One fascinating little detail on Olaus Magnus’s famous map of northern Europe, the *Carta marina*, drawn by him between 1527 and 1539, is an otter fetching a fish for its master, who stands ready with a knife in his hand and a cooking vessel on the fire (Fig. 1). On the map, the otter is placed in Ostrobothnia, an area that is now part of Finland. The explanation on the printed map states: ‘the otter is trained to catch fish and bring it to the cook’ (‘animal luter domatur ad piscandum et pisces coco porrigendum’). In a German commentary on the map, *Ain kurze Auslegung der neuuen Mappen* (1539), Olaus Magnus states, ‘All hie ist zu mercken das der Otter vviirdt geuuent visch zu holen vnd tregst dem koch in die kochen. Aber vmm seiner geizigkait uegen pringt ehr mer vmb uueder von neten ist darummm so braucht man in uenig darzu’, i.e. its services were clearly seldom utilised, in order not to catch too many fish (‘darumm so braucht man in uenig darzu’). In *Opera breve* (1539/1887), written in Italian and intended for readers in southern Europe, he similarly adds: ‘The otter is still common in Finland and around the Gulf of Bothnia, and it is sometimes tamed in order to bring fish for the kitchen’ (‘E anchora l’animale Luthero per Finlandia, & Botnia frequente, & alcuna volta si domestica, in modo che porta alla cusina il pesce’).

In his monumental work *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, published in 1555, Magnus provides further details on tame and trained otters in Sweden (Book 18:16). However, here he refers to another geographical location: ‘On the estates of some eminent citizens in Svealand, otters are made so tame that, upon a sign from the cook, they dive into a fishpond and bring forth a fish of the size he commands them, returning for another and yet another until his instructions have been completely satisfied.’ This anecdote is illustrated with a vignette of an otter with its master, a slightly expanded version of the image found on the *Carta marina*. 
Purpose and sources

Historiography is a human invention and is necessarily almost always anthropocentric. Nevertheless, human relationships to other species are a crucial part of cultural history. It is not possible to understand history without also examining how animals affect human societies, and vice versa. It is therefore important to study the biocultural domains that occur in the interaction between animals and human beings (Levi-Strauss 1962; Svanberg & Łukasz 2014). Many animal species have been of great significance for humans throughout history (Kalof 2007). Domestic animals, such as cats, dogs, horses, goats and sheep, have since time immemorial assisted Homo sapiens, improving our way of life. Some species provided energy, while others delivered a variety of services. Wild-caught species have also been tamed for various purposes besides predation, such as raising the alarm, fighting, and as guards, pets, and pack and draught animals (Gilmore 1950; Serpell 1996; Ståhlberg & Svanberg 2012). Trained wild animals assisting humans in their search for food are a fascinating topic in our cultural history. One example of this is otters assisting humans in fishing. Was the practice of fishing with otters, as described by Olaus Magnus, just a local, upper-class tradition in late medieval Scandinavia, a practice
that existed only on wealthy farms, or did it occur elsewhere and in other stages of history?

A pioneer in the study of the use of animals as assistants in fishing and gathering activities worldwide was the ichthyologist Eugene Willis Gudger (1866–1956), who also mentioned Olaus Magnus’s description in his brief but interesting and well-researched overview of fishing with otters (Gudger 1927; cf. Brandt 1972, p. 15). The topic of using animals to assist in hunting and fishing is still current in ethnobiological and human–animal research. A recently published book by Daniel Allen on the human relationship with the otter, including a brief discussion of fishing with otters, has prompted a look at conditions in Sweden and neighbouring countries for a complete picture of this custom (Allen 2010, pp. 42–44). With the help of ethnographic records in the printed literature and records in the Swedish folklore archives, this article sets out to review and analyse the practice of otter fishing in Sweden and elsewhere. In which areas did this practice exist? Who used otters for fishing? How were they trained to fish? Fishing with otters is a biocultural domain as yet inadequately studied by scholars in Sweden (Brusewitz 2001; Fridell & Svanberg 2007, p. 114).

