

# ECOVOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

## Field research on River Otters

SANTA CATARINA, B R A Z I L

**2009 - 2010**

Auspices & co-operation:  
EKKO BRASIL & ECOVOLUNTEER PROGRAM

You can freely download this project file and files on other projects from the homepage for this project within the Ecovolunteer website:  
<http://www.ecovolunteer.org/> (or from the national ecovolunteer domains).

As it is necessary for participants in this project to be able to communicate in English (or Portuguese), this text is provided only in English.

The text of this brochure is developed in cooperation with the project staff. Annually, under the supervision of the staff the text is updated. Nevertheless you may experience some changes in the field compared to the brochure text. It is inherent to wildlife research programs that during operations incidental changes are necessary because of unexpected results, weather conditions, wildlife behaviour etc. Be prepared for such changes. (Last update July 2009)

Please help us: If you happen to find any of the information below no longer to be valid, or when you have useful additions, then kindly report so to: Ecovolunteer Program: [info@ecovolunteer.org](mailto:info@ecovolunteer.org). That way we shall be able to provide better information to future participants.

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## 1 PREFACE

We offer you a unique opportunity to work with the one of the most charming animals, the river otter. It is a semi-aquatic animal, agile, crepuscular, curious and shy, occupying the top of the food-chain, sometimes hard to be observed from close in the wild.

By participating you support the protection of otters with your time, your energy and your donation. You may also see the river otters in their natural environment in the company of a specialized coordinator who will tell you everything there is to know about these beautiful animals. Since 2008 we represent the only Scientific Breeding for Brazilian Otter and its relatives. Orphans of otters are held in captivity for health recovery, breeding and behaviour studies.

During your stay at the project, you will be in the research base Refugio Animal, in Lagoa do Peri (Peri Lake), at Santa Catarina Island. Peri Lake, which is a freshwater lake, is the base site for the project and is located in a conservation area 30 km from the centre of Florianópolis, capital of the State of Santa Catarina and well known for its natural beauties (42 wonderful beaches), surfing, sailing and scuba diving.

There is a wide range of project activities including analysis of otter frequency at the shelters, monitoring of nests, ethological studies and food habits. The work is done in the field and in captivity (when there is an otter to be recovered or marked), but there is also some laboratory analysis involved. Although you will be based at Peri Lake, there are regular visits to other study areas.

## 2 BRAZILIAN RIVER OTTER

The river otter (*Lontra longicaudis*), is a mammal which belongs to the Marten family. It is a semi-aquatic animal, agile, crepuscular, curious and shy, occupying the top of the food-chain. It can be found in different environments, from rivers, streamlets and fresh water lakes, to estuaries, lagoons, mangroves and coastal islands. The adult can weights 20 kilograms, has an elongated, flexible and muscular body, a round head with small ears and short neck and feet with membranes between the toes. These characteristics provide the animal with great agility, small loss of heat and ability to stay long periods underwater.

Otters are hunted by man because of their magnificence pelts, which can be transformed into an expensive fur coat or a purse. However, the impact of hunting is small compared to the negative effects on the otter population caused by pollution and the destruction of the Atlantic Forest. These factors limit the availability of food items such as fishes and crustaceans, as they disturb the food-chain and reduce shelter areas for the animal. The river otter is now listed as an endangered by CITES (= the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna).

### 3 LAGOA DO PERI AND OTHER STUDY AREAS

The Lagoa do Peri, like the other study areas, is very important for the reproduction of otters, which live in these areas all year around and reproduce during spring. Their home range is quite large and it may be difficult to spot these animals in the wild as they are very shy and more active during the early and late hours of the day. Feeding patterns, monitoring and description of shelters are being held in the study areas.

The waters of the Peri Lake are rich in crustaceans and fishes and surrounded by mountains covered by Atlantic forest. The otters seem to like this environment and many young otters are born and raised in this area. The female and youngsters usually live in a group which is often observed from a distance by a male during the breeding season. When the animals feel threatened e.g. by an approaching boat, the group submerges and quickly disappears.

