

ESC America's Top 10

General Information	Please Use this Column to Provide the Requested Information
Organization & web address	Defenders of Wildlife, www.defenders.org
Contact name (for species info)	Elizabeth Fleming
Address	3637 Fourth Street North, Suite 230, St. Petersburg, FL 33704
E-mail & phone	efleming@defenders.org ; 727-823-3888
Communications contact name	Haley McKey
E-mail & phone	hmckey@defenders.org , 202-772-0247
Report Questions	
Do you have photos that can be used in the report?	Yes, or we could help locate photos
Will you want printed reports?	Yes
If your species is selected, will you use the opportunity to organize around the species and/or publicize its plight?	Yes
The Species & Its Status Questions	
Common name, genus & species	American alligator (<i>Alligator mississippiensis</i>) and American crocodile (<i>Crocodylus acutus</i>)
Conservation Status	American alligator: Initially listed as Endangered in 1967 on the Endangered Species Protection Act, the precursor to the ESA. It was reclassified to Threatened in 1977. It remains listed as Threatened on the ESA due to similarity of appearance to the American crocodile. The American crocodile was first listed as Endangered on the ESA in 1975. The Florida population was reclassified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as Threatened in 2007. Critical habitat was designated in 1979.
Current population size	American alligator: 5 million (1.25 to 2 million in Florida); American crocodile: An estimated 1,500 to 2,000, not including hatchlings
Has the species been delisted? If yes, when? Was the recovery on time? (Skip questions 17+18.)	American alligator - The Fish and Wildlife Service continues to protect the alligator under the ESA classification as "threatened due to similarity of appearance." American crocodile - no
If no, does the species have a recovery plan?	American alligator - no. American crocodile - yes.
If it does have a recovery plan, what is the projected downlisting and/or delisting date?	
Background Questions (for the report profile)	
Geographic range	The American alligator is endemic to the southeastern U.S., in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas. The largest populations occur in Florida and Louisiana. The alligator's range appears to have been increasing northward in the last few years. In Florida, the American crocodile population was found in the southern third of state and is today concentrated in extreme south Florida. Outside of Florida, the species is found along the coasts of Mexico, Central and South America and the Caribbean.

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Habitat	Alligators live in fresh water environments, such as ponds, marshes, wetlands, rivers, and swamps, as well as brackish environments. In Florida, crocodiles most commonly occur in brackish and saltwater habitats, such as ponds, coves, tidal creeks with mangroves. Crocodiles can also be found in inland freshwater habitats due to the extensive canal system in Florida.
Primary diet (if applicable)	Alligators are opportunistic feeders. Juvenile alligators eat primarily insects, amphibians, small fish, and other invertebrates. Adult alligators eat fish, snakes, turtles, small mammals, and birds. American crocodiles consume small fish, invertebrates, reptiles, birds and mammals.
Public Engagement Questions (Please explain why the species is interesting, why it matters, why decision-makers + the public should care.)	
Interesting facts about the species	In 1987, Florida declared the American alligator as the official state reptile. The United States (Florida) is the only place on earth where alligators and crocodiles occur together. While most reptiles have three-chambered hearts, the heart of alligators, and all crocodilians, has four chambers, a trait shared with mammals and birds. A four-chambered heart results in more efficient respiration needed for the high metabolism of warm-blooded animals leading some scientists to hypothesize that crocodilians may have evolved from warm-blooded ancestors.
Additional background information to complete the species profile in the report.	The American alligator is a conservation success story. Strict law enforcement and protection of its habitat have been central to the successful recovery of the species and maintenance of healthy populations. The American crocodile has also benefited from protection under the ESA and has been increasing in numbers.
What are the most important messages that should be communicated about this success story?	While tremendous progress has been made with recovery of the American alligator and Florida population of the American crocodile, development and water management remain significant threats. Increasing numbers of people living and recreating near water have led to a steady rise in the number of alligator-and crocodile-related complaints. In the Florida, FWC (Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission) receives more than 7,000 reports of nuisance alligators per year.
Outline and describe the existing threats that might impede its recovery, e.g., new threats to its habitat, etc. Include any potential political threats, e.g., a Congressional delisting before its time. Cite any substantiating scientific studies.	While the American alligator has benefited from legal protection and is now abundant in many areas, habitat loss and changes in water management continue to threaten the species. Crocodiles are threatened by loss of habitat to human development, illegal killing and collisions with vehicles. Lack of human tolerance, fear of alligators and crocodiles and illegal feeding of alligators remain problematic. Alligators have been known to kill pets, and rarely people. Most attacks occur in the water, suggesting victims are mistaken for prey. Crocodiles are shy and reclusive and generally do not pose a problem for people.

