



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

by Chris Hardman

One of the world's most threatened animals, a giant river otter swims and basks along the Rupununi River, its home waters

It's nearly eleven in the morning, and the sun is already scorching the arid 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 *lobos del río*, 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 they 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. Then she remembered that as a child she 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 surround-

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ings 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 hut 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 hut 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.

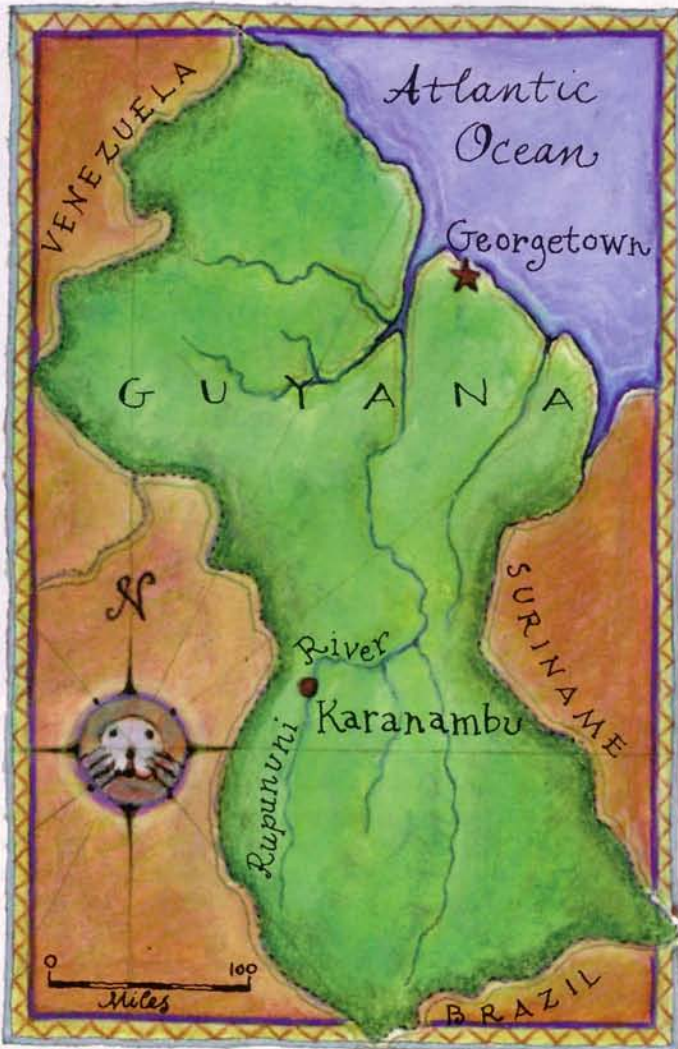
McTurk scours through her supplies trying to find proper milk bottles and nipples. Does she have any bottles or have the cockroaches eaten through the plastic again? Working against her efforts is the remoteness of the ranch.

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

In Guyana, river otters are fondly referred to as “water dogs”—probably because, like dogs, they live in family groups and engage in noisy play



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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 otter 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:



Diane McTurk cuddles a rescued baby river otter, above, part of a bonding process that will aid the young animal's rehabilitation to the wild. In a few months it will be hunting with other otters like this mature adult, left, which consumes six to eight pounds of fish daily. Meanwhile, researchers and volunteers, opposite, ply Amazonian water lilies on the lookout for otters



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"I've always felt extremely humble about my activities with the otters," McTurk says, "because as far as I'm concerned, I've been having fun"



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.

Tour participants are housed at Karanambu (the ranch can accommodate ten), staying in comfortable huts built in the traditional Amerindian style with clay bricks and palm-thatch roofs. They dine with the McTurk family in the main building and spend their days watching wildlife along the river, hiking in the forest, or exploring the savanna by jeep. A staff of thirty—mostly Makushi Indians—keeps the ranch going.

Recent additions to Karanambu's staff include McTurk's nephew, Edward, and his wife, Melanie. They are in training to take over running the ranch so that McTurk can spend more time with otter rehabilitation and education. While most of their friends opted for well-paying jobs in Canada, Melanie and Edward chose to stay in Guyana. Although it takes courage for this well-educated young couple to forsake the comforts of city life for the bush, Melanie seems quite smitten with the Rupununi. "It is the most beautiful place on earth," she says.

The 125-square-mile ranch includes savanna, bush islands, and riverine forest.

Rare and unusual creatures abound—giant anteaters, nine-foot long black caimans, and giant Amazon water lilies. The river is also home to the arapaima, the world's largest freshwater fish, which can reach a length of six to seven feet. The bird life, too, is amazing. Many serious birders come to Karanambu, and with the help of the ranch's local guides, they have identified nearly two hundred different species of birds. "We get tremendous joy out of sharing [the wildlife] with people," Melanie says.

McTurk and Duplaix travel by boat to the Indian village of Masara. The young woman who made the radio call is there to greet them. "I was so worried about them," she tells McTurk as she guides her toward a small house. McTurk has built a good rapport with the Makushi villagers, earning herself the nickname, "Otter Lady." Although it's the hottest part of the day, many of the villagers have come out to see these visitors. Schoolchildren, dressed in blue and white uniforms, pour out of their classroom to peer in the windows where one of the little otters lies sleeping.

Because baby otters are so cute—with their soulful eyes and plaintive cries—people are tempted to take them from the

wild to keep as pets. They are quite a handful, though, and within a few months they are eating more fish than the entire human family. One adult otter alone eats six to eight pounds of fish per day. Unfortunately, when otter cubs are still nursing, they can't be returned to the wild.