Peri Lake, which is a freshwater lake, is the base site for the project and is located in a conservation area 30 km from the centre of the town. It has an area of approximately 20 square kilometres, divided in three sectors:

- 1) Leisure area which includes dunes and the lake;
- 2) Cultural area where traditional villages can be found;
- 3) Biological reserve, which includes Atlantic Forest vegetation.

Peri Lake is located on an island (Florianópolis) in the south of Brazil (26°00'S and 48°30'W). The climate is humid, with an annual mean precipitation of 1,406 mm and annual mean temperature of 20°C and mean temperatures of 24,3°C and 16,4°C, in January and July, respectively. The local culture is *açoriana* (Brazilian Portuguese), inherited from the first Portuguese navigators and very traditional. The official language is Portuguese, though Spanish is a useful second. Researchers at the project base speak English and Spanish. People living in the surroundings commonly speak, in addition to Portuguese, Spanish, German and English. Locals are very friendly and treat visitors well, displaying a lot interest and curiosity.

Whilst in the study area you may see many other animal species. Caiman (*Caiman latirostris*), wild cats (*Felis tigrina*) and cuícas (*Philander opossum*), for example, are common in the area. Also, hundreds of local and migrant birds provide a great show for those who love wildlife. During breakfast you can see many of these magnificent birds, such as the gralha azul (*Cyanocorax caeruleus*) and the aracuã (*Ortalis squamata*).

In recent years, the number of otters seems to have declined. The reasons are still unknown which gives even more importance to the present project. Your contribution is essential to help to preserve this species. Besides valuable contribution in the field and with many suggestions which have been implemented, ecovolunteers have helped fund the purchase of kayaks, GPS, a photographic camera, torches and also improve lodging and maintenance facilities at the base. These contributions are critical to the study and to help protect the river otter.

## 4 THE PROJECT

Brazil is an immense country with a coastline of 7,408 kilometres and an area greater than 8,5 million km<sup>2</sup> (larger than Western Europe). Many Brazilian organisations work very hard and have to overcome many obstacles to protect the coastal areas but due to international pressure, most nature conservation projects focus on the Amazon.

The Otter Project started in 1986, with Dr. O. Carvalho Junior who made the first study on the ecology of otters in Brazil (*Auto ecology of river otters at the Peri Lake, master thesis at the UFSC University, Brazil*). After an interruption of almost 10 years, the period that Dr. Carvalho Junior was out of Brazil doing MSc and PhD studies, the project begun again in 2000. In 2002, a partnership with the Ecovolunteer Program, results on a fundamental financial and labour support to the project activities. The work is financed by the help of ecovolunteers, University scholarships, consultancy and selling of products such as T-shirts and bags. The main objective of the Otter Project is to increase the knowledge of the species and to promote its preservation in Brazil.

The Project also works on raising awareness of the tourists and the fishermen community, creating awareness of the importance of the otter preservation and its ecological value. The Project is one of the projects of the INSTITUTO EKKO BRASIL, a non-governmental-organization, which administrates and generates financial support for the Project. The project activities also include an environmental education program for children (Pró-Lontrinha School), which aims at improving the quality of life of the community.