Kleptoparasitism

In a variety of ways, humans have long depended on animals in their foraging activities. Simply stealing what you can eat from other species is, of course, a prehistoric habit that continues to this day. For example, in the Nordic countries it was for a long time common to gather eggs and take nestlings from birds’ nests for food (Storå 1965; Berg 1981; Svanberg & Äegisson 2006). Collecting honey from wild bees and bumblebees is another practice with a long tradition (Crane 1999, pp. 43–103; Svanberg 2006, pp. 16–29).

Kleptoparasitism, the act of stealing food from other species, has been a common strategy in the human search for sustenance. Taking advantage of what other species have already gathered is an easy way to obtain food. Indeed, stealing prey from predators was probably practised in early history. Examples of humans chasing lions away from their prey to consume the meat themselves are still reported (Schoe, de Iongh & Croes 2009). Nomads and hunters in the Eurasian steppe and tundra landscape looted rodents’ nests for nuts, bulbs and seeds. This practice is also known from subarctic North America (Nabhan 2009; Ståhlberg & Svanberg 2010). On the Swedish Baltic islands of Gotland and Öland, local people collected ‘mouse nuts’ or ‘rat nuts’ (hazelnuts) in winter from field mice (Apodemus spp.). On a journey to Öland in 1741, Carl Linnaeus (1745, p. 63) noted that wild hazelnuts (Corylus avellana) taken from mice were the best nuts that could be found. The mice gathered them in large stores under bushes, and many of
the nuts were perfect, with no worms or cavities. A hundred years later, Per Arvid Säve observed a similar habit on Gotland. The happiest people, he said, were those who, in winter, found a hoard of ‘rat nuts’, which were the best of all (Säve 1939, p. 43).

It was also common practice among coastal dwellers to rob fish from various bird species. In Sweden and Finland, coastal dwellers practised kleptoparasitism on the nests of white-tailed eagles (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) and ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*). The method was simple. First, the nestlings were chained to the nest when they were beginning to leave it. Daily, the nest could be emptied of fish that the parent birds had brought home to their young. Tying the nestlings’ cloacae with string could make this more efficient, preventing them from eating all the fish the adult birds had brought to the nest (Brusewitz 2001). The same practice is described from the Pákász, a group of fishermen living in the Hungarian marshes, who also robbed the nests of white-tailed eagles (Gunda 1969, p. 493).

**Fishing with animals as helpers**

Human beings have used various species to assist them in hunting and gathering activities (Magnus & Svanberg, forthcoming). Dogs, ferrets (*Mustela putorius furo*), cheetahs (*Acinonyx jubatus*), caracals (*Caracal caracal*) and other mammals have been used to track and chase various prey that humans have had as targets (Masseti 2009; Ståhlberg & Svanberg 2012). Stalking horses and other animals used by hunters to hide behind while stalking their prey have been noted in many parts of Europe, including Sweden, but also in Asia (Brusewitz 2001; cf. Birket-Smith 1966, p. 323; Gunda 1977, p. 83).

Birds of prey, such as eagles, falcons and hawks, have also been used for hunting purposes, especially in Eurasia (Cocker 2013). Falconry is still a common practice and an esteemed form of hunting in many parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East, and hunting with eagles is conducted among Kazakhs in Inner Asia (Soma 2014).

