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Caretaker of Guyana's water dogs: deep in the savanna, a passionate protector of these endangered river otters is rehabilitating them for release into the wild

[Americas \(English Edition\), March-April, 2004 by Chris Hardman](#)

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It's nearly eleven in the morning, and the sun is already scorching the and earth of Karanambu Ranch. The birds have stopped singing, and the breeze has died down. It's the dry season in the Rupununi, a vast savanna located near Guyana's Brazilian border.

Suddenly the CB radio crackles, and a young female voice calls, "Masara, Karanambu, Masara, Karanambu." She is frantic; her boyfriend has brought her two wild baby river otters as a gift, and she doesn't know what to do with them. Fortunately she knows whom to call.

Karanambu is home to Diane McTurk, the only person in the world who has successfully reintroduced giant river otters into the wild. McTurk asks, "Are they drinking milk? Are they eating fish? Do you want me to come and get them?" The entire staff of the ranch goes into high gear to prepare for the arrival of the otters, while McTurk prepares for the three-hour round trip boat ride to pick them up.

Giant otters (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) are one of the most endangered animals on earth.

Demand for their velvety fur has eliminated them from throughout most of their range in South America. At six feet long and fifty to sixty pounds, they are the largest of the world's thirteen otter species. In Guyana, they are fondly referred to as "water dogs"--probably because, like dogs, they live in family groups and engage in noisy play. In Peru they are called lobes del rio, and in Suriname they are called watradagoe. In spite of their similarities, river otters are not related to dogs at all. They are a member of the weasel family, which includes skunks and tayras. They are equally at home on land or in water, and they can travel long distances either way. Their webbed paws and flat tails make them strong swimmers and formidable predators.

McTurk fell into her role as river otter mother entirely by chance. In 1985 a friend gave her a baby otter as a gift. "I love all animals, and therefore I was absolutely delighted to have him," McTurk recalls. "That got me more interested in what was the status of these animals, because we hadn't seen many of them around recently."

Born and raised in Guyana, McTurk, seventy-one, is the second generation of her family to live at Karanambu. She has been running the ranch since 1978, when she took over for her brother. She remembers when she used to see giant river otters often.

"I found out riley were still being hunted for their pelts to supply a leather-craft trade in Brazil," she says. "Then I found that there really were abandoned otters, little otters, that had been lost in the panic of parents being killed. So I put out the word for anyone who found these abandoned otters to please come and bring them to me."

McTurk says she had no idea how to take care of her first otter, and he was very lucky to survive. Because the milk she fed him disagreed with him, the otter became quite ill. Their site remembered teal as a child site was allergic to milk and had to drink eggnog, so she whipped together egg yolks and hydration fluid, and the little otter began to thrive. Soon after, two females were brought to her. Those three made up the first group of otters raised at Karanambu. Since then McTurk has taken in and rehabilitated thirty-five giant otters. "We have the perfect surroundings for rehabilitating them here because it's actually natural otter territory," she explains.

One of the keys to successful otter rehabilitation is to get the young to bond with their caretaker right away. Like human babies, that is done through food. In the wild, the otter babies would stay with their mother for two to three weeks in a special den dug into the side of a riverbank. To simulate a den's dark environment, McTurk lines a dog carrier with blankets. The otters will live in her bathroom until they are ready to move into the otter but out back. Typically baby otters are introduced to the water when they are three to four weeks old. By the time they are three to four months old, they begin hunting in the river along with the rest of the family.

At Karanambu, otters are moved to their own but once they have bonded with McTurk. They have ample opportunity to play in the water either in a plastic tub or during their daily trips to the river.

McTurk scours through her supplies trying to find proper milk bottles and nipples. Does she have any bottles or have the cockroaches eaten through the plastic again? Working against her efforts is the remoteness of the ranch.

All supplies must come to Karanambu from outside the Rupununi, usually by small plane or boat. The closest neighbor is Yupukarri, a Makushi Indian settlement some ten miles away. It's a backbreaking ten-hour ride by Land Rover to the capital, Georgetown--a vast improvement over the three-day journey it used to be. McTurk has mastered the art of improvisation. She creates tools out of whatever she can find on hand.

Joining McTurk on this outer rescue trip is Nicole Duplaix, the world's foremost river otter expert. Duplaix has devoted her professional life to studying and protecting giant otters. She was the first person to go into the wild to study otters on their own turf. Beginning in 1976 she spent two years conducting river otter surveys deep in the jungles of Suriname. She is the former director of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Otter Specialist Group and has done more to further the cause of otter research than any scientist to date. Three years ago, the inevitable happened: Duplaix and McTurk joined forces. Now they work together several times a year leading both research and natural history tours for the Oceanic Society, a San Francisco-based conservation organization.

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