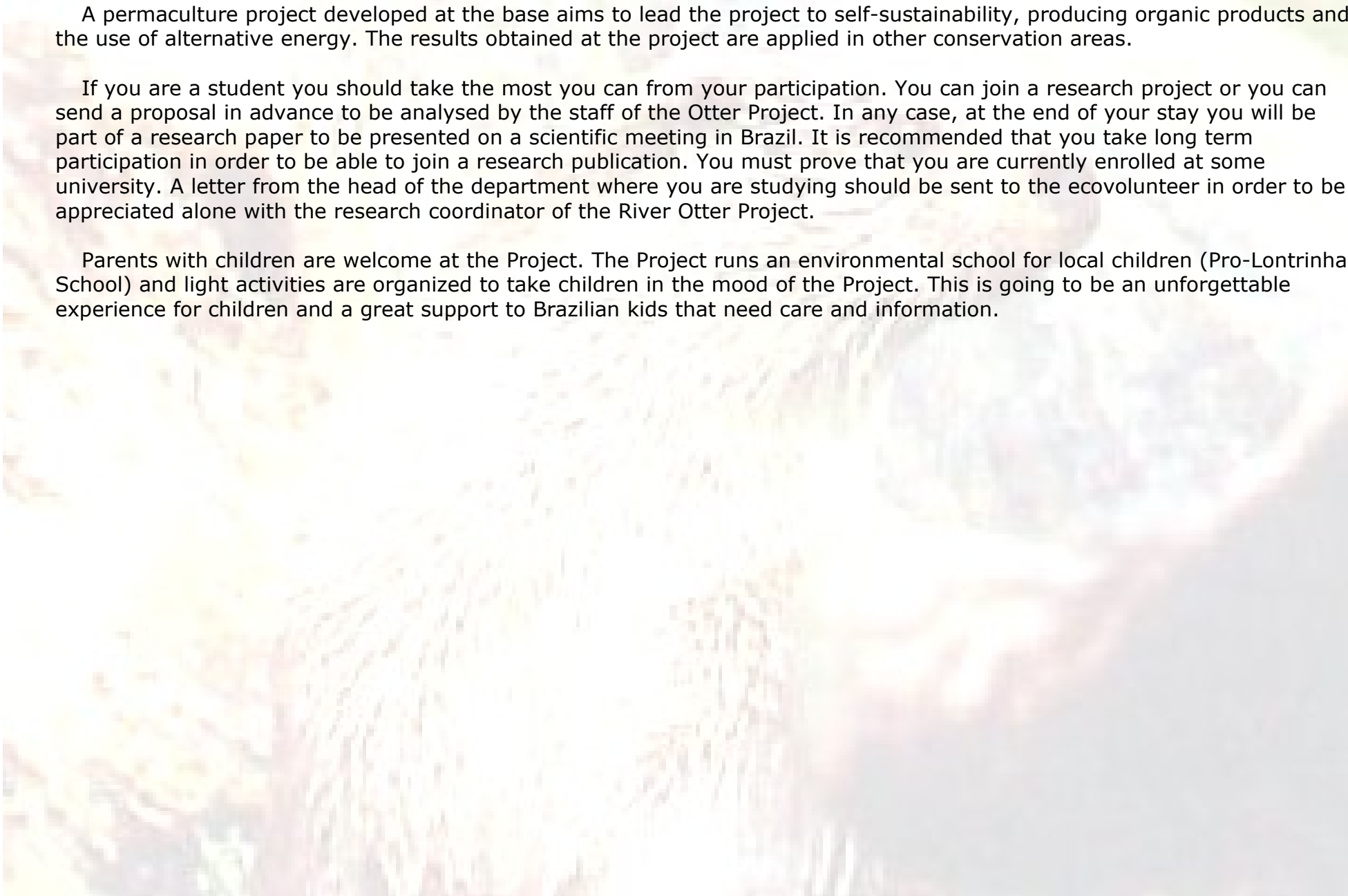
Currently, we run more than 15 sub-projects on otters. Every sub-project has a university student responsible for its conduction, supervised by a research coordinator. A field coordinator is an expert on the study areas and lead ecovolunteers, students and researchers on the data collection. A strict weekly schedule of activities made the execution of all these projects possible. From Monday to Friday, busy days start before sun rise and might cross the night. Saturday is a free day to relax at the base, at the beach or visiting the charming town of Florianópolis. Sunday is the day when new ecovolunteers arrive and normally requires some training with kayakers and talks about the work of the coming week. "Study time" is organized during the week to discuss what has to be done, or for ecovolunteers to read some literature about the *Lontra longicaudis*, or to present some preliminary results. It is a perfect time to increase your knowledge and to know more about the Brazilian culture and ecosystems. Ecovolunteers know in advance what is to do the following week.

The projects currently going on can be seen at the Table below.

