

# FOCUS ON CONSERVATION

## The Gharial: Back on the Brink



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Touted as the most successful conservation story in India for decades, the Gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) conservation program is in the doldrums today. Gharials are specialists in choice of habitat (only deep rivers) and prey (only fish), limiting the species' ability to survive in disturbed and marginal areas. Only about 200 reproducing Gharials remain in the wild in India and Nepal. Formerly found in almost every river system in the northern Indian subcontinent, today these large crocodylians are found only in a few protected areas disconnected by hundreds of kilometers. Gharials have been extirpated in Pakistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

Poaching is a major threat, and fishing depletes the prey base and Gharials quickly drown when enmeshed in nets. Fishermen are not sympathetic to the plight of Gharials, which they view as rivals. Many riverbanks are seasonally taken over by farmers to grow cucumbers and others are destroyed by sand mining. Either deprives Gharials of basking and nesting sites. Water siphoned from rivers for irrigation creates extensive shallow areas that Gharials will not use. Turtle poachers use longlines with up to 1000 fishhooks that ensnare young Gharials.

Once before, in the mid-1970s, the number of wild Gharials had approached 200, triggering the much-publicized Project Crocodile. A head-starting program was so successful that it was touted as the most successful conservation project ever conducted in India and one of the most successful in the world — but little was done to involve local communities and to secure wild habitats. Today we are reaping the results of that incomplete conservation strategy.

### How can you help?

The Gharial Taskforce at the Madras Crocodile Bank is lobbying for the resumption of the Gharial rehabilitation program and for the protection of riverine habitats, coordinating conservation and education efforts, and conducting surveys on thousands of kilometers of rivers. A donation to the Madras Crocodile Bank will be instantly acknowledged and will entitle you to receive periodically the Task Force's Gharial Conservation Update. The Gharial needs your help now!

You can support the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust through the IRCF ([www.IRCF.org/gharial](http://www.IRCF.org/gharial)).

NOTE: The Madras Crocodile Bank Trust is a registered charitable trust established in 1976 for the conservation of India's three species of crocodiles. It is also an international crocodile gene bank with 2500 crocodiles representing 14 of the 23 species. The Crocodile Bank has administered and operated numerous conservation programs throughout India and is highly regarded as the premier herpetological institution in India.