In Illinois, the river otter got a shove from endangered to common status.

Over-achievers?

Historically, river otters (*Lontra canadensis*) were common almost everywhere in North America except the desert southwest and arctic circle.

As explorers and settlers moved westward, otters disappeared from about 75 percent of their former range because of unregulated harvest, habitat loss and water pollution.

When I graduated from high school in 1978, otters had been protected in Illinois for nearly 50 years without much success. Fewer than 100 remained in the state and they were confined to a few counties.

However, prospects for a turn-around seemed promising. Water quality had improved greatly thanks to the Clean Water Act. Many streams and rivers were still flanked by trees. Beavers were abundant, providing wetlands and vacant den sites.

Perhaps all otters needed was a little push. As it turned out, they got a hard shove.

Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky and Missouri released more than 2,000 otters during the 1980s and 1990s. Nearly all of them came from Louisiana, where otters were abundant and a network of trappers could supply healthy animals captured from the wild with small foothold traps.

Otters flourished in their new homes.

By 1997, they had been documented in all the major waterways in our state. Illinois' Endangered Species Protection Board down-listed their status from endangered to threatened in 1999.

(Photo © C.C. Lockwood.)

In 2004, otters were common and de-listed from their status as state threatened.

Coming up with a population estimate for central and southeastern Illinois is straightforward because we know we started with 346 otters that were released there. Scientists from the Cooperative Wildlife Research Lab at SIU estimated that their numbers had doubled every 4 to 5 years and reached 4,600 in 2005.

Coming up with an estimate for the entire state is a bit trickier, but 17,000 is a good ballpark figure.

Some people consider this bounty a mixed blessing. They are beautiful, adaptable animals that remind us that an endangered species' fate is not sealed, even nowadays.

But I've spoken to more than one grandfather who was excited about a fishing trip with the grandkids—until they found fish heads scattered around their favorite pond.

Facing similar problems, Missouri, Iowa and Kentucky recently approved regulated trapping seasons to balance the needs of otters and people. Some believe this has tarnished the otter's success. Others believe it shines as brightly.

—**Bob Bluett**, Wildlife Diversity Program Manager, DNR Division of Wildlife Resources