

## American Alligator

**Common Name:** Alligator, Gator

**Class:** REPTILIA

**Order:** CROCODYLIA

**Family:** *Crocodylidae*

**Genus species:** *Alligator* (derived from *el lagarto*--the lizard),  
*mississippiensis* (belonging to the Mississippi River)



**Size:** adult male to 3.3 m (11-12 ft.), adult female to 2.75 m (8-9 ft.)

**Weight:** adult males between 180 to 228 kg (400-500 lb.)

**Description:** a large, lizard-shaped reptile with four short legs, and a long muscular tail. The hide is rough and scaled. Young alligators are black with bright yellow blotches and stripes. Adults are a uniform dark color.

**Life span:** average 30 to 35 years in the wild, up to 50 years in captivity

**Sexual maturity:** reached at about 1.8 m (6 ft.) in both male and female

**Incubation:** about 20 to 25 eggs incubate for approximately 60-65 days.

**Habitat:** southeastern United States from Texas to Florida and north through eastern South Carolina. Found in both natural and man-made freshwater lakes, ponds, rivers, and wetland areas.

**Diet:** fish, turtles, mammals, snakes, birds, and even other alligators (under certain conditions); also will eat carrion.

**Status:** listed by the USFWS as threatened due to similarity in appearance to the American crocodile and protected by CITES. (Alligators used to be classified as endangered; they are one of the few animals to be down listed to threatened.)

### Fun Facts

1. The alligator became the official state reptile of Florida in 1987. it is also the mascot of the University of Florida at Gainesville.
2. Because of legal protection, alligators are no longer endangered. They have made a remarkable - comeback but are still classified as threatened due to similarity of appearance. This helps insure its continued protection and that of the endangered American crocodile.
3. Unlike other reptiles, female alligators will protect young for up to two years after hatching.
4. The sex of an alligator is determined by the temperature at which eggs are incubated. If the nest is below 30 degrees Celsius (86 F) all are female; above 34 degrees Celsius (93 F) all are male and the temperature in between will produce both sexes.
5. There are approximately 80 teeth in the mouth at one time. When they wear down they are replaced and an alligator can go through 2,000 to 3,000 teeth in a lifetime.

## **Ecology**

Alligators construct "gator holes" with their large sweeping tails that retain water during periods of drought. This provides water and foraging space for many other species such as wading birds. In turn, alligators may forage on the species attracted to the "hole." Other species, like the red bellied slider use alligator nests for their own egg deposition. Paths used by alligators in sawgrasses widen to form creeks which in turn help to flood marshes during rainy seasons.

## **Conservation and status**

Although heavily exploited since the 1800s, and considered to be endangered in the early 1960s, populations of American alligators have responded well to conservation management and have recovered rapidly. Extensive surveys and monitoring of alligator populations have been done as part of sustainable use programs in several states. Overall, alligator populations are quite healthy and, owing to expanding human populations, programs to control alligators that occur near people and dwellings (termed nuisance alligator control) are an integral part of alligator management and conservation. In some states, near the periphery of the alligator's distribution, alligator populations are less dense and are completely protected.

Sustainable management programs have been operated in Louisiana, Florida, Georgia, Texas and South Carolina for more than a decade. Management is based on a combination of farming, ranching and direct cropping of wild adults. The current stock in farms and ranches is well over 350,000 and throughout the country there are over 150 farms and ranches involved in commercial alligator production. Captive breeding (farming) produces about 20,000 hatchlings annually, i.e. about 10% of production. Commercial production of skins is highly regulated with an interlocking system of permits, licenses, periodic stock inventories, ranch inspections, and rigorous tagging and export permit requirements.

In Louisiana, exploitation is primarily in the form of egg collection for ranches and a managed hunt that utilizes seasonal habitat segregation of female alligators into less accessible parts of the range to focus the hunt on males (65%-75% of harvest) (Elsley *et al.* 1994). Wild harvest generates 20,000-25,000 skins annually. Egg collection from private and state owned lands provides 150,000-250,000 eggs annually to ranches. Seventeen percent of the animals commercially ranched (> 1.2 m long) are required to be returned back to the wild. Skin production from ranches has ranged from 88,000-150,000 per year since 1990.

In Florida, the program includes farming, hunting and nuisance alligator control, as well as egg and hatchling harvests for ranching. Controlled hunting and egg collection on both private and public lands are based on harvest allocations generated from annual population surveys and nest counts for each area. Harvest quotas based on annual monitoring of both nesting and population density is an integral part of the program. Annual production of skins in Florida is around 30,000-40,000 from all sources. A small farming program has also begun in Georgia.

In Florida, Louisiana, Georgia and South Carolina nuisance alligator control is achieved by licensed trappers who, acting under the direction of wildlife officials, respond to public complaints of alligators over 4 feet long that are considered a potential peril to people, pets or livestock. Such animals are - trapped and in most instances killed and their skin and meat sold to defray costs. These programs have converted an expensive animal control program into a self-financing public service and provided important re-assurance to the public who live in alligator habitat. Alligator populations under these management programs are certainly stable or even increasing. The only remaining threat to alligators is the loss of habitat to expanding agriculture and residential development, pollution and water diversion.

Sustainable use of alligators in the USA generates more than 60 million dollars annually, providing a substantial incentive to retain habitat and tolerate alligators. Fees from the regulatory system provide funding for management, regulation, enforcement and research programs on alligators.