Some mammal species have been used for fishing. The Ainu of northern Japan and Sakhalin trained their dogs so that, on command, they could swim in packs, frightening fish into shallow water, where they were easily caught (von Brandt 1972, p. 13; Sjöberg 1993, p. 55). Fishermen in coastal Portugal similarly used dogs for fishing. Dogs of the local breed Cão de Água were originally taught to herd fish into fishermen’s nets and to retrieve lost or broken tackle (von Brandt 1972, p. 14). The ethnologist Béla Gunda (1974, p. 11x) provides a few examples of dogs being used for fishing from Rétköz in the Carpathian region and from Hortobágy on the Hungarian plain (for further examples, see Gudger 1923). The Orang Laut, the sea nomads of South Johor, Malaysia, use dogs for hunting crabs (Burdon 1951). An interesting method of catching large fish and sea turtles is with the help of
remoras or suckerfish, which has been described from East Africa and the Torres Strait (Gudger 1919a, 1919b; De Sola 1932).

The use of tame cormorants (*Phalacrocorax capillatus*; *P. carbo*) and oriental darters (*Anhinga melanogaster*) to assist in fisheries is a well-known example of animal helpers in the ethnographic literature (Fig. 2). Cormorant fishing has been especially common in Japan and in parts of China, while darters were used for the same purpose in South Asia (Gudger 1926; Laufer 1931; Stoner 1948; Jackson 1997; Naefe 2002). Some examples of cormorant fishing from Europe (England and France) are also known, although it was never a widespread practice there. The earliest reliable source stems from Justus Joseph Scaliger in 1557, reporting cormorant fishing from Venice (Beike 2012). Similar methods were also reported from pre-Columbian Peru (Birket-Smith 1966, p. 328).

A practice related to the use of cormorants was that of taking advantage of seabirds that dived and drove the fish shoals into nets or traps. In some cases, the animal’s ability to gather a significant quantity of some resource in a limited time may be of primary importance, for instance diving birds which drove fish shoals at Doiran Lake in southern Macedonia. Working groups of fishing birds were formed, including red-breasted merganser (*Mergus serrator*), great crested grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*), cormorants (*Phalacrocorax*), and black- and red-throated divers (loons) (*Gavia arctica, G. stellata*). The wings of some of those birds were clipped and they were used to drive fish into fenced areas (Apostolski & Matvejev 1955). There are a few examples of this in Sweden and Finland as well. In 1749, the Rev-
nder Johan Ilström described how the peasantry in Kalmar Strait took advantage of the gathering of goosanders (*Mergus merganser*) in the shallow bays during the autumn. Goosanders appear in large flocks and fish collectively by lying in rows and scaring the fish into shallow bays. The peasantry noticed this behaviour and constructed special traps under the surface of the water where the birds appeared in the autumn. The fish took refuge in these traps to escape the birds chasing them, and then all the peasants had to do was collect the fish. According to Ilström (1749), it was a very profitable way of fishing. Into the mid nineteenth century, this method of fishing with the help of goosanders continued to be used along the Baltic Sea coast (Brusewitz 2001; Svanberg 2013, pp. 108–109).

**Fishing with otters**

Fishing with trained otters has been carried out for centuries in Asia and Europe. There are several species of otter in Eurasia, but only two seem to have been employed to assist with fishing. Occasionally, individual fishermen in North America also trained otters for fishing, although there evidence of the practice is more limited (Gudger, 1927, pp. 219–220; Etkin 2009, p. 12). In the mid eighteenth century, for example, the Swedish traveller Pehr Kalm reported from eastern North America, ‘I have seen some [otters] which were as tame as dogs, and followed their masters wherever they went; if he went out in a boat, the otter went with him, jumped into the water, and after a while came up with a fish’ (Kalm 1772, pp. 162–163). In the quotation, Kalm must be referring to the North American river otter (*Lontra canadensis*).

The Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) is one of the two types of otter in Asia and Europe that have been trained for fishing. The Eurasian otter has been widely distributed not only all over Scandinavia, but also across Europe, northern Africa and large areas of Asia. It inhabits lakes, streams, rivers and ponds, and may also live along the coast, in salt water, but nonetheless requires regular access to fresh water to clean its fur (Allen 2010, p. 10). In China, the Eurasian otter was used to drive fish into fishing nets, to root out fish from places of refuge, and even to inform fishermen if no fish were found in an area, by swimming to the surface (Simoons 1991, pp. 342–343). The technique of fishing with tame otters is known from the Tang dynasty (618–907) and is reported from the Yangtze region. Gudger (1927) mentions letters he received from the anthropologist Berthold Laufer, an expert in Chinese culture, who quotes several descriptions of fishing with otters in old Chinese literature, with examples as far back as the Tang dynasty. One of the texts quoted is *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang* [Yōuyáng Zázī], written by Duan Chengshi around AD 800. It reads that at the end of the Yuanhe period (AD 807–821), in the district of Yunyang in Hubei, there
lived ‘a man seventy years old who raised ten otters for the purpose of catching fish’ (Gudger 1927, p. 199).

In his travel reports from 1330, the Franciscan friar Odoric of Pordenone, who travelled in China between the years 1323 and 1328, describes both otter fishing and fishing with cormorants in the province of Mancy (Yule 1866, p. 112). His text was copied in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, a faked travelogue that became popular in the late fifteenth century, thus reaching a learned world and achieving wider circulation (Gudger 1927, pp. 194–198).

Fishing with otters was still being reported from China in the nineteenth century. The English naturalist Robert Swinhoe reported from the Yichang Gorge along the Yangtze River: ‘we came across a fisherman with a trained Otter. It was very tame and gentle, but he kept it chained in his boat. To make use of its services he would throw his large loose net, weighted at the edges, and let the Otter into the water’ (Swinhoe 1870, p. 625; further examples are given in Gudger 1927, pp. 201–205). Otter fishing has been reported in various provinces (among them Sichuan, Hubei, Shaanxi, Hunan), mostly along the Yangtze River (Simoons 1990, p. 342).

The use of otters for fishing in South Asia was described by the British soldier Robert Christopher Tytler (1854, p. 172). From Dhaka, he reported that several otters were kept by each fisherman’s family for the purpose of catching fish. Otter fishing still survives in Bangladesh. A traditional fishing technique, passed down from father to son for centuries, it is now almost eliminated from most parts of South Asia and is only practised on a small
scale in certain villages in Bangladesh. Fishermen of southern Bangladesh use the smooth-coated otter (*Lutrogale perspicillata*) for their fishing activities (Foster-Turley 1998). They are completely dependent on their otters and have no other livelihood. Each fishing group is composed of one fishing boat, three to five fishermen, one special rectangular net, and three otters (usually two trained adults and a juvenile under training). The otters drive the fish into the net from different directions, and when the fish come close to it, the fishermen pull the net into the boat (Feeroz, Begum & Hasan 2011).

‘The Chinese tame one species and train them to catch fish, and in Europe Otters have also repeatedly been trained for the same purpose. A tame Otter is a very pretty and sympathetic animal. It soon comes to know its owner and follows him or her about like a dog. It prefers a milk and vegetable diet to one of meat, and may be trained not to touch fish at all’, concludes the German zoologist Alfred E. Brehm (1895, p. 177). Fishing with otters has been practised in Europe since the late Middle Ages. According to late medieval zoologists such as Thomas of Cantimpré (*Liber de natura rerum*, 1225–41), Vincent de Beauvais (*Speculum Naturale*, 1244) and Albertus Magnus (*De Animalibus*, mid thirteenth century), otters were trained to fish in central and western Europe. According to Bernström, they were taught to dive after the fish and drive them into the fishermen’s nets. This technique is probably most suitable for catching salmon (Bernström 1975, p. 390). An English translation of the late medieval *Hortus Sanitatis* describes the usefulness of tame otters: ‘Sometimes [...] ye fysshers [...] lerne it to fysshe in this maner. The fisher casteth his nette at ye one syde of ye water & this lytell beste is set in at the other syde & he dryueth ye fysshes into ye nette’ (Anonymous 1526, p. 89). Almost identical statements can be found in a number of other works, including editions of works by Conrad Gessner (1620, p. 685), Ulisse Aldrovandi (1637, p. 294) and Edward Topsell (1658, pp. 445–446). It is possible that they all derive from a common source.

