

CONSERVATION OF THE CROCODILE IN THE SAYAJI SAROVAR LAKE, BARODA, INDIA

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The once common and familiar crocodile (*Crocodylus palustris*) (Fig. 1) seems to be losing its fight for survival in its natural habitat, being severely threatened throughout India. Twenty years ago it was still possible to see them in huge numbers, but today there are few left in their natural habitats and it is clear that they are diminishing at an alarming rate. A press announcement by the World Wildlife Fund on 16 April 1973 reported that according to an international group of specialists 15 of 21 existing crocodylian species (crocodiles, alligators and caimans) are already considered as seriously threatened and several are on the verge of extinction.

In Baroda, the Sayaji Sarovar lake area is owned by the Municipal Corporation at Ajwa, and is situated about 10 km from the city. The present lake came into existence during the period of former Baroda rulers. Sayaji Sarovar (also known as Ajwa lake) is one of the very few lakes where it is still possible to see the crocodile, and in 1967 a conservative estimate put the population at about a hundred. Unfortunately, many crocodiles have been slaughtered in the past when the Municipal Corporation auctioned the fishing rights in the lake to local people. Today some 200 fishing boats can be seen in the summer on Ajwa lake. A number of crocodiles also disappeared elsewhere because of the very low water level. At present the crocodile population in the Sayaji Sarovar is not more than about fifty.

As a result of the poor monsoon in 1972, the water level at Sayaji Sarovar was much lower than usual in the summer of 1973. The fall in level is expected to continue and if the Corporation auctions out the fishing rights over the Sayaji Sarovar, as was done in the past, the crocodile population will be further reduced. Within the next two or three years it may disappear altogether.

Conservation of the crocodile in this area is urgent. Under the Constitution, the Gujarat State has sovereign powers over faunal areas situated within its

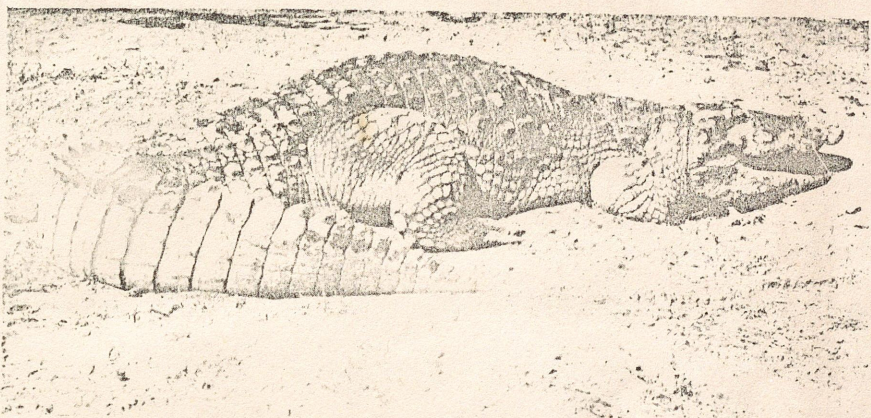


Fig. 1. Crocodile (*Crocodylus palustris*) in the Sayaji Sarovar, Baroda. Photo: Prince Ranjitsinh P Gaekwad of Baroda.

boundaries. Both the Municipal Corporation and the Gujarat State Wildlife Conservation Department must work towards saving the crocodiles in the Sayaji Sarovar. A solution to this problem and a contribution to wildlife conservation in India would be the establishment of a crocodile farm in Baroda for the perpetuation of these species.

The crocodile habitat at Sayaji Sarovar should be protected against human activities and be preserved as a heritage for the State and Nation. This has now become essential in view of the spread of urban growth into natural habitats.

Among those reptiles already threatened with extinction in India are the gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) of the Ganges and Brahmaputra and its tributaries, and the estuarine crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*). Indian Sanctuaries where these reptiles still survive are the Pakhal in Andhra Pradesh, Renuka in Himachal Pradesh, Ranganathitoo in Mysore State and Sawai Madhopur in Rajasthan State (Dharmakumarsinhji *et al.*, 1970).

REFERENCE

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