
Chinese Alligator Fact Sheet (5/1/94)

Chinese Alligator (*Alligator sinensis*)

Description: The critically endangered Chinese alligator differs from its American ally in subtle ways. Its head is more robust, and its snout is slightly upturned. The eyelids of the Chinese alligator have a bony plate which is missing in the American alligator. The American alligator also lacks the bony belly plates, or osteoderms, of the Chinese alligator. The largest Chinese alligator measured in recent times was seven feet and one inch, about half the length of the largest living American alligators. Its weight may exceed 85 pounds, but few weigh over 50 pounds.

Range: In historical times, the Chinese alligator was found in the extensive lakes and marshlands of the middle-lower Yangtze River region and along the river from Shanghai to Jianling City in the Hubei Province. Today it is limited to the lower Yangtze, primarily in the Anhui and Zhejiang provinces.

Habitat: Marshlands, ponds, lakes, reservoirs, river backwater canals, rice paddies and irrigation networks are used by the Chinese alligator. They may build extensive and lengthy earthen tunnels with multiple chambers, entrances and pools. Largely nocturnal as a result of human persecution, they stay in their retreats much of the day when humans are in the vicinity as well as during cool weather and winter months.

Diet: The Chinese alligator is an opportunistic feeder. Its diet mostly includes snails, crustaceans, insects and fish, but young waterfowl and rodents will be taken if available.

Social Organization: Social life begins before hatching, as nestmates communicate egg to egg and with parents who open the egg chamber when synchronized hatching begins. Nestmates may spend weeks to years together in the protection of the mother. Young vocalize to bring the group together and maintain its cohesion, while adults respond to juvenile distress calls. Bellowing occurs among males and females during the breeding season. The mating system is polygamous, as a male may breed with more than one female. Both sexes may react very aggressively to one another, especially in first encounter situations. The Chinese alligator's social behavior is very complex and may extend beyond aggression, dominance and courtship to social recognition.

Conservation Status: The Chinese alligator is in desperate need of habitat conservation and complete protection in the wild. It is a CITES Appendix I species and is listed as endangered by both the IUCN and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The free living wild population may be fewer than 200 individuals.

Threats to Survival: While habitat loss is partly responsible for the species decline, an ill-conceived alligator farming scheme in China has plundered the remaining wild population stocks and is probably the biggest threat to this species today. Wild-caught alligators, important as potential genetic founders, are maintained in groups and often kill one another during the breeding season. In addition, reserves exist only on paper as their aquatic habitat suffers from flooding, siltation, pollution and gross human activities. Though alligators are protected by law, animals are occasionally dug out from their dens and killed.

Zoo Programs -- SSP: About 100 Chinese alligators are managed under the SSP in 13 North American institutions. All of these are derived from seven founders, with an additional four potential founders (wild-caught animals which have not yet bred) in the population. Animals are being exchanged with European and Asian zoos to increase the founder stock. It is also hoped that captive-bred young can be exchanged with Chinese alligator farms.

Conservation: The Chinese alligator is protected in China as a "first-class rare animal," and hunting is prohibited. When wild alligators are observed, a conservation station is established at their den site, and a local farmer is paid to be responsible for the station by the National Forestry Department.

Education: China now promotes its alligator as a rare, valuable and harmless animal. Local people are enlightened to the animal's significance as a national resource which must be protected by everyone. The SSP, the AZA Crocodylian Advisory Group and the IUCN Crocodile Specialist also promote the conservation of this diminutive crocodylian.

rev. 5/94