The English author Izaak Walton (1594–1683) is another European source for this custom. In his famous *The Compleat Angler* (1653, chapter 2), reprinted many times and translated into many languages, he describes in detail how otter pups were caught at the age of three to four months and then trained like dogs. The otter was muzzled to prevent it from eating fish, and was fastened by a leash to its master. Otter fishing in the Hebrides is mentioned by the Scottish author Martin Martin around 1695. The otters were ‘trained to go a Fishing, and fetch several sorts of Fish home to their Masters’ (Martin 1703, p. 391). We have several examples from England, recorded for instance by the Reverend John George Wood (1827–1889):

A well-known gentleman was possessed of one of these animals, which had been trained with singular interest. When called, the otter immediately answered to the appropriate name of Neptune. The animal, it appeared, was caught two years ago,
being then only a few weeks old. It was actually suckled by a pointer, and, showing early signs of docility, was made over to the gamekeeper. In process of time, the animal increased in aptitude and sagacity, and was soon enabled to undertake the duty of an economical fisherman, frequently procuring a dish of excellent burn trout at such seasons when the angler’s art, from adverse winds or foul streams was in vain (Wood 1865, p. 384).

Wood offers several accounts of how impressive tamed otters were as fishermen. Though he states that otters could be a fierce and savage animal when attacked, they were susceptible to human influence and could easily be taught to catch prey for their master. Wood’s stories have much in common with Olaus Magnus’s description of otters carrying fish to the kitchen. Alfred E. Brehm describes how an otter was trained to fish and how a patient hunter could instruct an otter to fetch a bird shot down in water (Brehm 1895, p. 178).

There are also examples from Germany. Georg Franz Dietrich aus dem Winckell, in the mid nineteenth century, recounts a peculiar story of eine gezähmte Fischotter […] welche unter der Pflege eines in Diensten meiner Familie gestandenen Gärtners aufwuchs, und meinen Brüdern und mir selbst viel Vergnügen machte. Noch ehe sie halbwüchsig wurde, befand sie sich nirgends so wohl als in menschlicher Gesellschaft. Waren wir im Garten, so kam sie zu uns, und guckte nur mit dem Köpfchen aus dem zugeknöpften Oberrocke. Als sie mehr heranwuchs, reichte ein einziges mal Pfeifen nach Art der Otter, verbunden mit dem Rufe des ihr beigelegten Namens, hin, sie sogar aus dem See, welcher einen Theil des Gartens umgab und in welchem sie sich gern mit Schwimmen vergnügte heraus und zu uns zu locken. Bei sehr geringer Anweisung hatte sie

Postcard published in 1902, referring to the otter mentioned in Pasek’s memoirs: ‘We went with Mr Straszewski to a pond and I said: Robak [the otter’s name]! I need fish for my guests. So the otter dived in the water and brought a pike for a dish’ (private collection).
apportiren, aufwarten und nächstdem die Kunst sich fünf bis sechs Mal über Kopfs zu kollern gelernt, und übte dies Alles sehr willig und zu unserer Freude aus. Beging sie, was wol zuweilen geschah, eine Ungezogenheit, so war es für sie die härteste Strafe, wenn sie mit Wasser stark besprengt oder begossen ward, wenigstens fruchtete dies mehr als Schläge. Bei jeder Züchtigung hörte man den […] erwähnten klagenden oder unwilligen Laut. Ich erinnere mich nicht daß der Pächter des fischreichen Sees über erlittenen Schaden geklagt hätte, der ihm durch diesen sonst angemachten Fischfeind erwachsen wäre, auch habe ich sie nie einen Fisch fangen oder erfolgen sehen. Wahrscheinlich kam dies daher, weil das Thier nie irgendetwas vom Fisch zu fressen bekommen hatte. Ihr liebster Spielkamerad war ein ziemlich starker Dachshund (Aus dem Winckell 1822, pp. 45–46).