Project	Subject	Periodicity
1	Monitoring Otter Shelters 1 and 2	15 days
2	Diet and frequency of otters at Lagoinha do Leste Beach	30 days
3	Diet and frequency of otters at Naufragados Beach	30 days
4	Analysis of diet of otters at Lagoa do Piri	7 days
5	Otter activities based on the frequency of faeces in active areas Section A (Tucano 1 a Tucano 2) Section B (Tucano 4 a Tucano 7)	15 days
6	Duration of active faeces in the Lagoa do Piri	30 days
7	Estimation of economic impact related to the presence of otters at aquaculture ponds	30 days
8	Observation Point	7 days
9	Distribution of shelters in the Lagoa da Conceição	30 days
10	Ecological Corridor: Pântano do Sul, Saquinho, Channel, Waterfalls	30 days
11	Frequency of otter activities in shelters in the Lagoa do Piri	15 days
12	Behaviour in captivity	week
13	Pró-Lontrinha School – Social Project with children and schoolteachers	7 days
14	Monitoring Otter Shelter 7	15 days
15	Metapopulation from DNA analysis and radiotelemetry	30 days
16	Impact of otters on mariculture and aquaculture farms (Ribeirao, Barra da Lagoa, Lontras)	30 days
17	Otters monitoring on mangroves areas	7 days
18	Monitoring Otter canal Lgoa do Peri	30 days

You can also check how the projects are distributed through the months on the next Table. It is quite a challenge to run all these projects together, so you can imagine how important your participation is. Many projects are active because of ecovolunteers participation.

Project	WEEK 1	WEEK 2	WEEK 3	WEEK 4
1	X		X	
2	X			
3			X	
4	X	X	X	X
5	X		X	
6	X	X	X	X
7			X	
8	X	X	X	X
9		X		
10		X		
11		X		X
12	X	X	X	X
13	X	X	X	X
14		X		X
15				X
16	X			
17	X	X	X	X
18				X



A permaculture project developed at the base aims to lead the project to self-sustainability, producing organic products and the use of alternative energy. The results obtained at the project are applied in other conservation areas.

If you are a student you should take the most you can from your participation. You can join a research project or you can send a proposal in advance to be analysed by the staff of the Otter Project. In any case, at the end of your stay you will be part of a research paper to be presented on a scientific meeting in Brazil. It is recommended that you take long term participation in order to be able to join a research publication. You must prove that you are currently enrolled at some university. A letter from the head of the department where you are studying should be sent to the ecovolunteer in order to be appreciated along with the research coordinator of the River Otter Project.

Parents with children are welcome at the Project. The Project runs an environmental school for local children (Pro-Lontrinha School) and light activities are organized to take children in the mood of the Project. This is going to be an unforgettable experience for children and a great support to Brazilian kids that need care and information.

## 5 HOW YOU CAN HELP

This project is not a tourist program! It is a project that is in need of ecovolunteers who want to participate in the research and conservation activities. The research is coordinated by oceanographer Dr. Carvalho Junior with assistance from an experienced staff.

You should realise that you are participating in an ecovolunteer project, not a holiday on the beach. The needs of the project will decide what has to be done and when it has to be done. A weekly schedule, monthly defined, shows you in advance what has to be done. However, you can be sure that there will be enough time for entertainment and relaxation!

You will be lodged at the project base accommodation, attached to the Ecological Station of Peri, a renovated mill. The accommodation includes comfortable rooms and shower facilities. Breakfast and dinner are provided during the week and included in the accommodation cost. Breakfast and dinner are not provided on Saturday and Sunday. Vegetarian food can be arranged. Bread, many fruit and vegetables are produced locally, organic and natural. In addition, the surrounding area offers typical seafood restaurants and small markets where you can shop and visit on your own. During working hours you will be supervised by the project team.

Laundry: There is a washing machine just for ecovolunteers that can be used for free on Wednesdays and Saturdays. You just need to buy the soap.

The station is a well organised project base, not a professional tourist organisation. You can expect good and friendly supervision and cooperation from your local colleagues. The atmosphere is informal and the Brazilian 'relax & swing' attitude sets the tone.

