

# Six things to know about alligators

June 28 2016, by Evelyn Perez

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Mike Heithaus, a marine biologist specializing in predators, examines an alligator in the Florida Everglades. Credit: Florida International University

Growing up to nearly 15 feet in length, the American alligator can take up residence in Florida's canals, lakes, rivers and swamps. It is one of the state's most ecologically important and often misunderstood predators. And when they attack, they make news.

FIU biologists Mike Heithaus and Maureen Donnelly offer insight on this native predator.

1. People are not their meal of choice. Alligators like to feast on a variety amphibians, birds, fish, reptiles and small mammals, including raccoons and rabbits. However, if they sense something splashing in the water, they are likely to bite first and ask questions later.
2. Alligators are efficient predators. To attack their prey, alligators disguise themselves by staying in the water with only their eyes peeping above the surface. They typically wait for something to swim or walk by and then lunge at it. The highly efficient predators are quick on land and even faster in water.
3. Alligators tend to be shy, but they are still predators. The American alligator is a freshwater species, while the American crocodile can thrive in both freshwater and saltwater habitats. Donnelly, an expert on amphibians and reptiles, recommends you never allow children or pets to play, swim or exercise in bodies of water these reptiles may call home. Heithaus, an expert on apex predators, reminds you to be vigilant when you are near shorelines, especially between dusk and dawn when they are most active. Give them their space and never feed them because this will make them less afraid of people.
4. Alligators play an important role in maintaining ecosystem balance. Sitting at the top of the food chain, alligators are apex predators and help keep other animal populations in balance. By digging holes and leaving trails throughout marshes, they create habitats for fish and marine invertebrates. Alligators also help protect birds. Although alligators tend to hang out under rookeries to eat nestlings that fall out of their nests, they also like to eat raccoons, which prey on birds while they're in their nests.
5. Alligators and crocodiles are ectothermic. This means they do not internally regulate their body temperature. Instead, they rely

on external sources of heat to regulate their body temperature and lie out in the sun, or move to areas with warmer or cooler temperatures, to do so.

6. Most alligator and crocodile populations are in trouble. The American alligator, which is known to live in Florida, North Carolina and Oklahoma, has been listed as a threatened species since 1979 by the Fish and Wildlife Service. The American crocodile is threatened in Florida, but is endangered throughout South and Central America and the Caribbean. Demands for [alligator](#) meat and reptile skins have resulted in their farming, but, conservation efforts are under way to help restore populations.

Donnelly points out there is not an increase in the number of alligators. Rather, Florida's population growth and demand for waterfront properties may be the cause for increased sightings.

"We are developing in wild places that are home to alligators, coral snakes, rattle snakes and other animals that could harm us," Donnelly said. "The animals have nowhere else to go. Wildlife-human conflict happens all over the world. Elephants in India destroy crops and homes. Leopards in Africa attack and consume people. The more we develop, the more likely we are to see this type of conflict."

Alligators and crocodiles are an important part of aquatic ecosystems and of Florida's natural and cultural history. State laws prohibit feeding, harassing, killing or possessing them. Anyone who encounters one and believes it may pose a threat, should contact the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Provided by Florida International University

Citation: Six things to know about alligators (2016, June 28) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-06-alligators.html>

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