



Otters and People

Some Thoughts on Why Otters May Attack

No direct evidence exists to specifically state why river otters attack humans. The mostly likely reason, particularly in south Florida, is the potential for human-otter contact where otters are frequently present in areas of highly concentrated human populations. The human population in Florida has significantly increased over the past half century (no population statistics were examined). In southwest Florida one need only consult aerial photographs, of residential community development, to realize how much area has actually been created for human habitation. This author has been recording river otter presence in southwest Florida since early 2011. The majority of the sightings reported have been within residential communities-particularly communities designed to include artificial lakes and ponds.

Other potential reasons for otters attack on humans could include human encroachment into river otter territories. Territorial defense by the North American river otter, against other otters, has been suggested not to exist. The thought is, the otters' scent marking behavior of specific areas "signals" unrelated otters that the area they have entered is that of another otter, more specifically a female, and "they" are not welcome. Consequently, no "strange" otter entry, no necessity for physical conflict. However, what about humans entering the females' territories? When the female is reproductively receptive, i.e. "in heat", a male is invariably present or nearby. He's going to defend his access to this female. When the female is with her pups and a human gets too close she may choose to move away from the presence of humans. This is probably the most likely choice of the mother otter. However, if the human presence occurs suddenly, which could occur with boaters or kayakers, the female would probably defend her pups immediately. In summary, high human density and activity, in man-made or natural environments + extensive otter distribution in these environments = river otter attacks on humans as well as pets.