The Otter Project is designed to integrate participants in a friendly and productive atmosphere. Activities vary and may include analysis of otter frequency at the shelters, monitoring of nests, ethological studies in captivity (when there is otters to be recovered) and study of eating habits. The work is done mainly in the field but studies of otters in captivity and some laboratory and computer analysis are involved. Although based at Peri Lake, short trips to the other study areas area carried on and normally include overnight camping, on a different place every week. The work can include trekking through the Atlantic Forest and dunes, rafting, use of canoes kayaks, and nocturnal observations. Depending on your personal abilities and interest you can also participate on data organisation and computer analysis. Monitoring and feeding otters in captivity and cleaning otter places are also part of the work.

In the field, you may assist in operating the GPS (*Geographical Position Satellite*), to establish the geographical position of the shelters and otters or help to report behavioural observations. During their time off, they can go shopping or even organise their own trips.

The institute runs a Scientific Sanctuary where river otters are recovered. Few otters are maintained in captivity for research and educational purposes. These are animals that cannot survive in the wild anymore. You will be helping to clean the cages, feed and play with these otters, always assisted by the staff and the Chief Vet of the Institute.

## 6 YOUR PARTICIPATION CLIMATE NEUTRAL

The Ecovolunteer Program aims to offset all carbon dioxide emissions caused by your participation in the project. For this we cooperate with the Trees for Travel Foundation.



The Trees for Travel Foundation finances the planting, regeneration and maintenance of forests that will lock up greenhouse gases. The Foundation does her work in collaboration with local people and organisations to not only create a greener planet but also to fight against poverty. So we keep the greenhouse effect in check by contributing a modest amount to Trees for Travel to compensate your greenhouse gas emissions while participating in the Ecovolunteer project. Thus you help to make the world a better place at the same time.

The cost for climate compensation is not added to the price you pay, but is fully covered by the Ecovolunteer Program.

Please note that we only care for making your participation in the project climate neutral. Your travelling from your home to the project is not included. We recommend that you yourself will make your travels climate neutral as well. You could ask your travel agent or your airline to do so, or you can arrange that directly yourself through:

Trees for Travel Foundation: Website: <http://www.treesfortravel.info> Mail: [info@treesfortravel.nl](mailto:info@treesfortravel.nl)

## **7 PRACTICAL TRAVEL INFORMATION**

### **7.1 Period**

All year long, January to December.

You can register for a period of one, two or more weeks. Please enter your preferred starting date on the application form. Someone from the Project will be waiting for you at the Florianópolis bus station or airport.

### **7.2 Prices**

As specified on the ecovolunteer website <http://www.ecovolunteer.org/> or your national ecovolunteer domain (check <http://www.ecovolunteer.org/contact.html>).

### **7.3 Participants**

Maximum of 8 participants per week.

### **7.4 Included in the price**

- ◆ Supervision;
- ◆ Transfers in accordance with the program from local bus station/airport to and from the project base;
- ◆ Shared accommodation at the base, breakfast and dinner;
- ◆ Breakfast and dinner at workdays when at the main base;
- ◆ Advice on personal travelling necessities and literature;
- ◆ Advice on rules of conduct.

### **7.5 Not included in the price**

- ◆ Travel to and from Florianópolis (see below "flights");
- ◆ Airport taxes and excess luggage charges;
- ◆ Cancellation insurance, travel, luggage and accident insurance (see below);
- ◆ Personal trips during your time off or during your stay at the station (public transport);
- ◆ Lunches;

- ◆ Breakfast and dinner at weekend days;
- ◆ Food while travelling or in between field work when away from the main base
- ◆ Personal expenses such as: souvenirs, drinks, entrance fees, medicines, etc;
- ◆ Diving equipment (goggles, flippers and snorkel);
- ◆ Breakfast and dinner when away of the main base or travelling with the staff, for instance when making short visits to other study areas away from the Peri Lake main base.

## **7.6 Flights**

You will have to make your own flight arrangements. We advise you not to make reservations before your participation in the project has been confirmed. Of course you can also plan your stay at this project as part of a longer trip.

You can fly directly to Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil or travel overland to Florianópolis by bus, for example via Rio de Janeiro (your booking office will inform you about these transfers).

