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## **Cuban Crocodile - *Crocodylus rhombifer* Cuvier, 1807 (11/1/98)**

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### **CUBAN CROCODILE**

Crocodylus rhombifer Cuvier, 1807

**Description:** The Cuban Crocodile is a very distinctive crocodile with enlarged dentition and heavy armor. The squamosals are elevated, giving the head a characteristic appearance. The Cuban crocodile has a speckled pattern and in coloration is essentially yellow and black. The iris of adults is dark brown. Grown animals are usually less than 3.5 meters in length. It is an impressive jumper.

**Range:** Formerly Cuba, the Cayman Islands and Bahamas; now restricted to 300 km<sup>2</sup> of Cuba's Zapata Swamp and 100 km<sup>2</sup> of the Lanier swamp on the Isla de la Juventad.

**Habitat:** Freshwater marsh and swamp.

**Diet:** Fossil evidence indicates the Cuban crocodile preyed on giant ground sloths. Today juveniles feed on arthropods and small vertebrates. Adults prey on almost any other animal they can overpower.

**Social Organization:** Most crocodylians are polygynous. Males are larger than females. Captive Cuban crocodiles maintain dominance hierarchies based on size, gender and temperament.

**Conservation Status:** The IUCN/SSC Crocodile Specialist Group's Action Plan states "The Cuban crocodile is without doubt the most threatened species of New World crocodylian" (Thorbjarnarson, 1992). IUCN Red List 1990: Endangered; CITES: Appendix I; USFWS: Endangered. The only viable population left appears to be limited to about 300 km<sup>2</sup> of the Zapata Swamp and 100 km<sup>2</sup> of the Lanier swamp.

**Threats to Survival:** Extremely limited distribution (= 400 km<sup>2</sup>). The Cuban crocodile's genetic integrity is threatened by hybridization with the now sympatric American crocodile. This is the result of hunting in the 17th, 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries as well as habitat destruction for agriculture and charcoal burning industries. Competitive exclusion by an

introduced crocodylian, the spectacled caiman, may have had an adverse effect on the reintroduced Lanier population.

**Zoo Programs:** There are less than 60 Cuban crocodiles in the SSP. The SSP population hosts eight founders and eight potential founders. The Havana Zoo also maintains Cuban crocodiles.

**Conservation:** Cuba has two crocodile farms that maintain Cuban crocodiles. One of these at Laguna del Tesoro utilizes captive breeding to allow trade in crocodile products and is also involved in field surveys for the species. The other farm at Cayo Potrero is involved in the reintroduction of the animal into the Lanier swamp. A proposal has been made to make some of the remaining Cuban crocodile habitat in the Zapata swamp a faunal reserve.

**Education:** An educational program is being developed to help ordinary Cubans, teachers and school children learn to live with and appreciate their endemic crocodile (posters, pamphlets, videotapes, meetings, etc.).

**Reintroduction:** Cuba joined CITES in 1990 and the government has shown an interest in the preservation of this endemic crocodile since the late 1950's. The Empresa Nacional para la Proteccion de la Flora y la Fauna operates the croc farm at Cayo Potrero on Isla de la Juventud and has initiated the reintroduction of the Cuban crocodile into the Lanier swamp. At present (1998) more than 600 specimens of various ages, sexes, and size classes have been reintroduced there.

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