

## 30 YEARS OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

# AMERICAN ALLIGATOR

More than one million American alligators live in the freshwater swamps, marshes, ponds, and rivers of the southeastern United States. The success of the population is a testament to the resilience of the species, which was near extinction just 25 years ago. There is little question that the Endangered Species Act was paramount in the alligator's recovery.

### HISTORY OF ENDANGERMENT

Habitat destruction and excessive hunting were the primary culprits in the American alligator's decline.

In the mid-1900s, even before the today's development boom, urban and suburban sprawl destroyed and drained the alligator's wetland habitat. Without proper habitat, alligators were not able to eat, mate, and raise their young.

Even worse, however, was the hunting that decimated the alligator population. To their detriment, American alligators produce high-quality leather that was coveted during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. So many of the reptiles were killed to fuel the skins market that they were listed as endangered in 1967 under the Endangered Species Preservation Act.

### ROAD TO RECOVERY

The Endangered Species Preservation Act was not strong enough. In fact, it did not prohibit the hunting or killing of listed species, so alligator poaching continued into the 1970s.

With the passage of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, American alligator hunting became illegal, and the species finally began to recover. It was delisted in 1987, 20 years after receiving protection.

### CONSERVATION TODAY

Although the American alligator has been delisted, conservation continues even today. The alligator closely resem-

bles other crocodylian species that are still endangered, so the commercial use of alligator skins is highly regulated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

### ECOLOGICAL & ECONOMIC VALUE

American alligators are predators at the top of the food chain. Within their wetland ecosystems, they control populations of prey species, including fish, turtles, and small mammals. The alligators thereby keep the ecosystem balance in check.



Adult male alligators also create "gator holes," small ponds that they excavate by clearing vegetation and digging with their mouths, claws, and tails. These depressions hold water during dry seasons and drought and are a great benefit to other wildlife species. Some species, particularly the Florida red-bellied turtle, use the holes to incubate their eggs. The displaced land around their holes also allows new plant growth.

Alligator recovery has paid huge economic dividends as well. Today, farmers raise alligators for commercial purposes in an industry that contributes millions of dollars to the economy. Southern states are now home to more than 150 alligator farms, primarily in Louisiana and Florida.

### OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

American alligator populations continue to rise thanks to Endangered Species Act protections. However, alligators live in wetland areas that also appeal to humans. Wetlands attract developers who are eager to create housing and shopping complexes to accommodate burgeoning population growth in the south.

Rapid development is a significant problem for alligators, and Florida's development is a prime example: by 2020, the state's population is expected to increase by 25 percent to more than 21 million people. The development to accommodate this extreme growth will undoubtedly encroach into the alligator's habitat. Avoiding conflicts between humans and alligators will require that conservation groups and agencies monitor the threats associated with habitat destruction.