## **7.7 Insurances**

All participants are required to carry both a travel insurance and a cancellation insurance; the travel insurance should cover for full medical costs. Neither the Ecovolunteer Program nor PROJETO LONTRA nor your booking office, their officers and employees, the research station nor their employees will accept any liabilities that could have been covered by a travel insurance or a cancellation insurance.

## **7.8 Conditions for participation**

This ecovolunteer project is suitable for everyone in good physical health; kayaking and walking are part of the day by day activities. You must be able to take the heat (during the southern summer) and cold (during southern winter), and you must speak English or Spanish or Portuguese. Not all your Brazilian colleagues speak fluent English and it is important that you are patient and understanding. You must be 18 years or older and you must be committed to nature and animal protection, but you should also enjoy working with other people, or, if you prefer: otter people. If you have problems with hearing, walking or breathing, or if you are overweight, you may experience problems during this project.

## **7.9 Swimming and snorkelling**

Depending on the field work, you will have the opportunity to swim and snorkel but you should consult the research or field coordinator beforehand.

Swimming and snorkelling is at your own risk: there is no surveillance or instruction.



### **7.10 Proximity of services, villages, roads and transportation**

Close to the base of the project (700 m) there are markets and places to eat where you can buy the basic and have meals for low prices. A small fishermen village, around 3 km far from the base also offers small craft shops and seafood restaurants. Buses to town can be taken every hour. The trip to town takes around 40 minutes according to the traffic. The bus stop is at 5 minutes walking from the base.

### **7.11 Smoking and alcoholic drinks**

All facilities are no smoking areas.

Alcohol drinking is only allowed during special occasions as birthdays, for example, and during the weekend.

## 8 ADVICE ON PERSONAL TRAVELLING NECESSITIES

You do not need a special outfit for Brazil. We advise you to bring airy cotton clothing and during the southern winter season (that is during the northern hemisphere summertime) you should bring a warm coat, as the evenings can be fairly cold (sometimes 5°C). You can have your clothes washed at the base (not expensive), so it is not necessary to bring too much clothing.

Below you will find a list of items we recommend you to bring:

- ◆ valid passport
- ◆ printout of this information brochure
- ◆ pocket money, money belt
- ◆ small rucksack
- ◆ sunglasses, hat or cap
- ◆ sunscreen lotion
- ◆ swimsuit
- ◆ clothing (long trousers that dry quickly, shorts, T-shirts & shirts with long sleeves, sweatshirt)
- ◆ strong, dark and warm clothes (during winter)
- ◆ waterproof jacket
- ◆ comfortable shoes (for instance, sandals)
- ◆ walking shoes
- ◆ spare glasses for those who wear them
- ◆ personal first aid kit
- ◆ insect repellent
- ◆ comfortable shoes for daytime and spare time
- ◆ personal items
- ◆ flashlight (with spare batteries)
- ◆ light summer sleeping-bag, camping mattress
- ◆ watch, preferably with luminous dial
- ◆ plastic/waterproof bags to protect your luggage
- ◆ camera (with a zip bag or water proof bag)
- ◆ binoculars

### **For the field trips always bring:**

- Sleeping bag
- Towel
- Clothes for all types of weather & temperatures (warm clothes, bikini, rain jacket, cap, sunglasses).
- Flip-flops
- Walking shoes
- Flash light
- Sun protector
- Photo camera
- Toilet paper
- Insect repellent
- Water
- Mattress if you go overnight camping in a tent

### **Naufragados**

- 1 to 2 nights camping in tent
- At Naufragados is a bar/restaurant where we can have diner.
- We will visit the otter shelters by foot.