"As soon as you take the babies from the mother, it's such a shock that she stops lactating," Duplaix explains. As a result of McTurk's work, increasingly local people are learning about otters, and that they don't make good pets.

But there are other factors affecting the region. In recent years, the construction of a paved road between Guyana and Brazil has changed the way of life for many in the Rupununi. Areas once remote have been opened to settlement, and with Brazil now less than a day's travel away, many Makushi men are leaving their villages to work in the mines across the border. Traditionally, Makushi villages are fairly closed societies, with two-parent families supporting themselves through farming and fishing—but population growth has taken a toll on those natural resources and forced many men to find other ways to feed their families.

In the interior, ranches like Karanambu provide employment opportunities for some

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The otter's social nature, exemplified by group play, opposite, and its webbed feet, far left, which easily range over land and water, have led to problematic contact as human populations grow along the river. Left: McTurk and Nicole Duplaix, left to right, with volunteer Roger Nyenhuis review the day's work

of the Makushi who want to stay in Guyana. The complicated social issues that affect the Makushi way of life are among Melanie McTurk's gravest concerns. She says that a primary goal in the coming year is to improve the quality of life for the Indians who work on the ranch. That includes better housing, training, and health care. Recently, Karanambu helped three of their young employees attend a wildlife-guide training course held at the Iwokrama International Center—a conservation and community-development organization located in the Iwokrama rain forest of central Guyana.

For Michelle Manduke, a twenty-one-year-old single mother of two, the course was critical support for her growing interests in wildlife. Although she primarily works in Karanambu's kitchen, she has begun to guide guests on wildlife tours. By working at Karanambu, she can take advantage of new opportunities while keeping her children close by.

When Duplaix and McTurk return to the ranch with the baby otters, the news has traveled fast. Staff and visitors are waiting to see the babies. In the next twenty-four hours several people will take turns trying to feed the

squirmy cubs: Duplaix, McTurk, Melanie, and Nancy O'Connor, a volunteer research assistant from Sacramento, California. When there are cubs living at the ranch, says Melanie, you can't help but become involved with them. They get into everything. During her Christmas visit last year, she recalls, a male otter named Rewa was in the final stages of the rehabilitation process and was spending a lot of time at the river. Because he seemed to adopt Melanie and Edward, they would accompany him to the river when he would go fishing. "Otters are like kids. They like to have somebody with them," she explains. Whenever the biting sand fleas and mosquitoes would drive Melanie and Edward away from the river, Rewa would wail until they came back. Once they were sure he had fallen asleep, they would attempt to leave. "We're now trying to tiptoe off and all of a sudden, there's an otter sitting on Edward's foot," Melanie recalls with a smile. The following January, Rewa returned to the wild when a wild otter family that lives near the ranch accepted him into their group.

When an otter returns to the wild, the staff at Karanambu worries about the dangers it will face. Because otters, as predators, are near the top of the food chain, they have little to fear from other wild creatures. Altercations with caimans or jaguars are rare. But the human threats remain. In Rewa's case, his friendly personality causes much anxiety. He has a habit of jumping into boats to steal fish. While that may seem endearing to the people at Karanambu, a fisherman struggling to feed his family may have a different viewpoint. "Many people view the otters as competition for fish because they eat so much—especially the more tame ones like Rewa who are not afraid of people," Melanie says. "They can get into a lot of trouble."

As the human population along the river increases, conflicts between man and otter are bound to increase as well. Another threat to the otter population is illegal gold mining. New roads have paved the way for gold miners to reach some of the more remote rivers in Guyana. A by-product of gold processing is the release of mercury into the rivers and creeks. The presence of mercury threatens the health of all life in the river ecosystem, and studies have shown that the mercury levels in fish and people living near gold-mining camps are higher than what is considered safe.

To protect the otters and all the wildlife that make the Rupununi so special, the McTurks created a nonprofit organization, the Karanambu Trust. The goal of the trust is to make not only the Karanambu a legally protected area but the entire Rupununi as well.

Karanambu is located within the Guiana Shield—a region that includes French Guiana, Guyana, Suriname, and parts of Colombia, Brazil, and Venezuela—one of the largest and most pristine forests in the world. Although more than 90 percent of the Shield's forests remain intact, they are continually threatened by mining pollution, population growth, overfishing, and logging.

While the international community is beginning to pay more attention to the areas that make up the Guiana Shield, McTurk's work with the otters has provided much publicity for the small nation of Guyana while earning her international acclaim. "I've always felt extremely humble about my activities with the otters," McTurk says, "because as far as I'm concerned, I've been having fun. I've been borrowing the otters from the wild with the idea that they return to the wild. I have them for a time, and then they go back to what is their natural habitat. If I were not looking after them, they would be dead."

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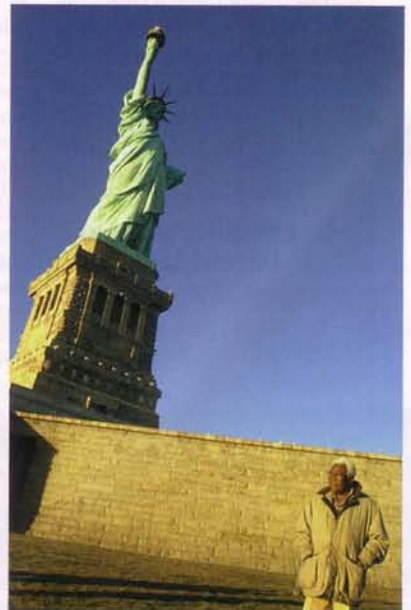
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