

Why Alligators Are Important – And How To Live With Them

by Ruth Woodham, Board Member, Committee of the Islands

Note: In a series of recent commentaries, Committee of the Islands has drawn attention to the fact that reporting a “nuisance alligator” here on Sanibel usually results in the destruction (killing) of the animal, not in its relocation. Here we explore how and why we should learn to live with these remarkable creatures.

Alligators first appeared on earth around 35 million years ago, but only two species remain in the world today: the American and Chinese alligator.

American alligators are found throughout the southeastern United States, including a large population in Florida. Having shared the habitat with the dinosaurs and survived some major planetary events, alligators began facing the greatest challenge to their survival early in the 20th century -- with the ever-increasing migration of humans to the warmer climates in the southeastern states. This included the barrier islands of Sanibel and Captiva.

Alligator numbers were severely reduced by humans in the 1960s and '70s by contamination of their natural habitat, by harvesting them for meat and hides, by increasing agricultural and industrial development, and by the perceived threat to the safety of humans. The federal government listed alligators as endangered in 1970, and by 1987 they were declared recovered but threatened.

In Florida the animal was classified as “threatened” in 1974 and down-listed to “species of special concern” in 1979. Dee Serage Century, a wildlife expert at the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation, includes a comprehensive history of alligators on Sanibel in her wildlife presentations at the SCCF facility. Serage is also available to talk to homeowners associations that share their property with alligators. Anyone who has not heard her speak is encouraged to check SCCF for her talks at the facility as well as her availability to speak to individual groups.

Three Keys to Living With Alligators

1. Understand the ecological role that alligators play in the environment.

- The alligator’s importance to its environment is so high that it is referred to as a “keystone species.” It can eat practically any prey, helping to regulate animal populations. Too many of any species places burdens on other populations and on parts of the habitat.
- During dry seasons (especially in the Everglades) alligators dig water holes that provide essential habitats for fish and other wildlife.
- They are sentries for nesting birds.

Birds will nest in trees and brush over the water so that predators such as raccoons must reach the nest by water and risk becoming alligator food.

- Alligator nests are sometimes shared by turtles that lay their eggs in the lower section of the nest to incubate in optimal levels of temperature and moisture plus being guarded by a fierce mother gator.
- If harvested legally under proper licenses and permits issued by the Florida Fish & wildlife Conservation Commission, alligators provide a source of food and income to some who would otherwise be unable to support themselves. The current reality TV program Swamp People is an example. For an unfortunate example of illegal misuse, readers are referred to Charles LeBuff's Sanibel Light, Chapter 16, The 'Gator War. LeBuff describes leading a group of Audubon Society birders on a field trip along the Sanibel River in October 1965 when buzzards alerted them to a poacher's kill. He uncovered 29 alligator carcasses, all from animals four to seven feet in length.

2. Be alert to the possibility of their presence.

- Alligators can occur anywhere there is water. Although they prefer fresh water, they have been found in brackish water and marine salt water. Never wade, swim or fish in waters where large alligators are likely to occur, especially at dusk or night.
- Never feed alligators; it is illegal. Normally alligators avoid humans, but alligators that have been fed lose their natural fear of humans and associate them with food. Feeding changes alligator behavior and they may become dangerous.
- Keep children and pets away from water's edge wherever alligators are likely to be present. Do not allow dogs to swim or explore waters that are known to have alligators. Keep dogs on a leash when walking them. There are far more alligator attacks on dogs than on humans mostly because of the size of the potential prey. Keep cats indoors.
- Mating season for alligators occurs from mid-April through May. After building a nest in a sheltered spot in or near water the female alligator lays her eggs, which incubate in about 65 days. Be aware of this period and avoid nests and recently hatched gators. Their mothers are very protective.
- It is rare for an alligator to chase humans unless they are near its nest or threaten it in some other way. If the animal makes an aggressive charge, run fast and straight. Alligators have sharp claws and powerful tails to help them push their bodies up. Fences for protection should be more than 4.5 feet tall. Do not clear the landscape to the water's edge where alligators are known to be. Planting tall grasses or other vegetation will serve as a barrier to discourage them from leaving the water. Serage reminds people who are disturbed by an alligator basking in the sun that during the winter months alligators are not eating. Their body temperatures must be at 72 degrees to eat. Because they are cold-blooded reptiles, the sun is important to keep their temperatures up. Many go for three to four months and up to six months without eating during the colder winter months. According to her, practically all negative encounters occur in the summer months.
- Alligators make terrible pets. It is illegal to possess or take an alligator without the proper licenses and permits. Alligators are purely instinctual hunters and do not show affection. Alligators will never love the hand that feeds them.

3. Respect the unique and special nature of Sanibel as a barrier sanctuary island.

- From the very beginning Sanibel has always been described as special and unique. Official recognition of Sanibel and Captiva's uniqueness occurred in 1939 when the Florida Legislature passed a Special Act (Chapter 1936) to establish a Game and Fish Refuge for the islands of Sanibel and Captiva. Following this designation, the Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge was designated in 1945 to include all of Sanibel.

The state continued to sell off pieces of the nearly 2,000 acres of state-owned land on Sanibel. Various environmental groups took up the cause to preserve the land over the years until the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge was dedicated on February 4, 1978. Because of this legacy as a special sanctuary island, Sanibel residents incorporated as a city in 1974 to protect the island from overdevelopment. A comprehensive history of Sanibel Island, its lighthouse, the National Wildlife Refuge and the early pioneers who made it all possible is recorded in Charles LeBuff's book, *Sanibel Light*, published in 1998 by Amber Publishing, Sanibel.

- On September 3, 1996, the Sanibel Plan was amended to include the Sanibel Vision Statement with Ordinance #96-06; it was reinforced in March 2007, when a referendum to include the statement in the city charter was passed by the voters. The Sanibel Vision Statement's definition of sanctuary states that: "Sanibel is and shall remain a barrier island Sanctuary, one in which a diverse population lives in harmony with the island's wildlife and natural habitats. The Sanibel community must be vigilant in the protection and enhancement of its sanctuary characteristics." Alligators are included!

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