast and 600 km of navigation, and Sielfeld (1992) did not find any specimen or signs of its presence all along the Chilean coast in front of Argentinean border of the Beagle channel.

In surveys conducted recently in Argentina including the Beagle channel (Cassini et al. 2009), none of the otter feces collected corresponded to *L. felina* in accordance with genetic analysis (Centrón et al. 2008). Even though there are anecdotal records of recent observations of chungungos on De los Estados Island and Mitre Peninsula (Figure 1), these records were not conducted by specialists and the taxonomic identity was not confirmed.

With present information, *L. felina* should be considered almost extinct from Argentina. This is why it is urgent to conduct surveys that update the information of this species in this country. The areas with largest possibilities of having populations of chungungo are De los Estados Island and Mitre Peninsula (Figure 1). Both areas are presently very well preserved. The first one is already a protected area, and the second one is close to receiving the