Frédéric de Tschudi (1889, p. 171) provides a Swiss example, claiming that otters could be trained to go into the water on command and bring back fish to their masters. A brief account is also given from the Kerzhenets River in Russia (Formosov 1923, p. 85).

In Poland, a well-known otter was kept in 1680 by a nobleman, Jan Chryzostom Pasek (1898, pp. 223–227), who in his memoirs presents a detailed account of its fishing skills. Eventually, he gave the otter to King Jan III Sobieski, who greatly admired the animal. One of Sobieski’s soldiers, unaware that the otter was tamed, killed the animal as a pest and sold the skin. Similarly, the famous Polish writer Wincenty Pol (1873, p. 18) describes the skills of the otter in a poem, including playing and fetching fish. It is difficult to say whether his account is original, or based on Pasek’s.

There are a few nineteenth-century accounts of tamed otters being kept that were not used for fishing. This was the case on the river Widawka in central Poland (Anonymous 1865a), on the Jeziorka near Warsaw (Anonymous 1865b), and in Śniatyn on the Prut, in western Ukraine, where the otter was killed because of the high price of its skin (Anonymous 1885). The Polish zoologist Antoni Wałek (1866) was probably referring to the one on the river Jeziorka, since he stated that the director of the paper mill owned an otter. There was such a mill by this river, in Konstancin. The same author also stated that, a few years earlier, two young otters had been caught in Łażienkowski Park, at that time near Warsaw (now in the centre of the city). Similarly, there is an account of a fisherman’s intention to tame captured young otters (Anonymous 1877). These tamed otters were even objects of

Advertisement for a tamed otter, from 1892: ‘A tamed otter, which can crouch like a dog, may be bought at a price of 25 roubles from Mr Łukasz Sacewicz in the village of Podhorbowie in the Bialskie region. Contact may be made directly or by mail, writing to the post office in Chotyłów.’
trade, as can be seen from an advertisement for the sale of a tamed one (Anonymous 1892) or information about the sale of six young otters in the city of Toruń (Anonymous 1884). In a brief note on taming otters, hunters in Poland were encouraged to look at these creatures not as vermin to be destroyed, but as intelligent animals whose skills people could use. Spring was the best time to catch and train young otters.

Descriptions like these can be compared with Olaus Magnus’s account of the fish-fetching otter and prove that the case he described was neither an isolated one, nor fictitious; it is very likely that he actually knew of, or had seen, trained otters fetching fish in Scandinavia.

**Fishing with otters in Sweden**

Olaus Magnus’s description of otters from 1555 is often quoted as an amusing example of how little he knew about wildlife. However, many sources, both older and more recent, would agree with his report; the fact is that otters are quite easy to tame and can, just like dogs, be taught signals and commands by their masters. The Swedish cultural historian John Bernström and ethnologist John Granlund, in their comments on Magnus’s depiction, did not specify any older sources and it can therefore be assumed that it was based on the bishop’s personal knowledge and experience of conditions in Sweden at the time.

Olaus Magnus’s record of the existence of fishing with otters in Sweden is also corroborated by evidence in later publications. In 1752, in the proceedings of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, Johan Low from Lund published an article on how to train otters. Low describes the techniques used to capture a young otter alive by driving it out of its holt with sticks and dogs, and then to train it by simple commands to catch a fish, using a device made especially for fetching and carrying, and a special collar with small spikes (Fig. 5). Low (1752) also mentions Bengt Nilsson of Kristianstad,
who very successfully trained an otter to catch fish for his household. One of the Academy’s commissioners, Baron Carl Hårleman, added that he had seen a man using an otter for fishing at Kungsholmsbron in Stockholm; the otter dived several times, and each time it surfaced it brought its master a nice fish (Hårleman in Low 1752, p. 144).