### **Lagoinha do Leste**

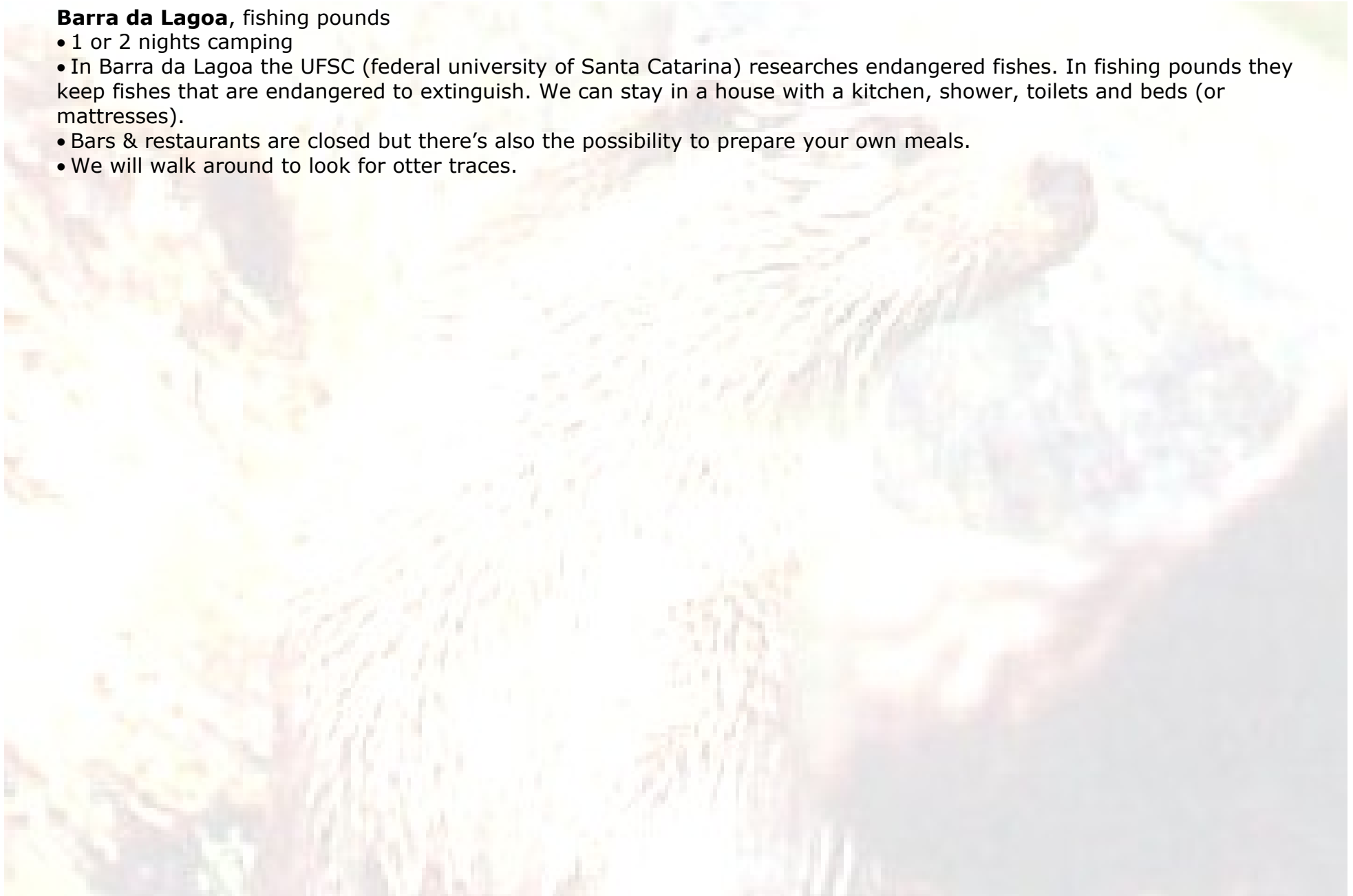
- 1 to 2 nights camping in tent
- Lagoinha do Leste is a protected area so this means: no houses, shops, bars, restaurants or whatsoever. However, Batista & Fernando – friends of projeto lontra – live here all year in tents. They constructed a kind of kitchen. We can use this kitchen to prepare our meals.
- Bring walking shoes to climb the rocks leading to the shelters.

### **Lagoa da Conceição, policia ambiental**

- 1 to 2 nights camping in tent
- We stay at the base of the environmental police. There is a canteen with a kitchen, shower, toilet & television. We can use the kitchen to prepare our meals, or make a barbecue.
- We will look for otter presence by kayak so bring clothes that may get wet.

