

COMMENTARY

Crocodiles And Alligators Are Very Different¹

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Florida recently reported another alligator attack. As more people invade alligator habitat in southern states, we have (or at least should have) come to expect such news. Contact between us and them is steadily increasing. Ironically, humans, the invasive species, are the ones who become offended when another species takes objection to our presence.

I do not want to belittle or trivialize the traumatic experience suffered by anyone who has been injured by an alligator or had a family member, friend, or pet actually killed by one. However, a comparison between American Alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*) and some crocodiles is worth considering, if for no other reason than to show how a truly aggressive species copes with interlopers. The Saltwater Crocodiles (*Crocodylus porosus*) of Australia are very different from American Alligators in their response to humans — they will attack and eat people. These are the reptile world's equivalent of Great White Sharks or Bengal Tigers. They frequent ocean habitats as well as rivers and freshwater marshes near where people live. Their maximum size is enormous, more than 20 feet. A crocodile only 15 feet long could easily kill and swallow a full-grown man.

Despite prevailing views about the sanctity of human life, some predators view people as simply another source of protein — and people living in areas where such attacks are common often develop different attitudes from those to which we are accustomed. For example, one journalist noted that people inhabiting the Northern Territory in Australia “seemed almost jubilant whenever someone was taken by a crocodile.” When a “mineworker met a grisly death in the jaws of a giant crocodile” in a national park, many of the residents in the Northern Territory displayed “widespread and bizarre delight” that the crocodile had been victorious.

Once when I visited the region near Darwin, Australia, someone was killed and eaten by a Saltwater Crocodile in the Adelaide River. The local folks with whom I talked the next day were seemingly unmoved by the incident. Why the lack of compassion by the residents? Because, as someone said, they view themselves as “rugged frontiersmen carving out an existence in an untamed wilderness.” They reject even the hint of a suggestion that the crocodile population be reduced in any way.

The preservationist attitude about the Saltwater Crocodile by old-time residents is based on the principle that the rivers of northern Australia belong to the crocodile. If humans want to share the waters and adjoining land, they must assess the risks of

these giant predators and be prepared to live (or die) with them. This is my image of the pioneering spirit of early America, which differs dramatically from the attitude of most Americans today.

What is the difference between an alligator and a crocodile, aside from the fact that some crocodiles will eat people? The answer is not simple. Almost two dozen species of crocodylians exist today, which vary greatly in shape and size. However, American Alligators have broad snouts, and American Crocodiles (*C. acutus*), which are native to southern Florida, have narrower snouts. Fortunately, American Crocodiles do not indulge in the antisocial behavior of eating people. American Crocodiles, in fact, behave somewhat like alligators, which are usually shy and inoffensive.

Some people consider American Alligators a menace because they occasionally attack people, but this seldom happens without some provocation. Almost all alligator attacks can be traced back to human irresponsibility of some sort, including people feeding alligators. Yet, if an animal causes harm to people, we hold the animal responsible, without considering that we may have entered its natural environment, threatened its young, and destroyed its habitat. Maybe Americans need to be more accepting of the nature of wild animals and more willing to share the environment with them. This doesn't mean we must acquiesce to the idea that humans are acceptable prey items, but none of our native species are typically out to make a meal of us.

To avoid alligator attacks or other unfortunate encounters with nature we must consider the rules of safety and probabilities of risk when dealing with any animal that could bite, trample, scratch, sting, or otherwise injure us. Developing an attitude that we must be responsible will be a good first step.



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Saltwater Crocodiles (*Crocodylus porosus*) are much more aggressive than American Alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*) and American Crocodiles (*C. acutus*).

¹ Adapted with permission by the author and Partners in Amphibian & Reptile Conservation (<http://www.parcplace.org/>).