

# AMERICAN ALLIGATOR

*Alligator mississippiensis*



## CASE STUDY: STATE MANAGEMENT OF AMERICAN ALLIGATOR in the Context of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)

### Conservation and Status

The American alligator is the outstanding example of the application of sustainable use for the successful conservation of a crocodylian species. Although heavily exploited since the 1800s, and considered to be threatened in the early 1960s, populations have responded well to management and have recovered rapidly. Extensive surveys of alligator populations have been undertaken throughout the species' range. Continuous monitoring of numerous localities is conducted as a part of sustainable use programs in several southeastern states. Overall, alligator populations are quite healthy. The current total wild population is estimated to be 2-3 million alligators. Sustainable management programs have been operating in Louisiana, Florida, Texas and other southeastern states for many years, based on a combination of farming, ranching and direct harvest of wild adults. Farming and ranching are now being carried out on a large scale, particularly in Louisiana and Florida. Stocks in over 100 commercial farms and ranches throughout the country were well over 790,000 individuals as of December 2013. Captive breeding (farming) produces about 20,000 hatchlings annually. Commercial production of skins is highly regulated with a coordinated system of permits, licenses, periodic stock inventories, ranch inspections, and rigorous tagging and export permit requirements (Elsey and Woodward, 2010).

### Decline of the American Alligator Population

In the early part of the 20th century the demand for skins of American alligator and those of most other crocodylian species around the world was contributing to uncontrolled and widespread illegal harvest of crocodylians. "When the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Crocodile Specialist Group (CSG) convened its first meeting in 1971, all 23 species of the world's crocodylians were endangered, depleted or declining in numbers. Excessive exploitation was rampant, regulated harvest almost non-existent and illegal international trade in crocodylian products was the rule." (*Thorbjarnarson 1990*) The depletion of crocodylian populations represented a significant loss of economic potential for local communities. When the CITES treaty came into effect in 1975, the American alligator was one of the first species to be listed. Along with the American alligator, most other crocodylian species were also listed.

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## Downlisting of the American Alligator

In 1979, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), prompted by the southeastern US range states, submitted a downlisting proposal to the 2nd CITES Conference of the Parties (CoP) in Costa Rica transferring the alligator from Appendix I to Appendix II, thereby allowing a level of controlled international trade. The state fish and wildlife agencies' desire for a downlisting was based on the belief that a sustainable use management program would provide an incentive to landowners to manage and protect the species. The proposal was justifiable based on the non-detriment findings and by the similarity of appearance provisions of the Treaty. The primary argument against downlisting the alligator was that legal trade would stimulate illegal trade to satisfy expanding markets. The rejoinder to that opposition

within CITES was that the alligator trade would be “diverted” to legal, sustainable sources through range state, federal and CITES regulatory requirements. In addition, a core legal supply chain of landowners, farmers, tanners, manufacturers and retailers would help divert supply to legal sources to avoid competition from illegal skins. The tannery bottleneck (less than twelve major tanners operate worldwide) and limited range state supply were critical components to building trade credibility. The American alligator was successfully downlisted and the sustainable use of alligators proved to be an important component to the recovery of the species.

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## International Measures to Monitor and Verify Legal Trade

Alligators immediately benefited from a CITES listing through international regulations that helped certify that the international trade was legal, sustainable and verifiable. The American alligator model set a high standard for other crocodilians that re-entered world trade. This worldwide adherence to a standard set of trade regulations was vital to the protection of American alligator trade. If other world crocodilian species were able to continue to enter into world trade illegally then the American alligator would not be able to compete. The example set by the American alligator model helped to confirm that illegal trade could be diverted to legal sources rather than stimulate more illegal trade as world markets expanded. This paved the way for expansion of legal trade for other crocodilians. Jelden et.al. (2014) reported that in the 1960s the worldwide trade in crocodilian skins was between 6 and 8 million, the majority of which was illegal and unregulated. Today, the annual trade is at sustainable levels for most species of crocodilians and ranges between 1 and 1.8 million skins, the majority of which are legal and regulated.

Several southeastern states (Louisiana, Florida, and Texas) along with USFWS and the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (now AFWA) collaborated in 1982 to initiate an International Alligator/Crocodile Trade Study (IACTS) to annually collect world trade data on crocodilians through cooperation with the World Conservation Monitoring Center (WCMC) in Cambridge, England. The concept was to independently verify, analyze and highlight trade patterns to document all exports, imports or re-exports of crocodilians. The first IACTS Report was published in 1984 and the primary recommendation was to tag all crocodilian skins in trade in order to verify traceability of legally taken skins. Ten years later the Universal Tagging of Crocodilians (Res. Conf. 11.12) was adopted in 1994 during the Fort Lauderdale CITES CoP (Ashley and Caldwell 2013). In the interim, every subsequent CITES downlisting of a crocodilian has required the tagging of skins. The CITES requirement of a serially numbered tag manifest attached to all export permits has become an important component of the regulatory controls that ensure that crocodilian skins in trade are legally taken and not detrimental to the survival of a species.