Criteria-Specific Questions

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Detail the ecological and scientific importance of the species. Note if it is a keystone species. Describe its role in the biodiversity of its environment. Cite any substantiating scientific studies.

Provide information on any additional benefits the species provides, such as economic, medicinal, or ecosystem services.

Judge's score for importance of species.

What recovery actions have been taken for the species?

Why were those recovery actions successful?

If there are or have been multi-agency and/or public/private collaboration to protect the species, please describe.

Crocodiles have always been rare in Florida, but alligators once dominated life in the state's freshwater wetlands. By building and maintaining ponds and nests, alligators (keystone species) create habitat that supports a rich array of life in the wetlands. These depressions hold water during dry periods. The ponds, nests, dens and trails of alligators play a valuable role in the ecology of wetlands.

Alligators are a barometer of the health of wetland communities. Now that alligators and crocodiles have been saved from extinction, difficult decisions regarding water management and land development need to be made concerning the future of these species and their habitat. Alligator harvest and trade create economic value and provide incentives to conserve alligators and their habitat.

The American alligator was listed on the precursor to the ESA in 1967. Critical habitat was designated in 1976. The species was in danger of extinction in the early 1960s through the early 1970s from unregulated hunting and trade in their skins, and strict legal protection helped the species rebound in many areas. The species was placed on Appendix I of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) in 1975. The alligator population rebounded to the point that several states permit carefully controlled seasonal harvests. Sustainable harvest programs have been in operation in Louisiana, Florida, Texas and South Carolina for more than two decades. Management is based on a combination of farming ranching and direct harvesting of wild adults for their hides and meat. Programs to control "nuisance" alligators have become an integral component of alligator management and conservation. The species remains listed as threatened for similarity of appearance to the American crocodile and is afforded legal protection by all states within its range.

States with alligator populations banned or restricted hunting and many populations rebounded quickly. Production from captive breeding, ranching and wild harvest developed quickly in the 1980s and currently produce alligators on a large scale, particularly in Florida and Louisiana. The American alligator is considered a success story and may be a useful model for the sustainable exploitation of other crocodylians in trade. Strict law enforcement and protection of its habitat helped the species to recover. Range states have retained large areas of healthy wetlands. The species has also been studied extensively, which has helped wildlife managers to understand the particular needs of the species.

IUCN Crocodylian Specialist Group, state wildlife agency alligator management programs, university studies, cooperation with licensed trappers, traders and farmers

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Please detail the species' recovery. What increases have there been in the size of the population and in the number of populations?

The American alligator has been used commercially since the late 1700s for its skin. Large-scale unregulated commercial hunting of the alligator started as early as 1800. Florida introduced legislation to protect alligators during the breeding season in 1944. Before hunting was effectively controlled in the 1970s, an estimated 10 million alligators were killed for their skins throughout their range. An estimated five million alligators occur today. The Florida population of the American crocodile is also a success story. The species was listed as endangered in 1975, and since then, its numbers have grown from a few hundred to more than 1,500, not including hatchlings. Since 2007, the Florida population has been listed as threatened under the ESA. Critical habitat was designated in 1979.

If there is political support for the conservation of the species, please explain.

Alligators, and crocodiles to a lesser extent, are recognized as iconic and fascinating natural features of Florida's wild heritage. The number of alligator and crocodile related complaints has been on the rise in recent years, tracking with both growing human and alligator/crocodile populations. Alligator management programs in Florida, Louisiana and other states have been developed around the premise that the economic value derived from the consumptive use alligators can provide economic incentives to conserve alligators and preserve their wetland habitats.

Are there actions that need to be taken by government officials and/or NGOs to continue the recovery?

Habitat conservation and management, improvements to water quality and quantity, continued progress with Everglades restoration projects, increases to funding for regional water management districts, construction of wildlife underpasses for crocodiles, expansion of "living with wildlife" programs to encourage coexistence and responsible behavior (e.g. never feed alligators and crocodiles), increased enforcement of these prohibitions

Are there additional actions that individuals can take to continue the species' recovery?

People can take responsible actions to coexist with wildlife and request policymakers to ensure that these reptiles continue to receive the protections they need.

Judge's score for recovery.

Final Judge's Score

0

Please submit to Nancy Welch at nwelch@endangered.org by July 3, 2013. Thank you for participating in the 2013 Top Ten Report.