



Why Should We Care about Alligators?



The American alligator, North America's largest reptiles, has no natural predators except humans. This species, which has been around for about 200 million years, has been able to adapt to numerous changes in the Earth's environmental conditions.

This changed when hunters began killing large numbers of these animals for their exotic meat and their supple belly skin, used to make shoes, belts, and pocketbooks.

Other people considered alligators to be useless and dangerous and hunted them for sport or out of hatred. Between 1950 and 1960, hunters wiped out 90% of the alligators in Louisiana, and by the 1960s, the alligator population in the Florida Everglades also was near extinction.

People who say "So what?" are overlooking the alligator's important ecological role or *niche* in subtropical wetland ecosystems. Alligators dig deep depressions, or gator holes, that collect fresh water during dry spells, serve as refuges for aquatic life, and supply fresh water and food for many animals.

In addition, large alligator nesting mounds provide nesting and feeding sites for herons and egrets. Alligators also eat large numbers of gar (a predatory fish) and thus help maintain populations of game fish such as bass and bream.

As alligators move from gator holes to nesting mounds, they help keep areas of open water free of invading vegetation. Without these ecosystem services, freshwater ponds and shrubs and trees would fill in coastal wetlands in the alligator's habitat, and dozens of species would disappear.

Some ecologists classify the North American alligator as a *keystone species* because of these important ecological roles in helping maintain the structure and function of its natural ecosystems.

In 1967, the U.S. government placed the American alligator on the endangered species list. Protected from hunters, the alligator population made a strong comeback in many areas by 1975 – too strong, according to those who find alligators in their backyards and swimming pools, and to duck hunters, whose retriever dogs sometimes are eaten by alligators.

In 1977, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reclassified the American alligator from an *endangered species* to a *threatened species* in Florida, Louisiana, and Texas, where 90% of the animals live. In 1987, this reclassification was extended to seven other states.

Alligators now number perhaps 3 million, most in Florida and Louisiana. It is generally illegal to kill members of a threatened species, but limited kills by licensed hunters are allowed in some areas of Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina to control the population. To biologists, the comeback of the American alligator from near premature extinction by overhunting is an important success story in wildlife conservation.

The increased demand for alligator meat and hides has created a booming business in alligator farms, especially in Florida. Such success reduces the need for illegal hunting of wild alligators.



Name: _____
Date: _____

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Before Reading

1. What caused American alligators to become endangered?
2. Why is it important for American alligators to avoid extinction?
3. What is a *niche*?
4. What is a *keystone species*?
5. What is the difference between an *endangered* and a *threatened species*?

After Reading

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