In a manuscript from the late eighteenth century describing the fauna of the Swedish province of Halland, Pehr Osbeck explicitly writes that the population there do not use trained otters for fishing (Osbeck 1996, p. 21). His remarks may have been true of Halland but, as demonstrated, otters were certainly trained for fishing in Sweden in the eighteenth century, a practice which, for some time at least, continued in parts of the country.

Otter pups are easily tamed, as several authors with experience of training the animals confirm (for example, Areschoug in Lilljeborg 1874, p. 561; Edström 1968, p. 38). One Swedish zoologist, Sven Nilsson, wrote in 1847 (p. 81) that otter pups ‘could be tamed and trained to fish’. The habit of taming otters for fishing is described in several locations in Sweden. Sven Littorin told a story, probably somewhat exaggerated, about a farmer who for several years kept a tame otter that had been trained to catch salmon and other large fish with such efficiency that he was able to get rid of his fishing gear (Littorin 1832, p. 315).

Ethnographic observations from western Sweden give interesting insights into the use of otters for fishing. From Ödeborg parish in Dalsland, Alex Andersson, born in 1852, states:

In the past they used trained otters for fishing. They took an otter with them in the boat. When they got out to sea, they released the otter. He dived for fish and brought them back to the boat. For each fish he caught, they gave him a part of the fish. This made him eager. An otter that was to be used for fishing was not to be caught before Michaelmas. The otter became as tame as a dog (ISOF: Department of Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research, Gothenburg: IFGH 2930, p. 21).
From Bohuslän, the following account is narrated by Axel Karlsson, born in 1874:

At one time, I had three otters that I had tamed myself. They used to run around freely between the houses at night and get up to mischief. Folks used to knock on my door and say, either there are ghosts in the village or it is your otters that are roaming about. Then I would take a couple of salted whitings with me and the otters always followed me back home like puppies (ISOF: Department of Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research, Gothenburg: IFGH 5885, p. 6).

In an interesting account by Gotthard Sjöman, born in 1869, from Vetlinge parish on the island of Öland, there is a description of a trained otter. Sjöman recounts how a fisherman, on his way to the ocean, heard a very young otter on the shore crying in despair. The fisherman captured the otter and placed him in his boat, before steering out to sea where he harvested his catch of herring. The fisherman fed the otter herring and took him back home, were he quickly befriended his family and their small dog. As the otter grew older, he followed the fisherman around like a faithful dog and answered to the name of Ludde, because of his fluffy fur (Ludde is a common dog’s name; Leibring 2015, p. 57). In one instance, a couple of neighbouring fishermen lost some of their chickens and blamed Ludde. The fisherman decided to confine Ludde to his backyard, together with the dog. When chickens started to disappear again, Ludde was proved blameless, and they discovered that it was a fox that was massacring the chickens. The account does not say whether Ludde could catch fish for the fisherman; probably he did not, his main function being to serve as a pet (ISOF: Department of Dialectology and Folklore Research, Uppsala: ULMA 20539, pp. 9–12).

The Swedish author Albert Engström, drawing on the accounts of an old fisherman known as Roddar-August, of Gräsön in Uppland, describes how fish could be caught with tamed otters. Roddar-August bragged:

But fishing with a tame otter is possible, Engström, and that is as true as the Bible. When I was a lad, there was an old man on Gräsön, who had two [otters], which he had raised since they were as small as this. Believe me if you will, but they used to drag fish to the old geezer […] and he ate until he became as fat as a wholesaler, and still he had fish to spare, so that he could sell it in Öregrund, salted of course.

Roddar-August also claimed that the otters slept in kennels in the yard and acted as guards (Engström 1946, p. 15).

