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FROM

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USA

AMERICAN CROCODILES AND THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The survival of the American Crocodile in the United States may depend solely upon the protection provided by the National Park Service in Everglades National Park. This is the finding of Everglades National Park Research Biologist John C. Ogden. In his recently released report on the status of the crocodile he concludes that, due to rapid industrial and commercial development and other human interference, the crocodile will disappear from all areas of its south Florida range, outside of Everglades National Park, in the next few decades.

According to Ogden, the crocodile is at the extreme northern limit of its range in south Florida and the population faces many natural limiting factors here which it does not face elsewhere. Add to these the deleterious impact of man on its habitat and the survival prospects for the crocodile decrease many fold. Even within the Park populations are declining, although at a slower rate, due to interference by commercial fishing, poaching, and even picknicing.

To stabilize the remaining crocodile population in the Park, it will be necessary to have a continuing research and management program that might, very well, require the curtailment of human activity around crocodile nesting sites.

The American Crocodile is on the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife's list of Rare and Endangered Species. Probably no area of similar size in the Continental United States has as many rare and endangered species as does Everglades National Park, according to Park Superintendent John C. Raftery. Many of these rare animals, says Superintendent Raftery, depend to a large extent upon the maintenance of a "healthy" environment in the Park to meet the requirements necessary to maintain their populations. The Park itself is threatened by many external developments brought by man in recent years, focusing public attention on the deterioration of south Florida natural resources. "Rare and endangered species in a rare and endangered park can well mean potential biological disaster", concludes Raftery.

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Responsibility for survival of American Crocodiles (Crocodylus acutus) in the United States may well rest squarely on the shoulders of the National Park Service. Restricted to southern Florida, crocodiles presently occur sparingly from southern Biscayne Bay, Dade County, south into Monroe County along the margins of Card, Barnes, and the Blackwater Sounds, upper Key Largo, and westward into eastern and north-central Flo-

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Florida Bay and adjacent tidal wetlands and brackish lakes north of the Bay. Presumably a few also remain in the lower Florida Keys. Outside of NPS administered portions of this range, it seems unlikely that a visible crocodile population will survive through the remaining decades of the 20th century. Greatly increasing human recreational activities of fishing, boating, etc., and immediate planning for industrial and urban developments within the heart of the crocodile range (Turkey Point Power Plant expansion; a proposed South Dade seaport; new Card Sound Bridge onto upper Key Largo, and predicted 1980 population of 5000 residents at the presently undeveloped "North Key Largo Beach" community, etc.) offer little hope for the unprotected percentage of the remaining crocodile population.

Yet survival of crocodiles within Everglades National Park or southern portions of the proposed Biscayne National Monument is not assured. C. acutus in Florida is at the northern range limits for the species, where the local population is likely acted upon by a complexity of environmental limiting factors not found in more central areas of the species' range. For instance, low hatching rates by crocodile eggs observed at several nests in Florida Bay may be an effect of local temperature and moisture conditions marginal to requirements for successful incubation. Presumably, enough reproductive successes occurred to maintain a stable, but never abundant, population of the long-lived crocodiles in Florida prior to human settlement, but the added burden of even low levels of human interference has resulted in an over-all population decline and local extinctions. The establishment of Everglades National Park offered limited protection that must have slowed, but not stopped, the decline of crocodiles in the Florida Bay area.

The decline of crocodiles in the Park almost surely is related to the level of human interference (commercial fishing, occasional poaching, picnicking, etc.) that continues to exist within close proximity of nesting beaches, and likely is proportional to increasing park visitation. Stabilization of the remaining Florida Bay population is the objective of a developing crocodile management and research program, with success for the program hinging on an early curtailment of human activities around crocodile nesting sites.

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John C. Ogden  
Research Biologist  
Everglades National Park  
17 July 1969

Lila A.K. Singh

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