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## State Agency Involvement in CITES Issues Related to Alligator Trade

One of the most important reasons why appropriate alligator trade mechanisms have been achieved throughout the CITES process has been the continued and unprecedented level of consistent range state engagement with CITES. State fish and wildlife agency involvement spans 35 years with the CITES treaty, IUCN CSG, WCMC, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), TRAFFIC (the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Network) and a broad range of international conservation organizations.

One or more state representatives have attended every CITES CoP since 1979. They have been in attendance during most intercessional CITES Committee meetings and actively participate in the IUCN CSG through regional and working group meetings around the world. Currently, Louisiana and Florida state wildlife agency personnel serve as IUCN CSG Co-Chairs for North America and a Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries contract consultant serves as Chair of the CSG Industry Committee. State agency representatives have been involved in every CITES decision affecting the crocodylian trade. These decisions include: downlisting proposals, range state quotas, removal of reservations, trade suspensions or bans, personal effects, small leathersgoods exemptions, captive bred and ranched specimens, electronic permitting systems and collateral impacts from the snake or other reptile trades.

The state fish and wildlife agencies have enjoyed tremendous success over the past three decades due largely to their agency presence at CITES meetings and intercessional discussions. These successes have underscored the value of consistent commitment and engagement in an increasingly global forum on issues affecting wildlife research, management and enforcement. This level of success, however, has come at a tremendous cost to state fish and wildlife agencies. Recognizing the cost of individual state representation at CITES, AFWA initiated a process in the early 90s to establish a team to represent state wildlife agencies in CITES forums. The process has worked well by ensuring that the state wildlife agencies interests are represented without the necessity of individual states being at the table. Due to the high profile status of alligators at CITES and due to the economic and cultural importance of this species, some states still elect to remain directly involved alongside the CITES Technical Working Group.

## Animal Rights and Welfare Groups

CITES does not recognize humane or ethical issues as part of its mandate, but it is often the same governmental representatives that address these issues in other forums. In 2013, a Swiss Parliament bill to ban the importation of any reptile product taken inhumanely passed the lower chamber and only failed in the upper chamber by one vote. Since there was no definition of “inhumane taking” the Swiss CITES Management Authority advised that if passed, this act would have resulted in a total trade ban on reptile products including skins of alligators. Since Swiss watch makers are high users of American alligator skins for watch straps, the impact on alligator trade would have been devastating. The CITES successes that have established American alligators as the world model for sustainable use were an effective argument in the lobbying effort against this proposed ban.

The CITES international forum provides a venue increasingly used by anti-wildlife trade organizations (particularly animal rights and welfare groups) to undermine, if not ban, trade in wildlife products. Most mainstream wildlife conservation organizations such as IUCN, WWF, Conservation International (CI) and others now recognize the conservation and community benefits of sustainable use, particularly alligators and other crocodylians in trade. However, animal rights and

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welfare groups like the Humane Society of the US (HSUS), Humane Society International (HSI), People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and others are increasingly attempting to use CITES and other forums to recast themselves as “conservation organizations” that misrepresent science-based wildlife management and undermine any consumptive use strategies for wildlife resources. The annual fund raising success of the above top three groups exceeds \$200 million a year in contributions (*PIJAC 2013*). Those are potent “war chests” for political and public persuasion campaigns so far aimed primarily at agricultural operations (poultry, veal, dairy, etc.) But these groups are increasingly targeting reptile trades following the airing of graphic exposes on the southeast Asia python trade; which backlashed onto other reptiles in trade, including the alligator. The weakest link in commercial trade is used to cast aspersion on other related trades, which can be effective propaganda to sway public opinion and policy.

In recent years the State of California instituted a ban on the sale of many wildlife products. The bill prohibiting the sale of these wildlife products would have also included the sale of American alligator products were it not for an aggressive defense orchestrated by the alligator range states. Most persuasive in the argument for removing alligators from the list of prohibited sales was the fact that the species was approved for sale by the CITES convention and was monitored through CITES related processes.

## Summary

The collaboration between state fish and wildlife agencies, federal authorities at USFWS and international organizations over the past four decades focusing on research, management, enforcement, compliance, ethical standards and conservation education have made the American alligator the most internationally recognized sustainable use success story by CITES and most conservation organizations. The alligator has a widely recognized “Marsh to Market” story that protects the species while providing benefits to wetlands, local people and cultures.

The total trade in classic crocodilian skins has averaged a little more than half a million skins per year over the past decade. The leather value of all classic skins is more than \$300 million and manufactured finished products exceed \$1 billion at retail. Recent supply chain audits by several luxury brands confirm the alligator is the most preferred species in trade, particularly for high end watch bands, with a 90 percent market share. One of the primary reasons for the preference towards American alligator is that it is among the most legally verifiable crocodilian skins on the market.

Overall the alligator accounted for more than 50 percent of total world trade in classic skins, about 300,000 hides per year during the last decade compared to total exports in 1984 of 30,000 hides, a tenfold increase in volume. Total raw value (hides and meat) has increased from less than \$3 million to almost \$90 million a year. The primary reasons for the alligator's success as a CITES model was a science-based foundation coupled with a visionary commitment to capture the economic incentives of commerce to benefit conservation and local communities. Today this is known as sustainable use.

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