“North American River Otter” Exhibit Press Kit

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

North American River Otter Exhibition Launches At The Living Planet Aquarium

Sandy, UT (January 4, 2012) --- Few animals convey a sense of joy and spontaneity like otters. Visitors to The Living Planet Aquarium this year will have three new animals and a unique new experience to enjoy. The playful river otter, native to Utah, promises new opportunities for wild discovery and fun animal observation. The North American River Otter Exhibit opens Thursday, January 12, 2012 at The Living Planet Aquarium in Sandy, Utah.

Undeniably cute, the river otter is a notoriously playful member of the weasel family. They love to swim, slip and slide, whether in the mud during summer or the snow in winter. They have even been observed playing tag and “juggling” pebbles with their front paws!! Three male river otters will be included among the Utah species featured in the Discover Utah Gallery. They come to us from the Long Island Aquarium in Riverhead, NY where they were born two years ago to wild-caught parents from Louisiana, where populations are so healthy that nuisance animals are often caught for relocation. “They need a new home because Long Island does not have room for this many adult otters, and because inbreeding will become a possibility as the youngsters grow” said Andy Allison, Curator of Animals. “Shortly after arrival to The Living Planet Aquarium the otters will be trained to enter their off-exhibit enclosures. They may rotate on and off exhibit to encourage more activity while on exhibit” said Allison. Trained aquarists will encourage the otters to demonstrate their species-typical behavior, allow them to exercise control or choice over their environment, and to enhance their well-being by offering them a variety of novel experiences. Enrichment items will comprise of different categories including olfactory (new smells), manipulative (something to play with such as food hidden inside something), habitat (new logs or rocks in the enclosure), food (like occasional treats they don’t see very often) and more.

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At one time, river otters were found throughout most of Utah's waterways. Early records report regular sightings of otters. Large quantities of Otter were known to live in the streams of Utah in the 1830’s. It was soon after this that otters seemed to disappear from Utah's rivers, probably due to habitat degradation, water pollution and un regulated trapping during settlement times. Since the start of the 20th century, River Otters have not been abundant in Utah and are protected by the Utah Wildlife Code. Trapping and hunting North American River Otters is currently prohibited. The exhibit will educate visitors about river otters, otter reintroduction efforts, and release locations in Utah. Preview the otters in their new habitat here http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ot63azU4z6s.

The North American River Otter Exhibit is made possible by the George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation.

Aquarium members will be allowed into the facility 1 hour early at 9am Thursday, January 12 for an exclusive “Members Only Sneak Peek” of the new exhibit. Membership card must be present for Aquarium entrance.

Quick Facts
What:    North American River Otter Exhibit
When:    Thursday, January 12 10am – 6 pm
Where:   725 E 10600 S in Sandy
Admission:  $9 adult
            $8 senior, student & military
            $7 children age 3-17
            Children 2 and under are admitted free of charge.
Sponsor:  George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation
Information:  www.thelivingplanet.com  (801) 355-FISH (3474)

The Living Planet Aquarium Mission Statement

The Living Planet Aquarium inspires people to explore, discover and learn about Earth’s diverse ecosystems.

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“North American River Otter”
Exhibit Facts

What: A $25,000 special exhibition exploring the North American River Otter, otter reintroduction efforts, and release locations in Utah.

Where: The Living Planet Aquarium, 725 E 10600 S, Sandy, Utah.

When: January 12, 2012. 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily (closed November 22 & December 25)

Aquarium members are invited for an exclusive sneak peek of the exhibit at 9 a.m. January 12. Membership card must be present for entry.

The exhibit: Three male North American River Otters will be a new addition among the Utah species featured in the Discover Utah Gallery. They come to us from the Long Island Aquarium in Riverhead, NY where they were born 2 years ago. The exhibit will educate visitors about river otters, otter reintroduction efforts and release locations in Utah.

Admission: Included with Aquarium admission: $9 adult; $8 senior (over 65) student (13–17 or with college ID) and military; $7 child (3–12). Children under 3 are admitted free. Group rates are available with advance booking for parties of 20 or more.

Parking: Parking is available in the aquarium parking lot with additional parking at REAMS 10670 S 700 E.

Tickets: The otter exhibit is free with purchase of Aquarium admission. General information is available at www.thelivingplanet.com or (801) 355-fish (3474). Advance tickets are available online www.thelivingplanet.com. There is no service charge to print tickets at home or to pick them up upon arrival.