One last example comes from Norway, from the Reverend John Bowden, who mentions fishing with otters in his book Naturalist in Norway (1869). In one section, describing the otter in the wild, Bowden states that the animal can be tamed. As an example, he quotes Bishop Reginald Heber, who saw tame otters used for fishing in the Ganges region of India, and then goes on to say that captured otters are difficult to keep alive and should be fed small fishes and milk, followed by bread and milk. He states that when an
otter is ‘sufficiently tamed, it may be taught with artificial or even dead fish; should it injure the fish, it must receive a gentle castigation with a whip. When it knows how to dive in pursuit of a fish in the water, it should be sent in to catch fishes for its master’ (Bowden 1869, p. 73).

Otter fishing among the Sami

Among Sami fishermen too, the use of otters for fishing seems to have been widespread, although unfortunately the practice is only sparsely documented. ‘In earlier times people kept tamed otters to assist them in fishing’, explains Ola Omma, born in 1922 in Karesuando, in an interview with Yngve Ryd in Jokkmokk (Ryd 2007, p. 230). In winter, when it was hard to catch fish using snares or nets under the ice, the otter was especially useful, as it could be released into open holes in the ice.

The Sami of northern Scandinavia regarded the otter as a species that should not be hunted. However, Sami who relied on fishing often tamed otters to assist them. To capture an otter for training, they searched for them during the spring when they had pups in their holts. Male pups were preferred to females, which were left in the holt to grow up with their parents. Once you had taken on an otter pup, you were obliged to keep it for life. Initially, the pup was kept in a cage made of willow branches and was fed with small fish. It was easily tamed and could then be released from its cage. The otter lived together with its owner, in their hut or tent. The Sami avoided keeping otters together with dogs. A tame otter could learn to fish by itself, but they preferred to let the pup train with a tame adult otter. Otters were given names; in her recollections, Omma mentions Guollenjunnje (‘Fish Nose’) as an example. Whistles and commands were used to control the otters. They caught fish for their owners, but could also drive shoals of fish towards land. In addition, they could indicate to their owners where fish were located in streams and lakes (Ryd 2007, pp. 230–235). Fishing with otters is also known from northern Karelia. There, otters were used in particular by children, who took them along on winter fishing trips (Aaltonen 2007).
Conclusion

This study has shown that there is no reason to doubt Olaus Magnus’s illustrations and descriptions of an otter catching a fish for its master. On the contrary, the practice is referred to in many texts, both older and more recent, and is further corroborated by ethnographic evidence. Training otters for fishing was not a method used by the upper classes of society; rather, the sources seem to indicate the opposite. In many places, it was a method employed by poor fishermen, a view supported by accounts found in the Swedish folklore archives.

There is evidence of fishing with otters from Sweden, Norway, Sápmi, Karelia, Germany, Switzerland, Poland, Scotland including the Hebrides, England, Russia, China, India, Bangladesh and probably North America. The practice also occurs elsewhere (Allen 2010, p. 44). Grudger (1927, pp. 205–206, 219) mentions it occurring in Malaysia and South America, for example. Indeed, both the Eurasian *Lutra lutra* and the Asian *Lutrogale perspicillata* have been used for this purpose. Two different kinds of otter-fishing technique have been employed through history. The commonest way in Asia seems to have been to use otters to drive fish shoals into nets. The other way is to train the otter to catch fish for its master, the method described by Olaus Magnus. The decline in the use of otters for fishing is linked to economic changes. Local, usually poor, fishermen have had to compete for fishing grounds, especially with groups that have adopted mechanical fishing techniques. The need to keep up with the demand of global markets has been detrimental to the traditional use of wild animals. Inherently limited by their biology, otters are only able to catch a limited quantity and type of fish. With rising demand and a need for rapid acquisition of resources, the use of animals, especially otters, in their earlier function is now deemed inefficient. In certain instances, however, their specialisation and specific adaptations may still prevail over the potential of technology.

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