

Skin demand threatens Nigeria crocs

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Ismail Dauda, 35, who went into the family business processing crocodile and python skins the age of 15, following in the footsteps of his father Maifata, whose name means "The Skin Man," shows skins in Kano in April 2009. Business is booming at Ismail Dauda's crocodile tannery in northern Nigeria, but environmentalists fear soaring demand for skins could be driving the reptiles to extinction.

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Thirty-five year-old Dauda followed his father Maifata, whose name means "The Skin Man", into the family business of tanning crocodile and python pelts when he was just 15.

At his tannery in the old part of Nigeria's main northern city of Kano

dozens of workers clean and cure the skins. In a good month they look to "process" up to 20,000 animals.

"We have been tanning snake and crocodile skins here for 120 years, but in the last few years we had a boost in our business... there is more demand and there is more market for it," Dauda told AFP.

Some crocodiles are still alive when they are brought to the tannery. After their jaws are roped together, they are turned on their backs before their throats are slit.

The meat is sold to people in the south of the country and the skins, once tanned, are exported to India, Saudi Arabia and now to China, to be made into high-quality leather products such as handbags and shoes.

Processed python skin sells for four dollars a square metre, while a crocodile pelt can bring in between 40 and 170 dollars depending on its size, explained Dauda.

He took a wooden pole to stir a pit containing a putrid smelling concoction of ash, potash and soda ash in which scores of python and crocodile skins were being soaked.

"It is a fact the volume of supplies has dropped in a decade which is perhaps an indication the rate of killing is higher than their regeneration rate, but this is a business we can't stop because it is very lucrative."

Environmental activists are furious that crocodiles might soon face extinction in Nigeria, especially if their hides are simply going to become fashion accessories for the wealthy.

"The trade is unregulated, is illegal, is not recorded. Two species are almost extinct now," Mathew Dore, an environmentalist who has worked

with crocodiles for more than 25 years, told AFP.

He said the Nile crocodile, whose [skin](#) carries the most value, is "very, very scarce, almost extinct" in Nigeria, and the last time he saw the rarer long-snouted variety was 20 years ago in a zoo.

"The most abundant species now is the West African dwarf crocodile most commonly found in the Niger Delta, and with all this oil pollution and poverty issues, dependence on the crocodile (market) is continuous and unregulated," he told AFP from the southern state of Edo.

It is no coincidence the hide of the West African dwarf crocodile is not so prized for leather goods.

"Ninety percent of the skins are from illegally hunted animals," said environmental activist Desmond Majekodunmi.

"The population has been absolutely decimated. Immediate action needs to be taken, otherwise we will find our crocodile population has gone below the capacity to regenerate itself."

Local crocodile stocks have become so depleted hunters are now bringing in animals from Cameroon, Chad and Ghana.

A 1985 Nigerian law supposed to protect the crocodile and the python does not stop their skins being sold at Lagos airport, right under the eyes of customs agents.

"It does not require much effort to clear the skins at the airport. All you need to do is to pay the officials off," Dauda told AFP. "The officials at the airport... sometimes visit this tannery and we give them some token even if we have no goods to export."

Local Nigerian officials blamed the federal government for the failure to enforce the law.

"The responsibility of stopping trade in the skins of endangered species such as crocodiles lies with the federal government that controls the airports and security agencies," state environment commissioner Garba Yusuf told AFP.

"If the security agencies live up to their duty of arresting and prosecuting offenders, the trade will be stopped because once it becomes impossible to export the skins the demand will drop and the tanners and traders will be out of business."

Dore said crocodile farming was virtually unheard of in Nigeria as would-be farmers looking for short-term profitability were often deterred by the gestation period.

[Crocodiles](#) do not reproduce until age five and so a farmer typically has to wait for 10 or 15 years until he can start selling animals, said Dore, who tried bred the animals himself for a decade.

The Nile crocodile was listed as "Lower Risk" on the 1996 World Conservation Union (IUCN) list of endangered species.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) lists it as threatened with extinction in certain areas and "not threatened, but trade must be controlled" in others.

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