**Barra da Lagoa**, fishing pounds

- 1 or 2 nights camping
- In Barra da Lagoa the UFSC (federal university of Santa Catarina) researches endangered fishes. In fishing pounds they keep fishes that are endangered to extinguish. We can stay in a house with a kitchen, shower, toilets and beds (or mattresses).
- Bars & restaurants are closed but there's also the possibility to prepare your own meals.
- We will walk around to look for otter traces.



## 9 PRACTICAL TIPS

### 9.1 Climate for Santa Catarina Island

	Mean temp. (°C)	Rain (mm)	# days with rain
January	24.4	191	16.7
February	24.6	183	16.4
March	24	169	15.8
April	21.8	128	12.9
May	19.4	105	10.2
June	17.1	85	9.9
July	16.4	82	10.3
August	16.8	94	10.5
September	17.8	115	13.4
October	19.3	129	14.5
November	21.1	131	14.4
December	23	139	15.1

### 9.2 Electricity

The voltage in Santa Catarina State is 220 volts.

### 9.3 Special days

- 1 January: New Year
- 6 January: Epiphany
- February: Carnival (date varies)
- 12 October: Our Lady of Aparecida Day
- 2 November: All Souls' Day
- 15 November: Proclamation of the Republic
- 25 December: Christmas

#### **9.4 Inoculations**

Recommended are DTP (diphtheria, tetanus, polio), gamma-globulin or Havrix and typhoid tablets. We strongly recommend you to check with a health-centre in your country to receive updated information.

#### **9.5 Medical services**

A medical centre with nurses and doctors is located in the village at 1.6 km from our base at Santa Catarina Island.

A University hospital is located as 15 km from our base at Santa Catarina Island; it is a government hospital and it is up to international standard.

Both the medical centre and the university hospital are free of charge.

A variety of good private hospitals is located within a range of 40 kilometres / 30 minutes, providing up-to-international standard service ranging from first aid up to heart-clinic, facilities for diabetes patients, and surgery. Most private hospitals accept patients covered by international insurance companies.

#### **9.6 Money**

It is recommended that you change some money at the airport. Generally speaking, US\$100 should be enough for a start. Later, you will be able to exchange more if you want to.

The monetary unit of Brazil is the *real*, R\$. One Real equals 100 *centavos*.

In June 2009, One US dollar is approximately R\$1.80 and one Euro is approximately R\$ 2.75. Check with an on-line currency converter for the current rates.

Credit cards and traveller cheques are normally accepted.

Opening hours:

Shops, Mon-Fri: 08.00-18.00 or 19.00, Sat: 08.00-12.00.

Some shops close during lunch time.

Shopping centres close late.

Banks, Mon-Fri: 10.00-16.00.

#### **9.7 Passport and visa**

Citizens of most countries do not require a visa (USA and Canada are notable exceptions) but we advise you to check this with your booking agency or the Brazilian Embassy in your home country. You should bring enough money to finance your stay and have the ticket for your return trip.

### **9.8 Prices**

Excluding the expensive big cities (Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Salvador), the prices of goods in Brazil are relatively cheap and you can get almost anything you need.

### **9.9 Language**

The official language is Portuguese but the Brazilian pronunciation differs from English on some points: instead of 'r', Brazilians say 'h' and their use of words is very different from that of the European Portuguese. If you want to study Portuguese before you visit Brazil, it is advised that you consult a 'Brazilian' tutor.

### **9.10 Telephone**

Many public phones operate on special cards that you buy at newspaper stands, post offices or pharmacies.

### **9.11 E-mail**

There is a 24 hour internet connection available at the base which you are welcome to use any time you like.

### **9.12 Time**

Brazilian time at the project location is generally three hours earlier than Central European Time.

### **9.13 Safety**

At the project base you do not have to worry about your personal safety when you go out. Of course, you should always be alert.

### **9.14 Water**

The water at the base is of excellent quality but you might want to drink bottled water (available at the base and free of charge). Do NOT use tap-water outside the base. Do not eat raw meat, chicken, fish or shellfish on your own. Raw vegetables are produced organically at the base.

The tap-water in the cities is NOT trustworthy.