This exhibit is made possible by the George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation.

January 2012
North American River Otter
*Lontra canadensis*

**Range:** North American River Otters occur throughout Canada and the United States except in southern California, New Mexico, and Texas. They are also not found in parts of Nevada and Colorado where the Mohave Desert is located.

**Habitat:** River otters can tolerate a variety of environments from lakes to rivers and even swamps & marshes. They are found no more than a hundred meters or so away from water. They have been known to build dens in the burrows of other mammals (i.e. beaver lodges). These dens are commonly found along river banks or under a pile of rocks or logs. These otter residences feature numerous tunnels—one of which usually allows them to come and go from under the water. Tunnels will lead to an internal nest chamber. The nest chamber will be lined with organic materials such as leaves, moss, tree bark, or hair.

**Characteristics:** Because these otters are semi-aquatic, they have very streamlined bodies with thick tapered tails and short little legs. They also have wide, rounded heads, small ears, nostrils that can be closed underwater, long thick whiskers, and completely webbed feet. The fur of the otter is dark brown on the back and light to golden brown on the belly and cheeks. They have short, dense fur with a layer of insulating fat underneath.

An adult river otter can weigh anywhere from 25 to 30 pounds. They can grow to be a length of about 4 ft. including the tail which makes up almost half of its body. Males are generally larger than females.

The North American River Otter can swim up to 7 mph. They can live, in captivity, up to 21 years. In the wild, they only live about 9 years.

**Behavior:** River otters are solitary except for mating season and when they are raising young pups.

These otters swim by propelling themselves with their powerful tails and flexing their long bodies. They remain active during winter months and will use ice holes to surface and breathe. They can hold their breath underwater for up to eight minutes. They can float on their backs, tread water, and swim either forward or backward.

River otters can dive down underwater to a depth of 60 feet. River otters are members of the weasel family. They are very playful and have been seen wrestling, bouncing objects on their hands, playing tag, and even sliding down snowy or muddy hills. There is debate however, if the sliding behavior is play or not. Biologists believe that when otters are young it is a play technique, but once the otters mature the sliding behavior becomes a mode of transportation and helps the otter get from the top of the hill to the bottom much more quickly.
North American River Otters get their boundless energy from their very high metabolism, which also requires them to eat a great deal during the day. They also communicate with other river otters with vocalizations or scent marking, which involves using paired scent glands near the base of their tails or urinating/defecating on vegetation within their home range.

The North American River Otter feeds mainly on fish which it catches during the day. In areas that are disturbed by people, the otter actually becomes more nocturnal. It will also consume insects, crayfish, frogs, snakes, lizards, smaller mammals, and small water birds that are found in or around the water.

**Reproduction:** Otters become sexually mature after 2 or 3 years and are solitary animals except during mating season (late winter/early spring). Gestation usually lasts two months, but the young may be born up to a year after mating. This occurs because these otters sometimes use a technique known as delayed implantation of the fertilized egg in the uterus. Instead of going into gestation right away, the embryos remain dormant in the mother’s uterus for about nine months. Births occur from November to May, with a peak in March and April. One female otter can have 1-6 pups per litter.

Male otters do not help raise the baby otters. Females raise them and teach them how to swim by shoving them into the water. River otters are natural swimmers and with the help of their mother (mostly supervision) they soon get the hang of it.

The babies are helpless at birth, much like human babies. Their eyes are closed and they’re covered with a light coat of fur. After three or four weeks they open their eyes, and they begin to play soon after. Juvenile otters stay with their mothers until she gives birth again the next year.

**Conservation Connection:** In the not so distant past, the North American River Otter thrived almost everywhere in North America. It was one of the most widely distributed mammals in the region. Now unfortunately, due to unregulated trapping, pollution, and habitat destruction, the river otter occupies only a fraction of its original range.

Recreational development of waterways, reduction of wetlands and riparian areas for farmland and new homes, and compromised water quality from increased runoff are the main reasons for otter demise. In some areas, roads and railroads contribute to a significant number of otter deaths, as they are often built next to streams and other waterways. Otters are extremely intolerant of chemical contamination. When land is cleared for farming, it not only increases the sediment levels in waterways, but it also introduces pesticides and herbicides. Past studies have indicated the presence of mercury and DDT in the tissue of otters.