

CROCODILIANS IN THE COMMERCIAL "PET" TRADE



BY ISRAEL DUPONT | 10 APRIL 2017 (REVISED 28 JULY 2017)

Images are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

The commercial industry of breeding and selling live reptiles as "companion" or "hobby" animals has flourished in recent years. The popularity of reptile-based television documentaries and "reality shows" has effected gains in the sales of these animals, including crocodilians. This article is an attempt to provide an introduction to the subject, addressing concerns for the welfare of the animals involved.

Alligators, crocodiles and caimans are **not ideal pets**, as they **grow relatively large** and potentially **very dangerous**, are **illegal to own** in many areas of various countries, including the U.S., and are **expensive to maintain**, given the requirements of food and ample (and carefully engineered) space for the growing animal; it should be considered that a 10-inch long hatchling alligator may grow to 12ft/ 3.7m in length and weigh 800lbs/ 363kg! The cost of keeping a crocodilian is especially high in colder climates of the world, where during the frigid season much energy must be consumed in order to keep the ectothermic animal warm. Furthermore, most consumers who purchase and keep an alligator (usually illegally) are unprepared, both materially and mentally, for the challenge.

Danger: This image shows the serious injury caused by the bite of a smaller crocodilian only about 3 ft/ 1m in length.

(Image courtesy of Jarrod Forthman)



The result is that, as this author has learned, many of these animals die en route to their destination or later in the custody of an uneducated and unprepared customer, alligators (species: *Alligator mississippiensis*) are abandoned by incapable or uninterested owners who vacate their dwellings, some alligators are released when the owner will no longer keep it, or the alligator escapes from the unknowledgeable and inexperienced keeper. In the colder climates, this means certain death for the alligator (or crocodile or caiman) during the cold months and bad publicity for the species when the animals' discovery as nonnatives in residential communities is usually sensationally publicized by the media. Furthermore, it is known that at least three nonnative crocodilian species are found in areas of North America.

The infrastructure of interstate trade contributes to the distribution of these animals: National shipping carriers, U.S. Postal Service (USPS) and United Parcel Service (UPS) facilitate interstate transport of baby crocodilians to household-based buyers. The lure of profits from the trade of young crocodilians, among other animals, has even transcended legally-compliant business as evidenced by illicit keeping, selling and transport of hatchling crocodilians (one such example is shown in one example in this news media [report](#).)

It should be noted in an abundance of fairness that a relative few among private keepers in the U.S. have the expertise, legal credentials and resources to properly care for crocodilians; however, it is clear that the majority of keepers, or potential ones, do not. Moreover, some of these reptiles are transported/traded in violation of law, both international and national. These reptiles are traded in Asia, Australia and Europe also, though this discussion's focus is on related commercial activity in North America.

ALLIGATORS

Readers may recall the 2005 highly publicized [case](#) of "Reggie" the alligator, an escaped or released captive alligator in Los Angeles County, California, which was eventually captured and placed at the local zoo. Valuable resources were utilized over a period of almost two years in attempts to capture the animal. This is merely one case of many; tales of alligators in the sewers of New York City date back decades and there are numerous documented accounts of nonnative alligators, caimans and crocodiles being found (dead and alive) in the U.S. and Canada, among other countries.

The most commonly sold crocodilian is the American alligator, and some are legally bred and sold from Florida. While there are no public records on the number of these sold annually, this author, who has monitored this field since 2007, believes the number is *at least* in the hundreds. It is also this author's opinion that the herpetoculture merchant industry has paid the problem only lip service. The period the 1960's through 1980's saw the busy sales of the common or "spectacled" caiman, the South American 'cousin' of the alligator. The current average retail price is approximately \$150.00.



Pictured at left is the (in)famous "Reggie" the alligator at Los Angeles Zoo in 2014. (Image: Public domain.)

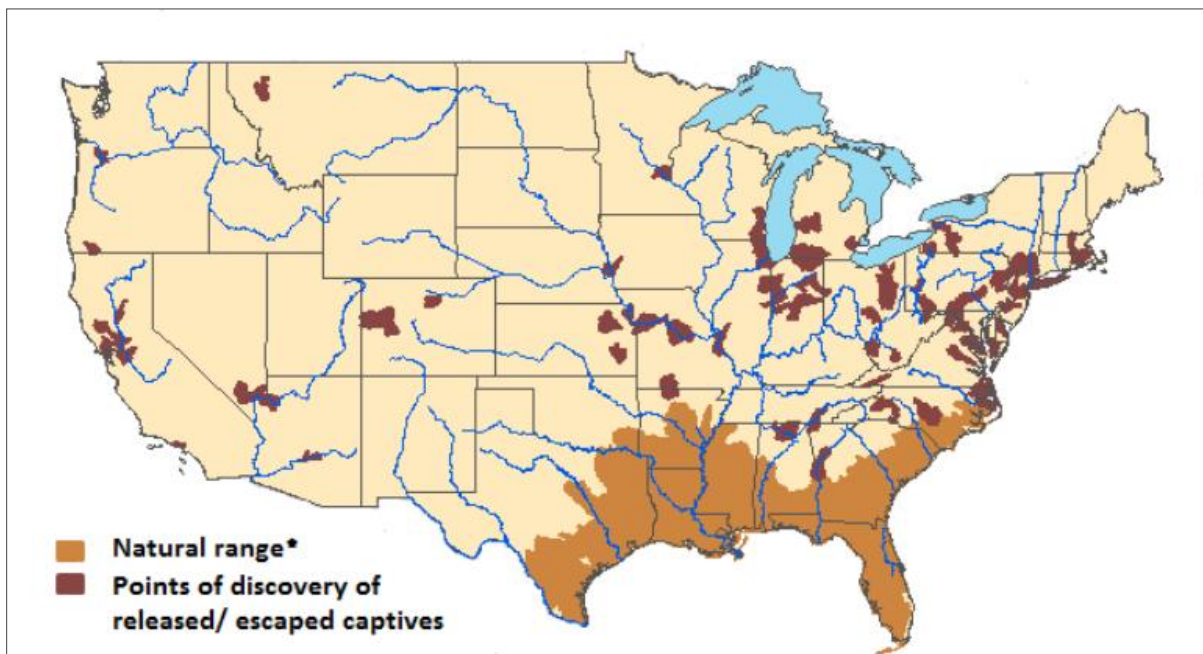
The average at-risk alligator is approximately 35in/89cm in length and about 2.5 years old. Approximately 95% of "pet"-owning respondents seeking placement assistance, to this author's inquiries on why they wish to place the reptile elsewhere, state that the reptile has grown too large for their comfort. Some wish to be rid of it specifically because they've been bitten (once or too many times) or are expecting a newborn child in the home and fear the potential danger to the child.

The alligator shown at left was rescued from a home in Ohio where it was kept as a "pet"; it suffered from a host of maladies including obvious emaciation. This individual did not survive, despite efforts to save it.



'UNNATURAL' DISPERSAL. Individual alligators are found in spots well outside of the natural range, as regular media reports attest to. These animals are those released or have escaped from captivity as "pets." In their natural range, alligators are able to adapt to the cold and even to ice-capped water. But those former captives loose in the harsher, northerly ranges will quickly perish when the seasons turn cold, so colonizing is practically impossible. In reported cases involving south Texas and southeastern Oklahoma, captives were released and these groups have thrived in their respective areas at the edges of the species' historic natural range. Biologists have observed slight differences of hide between alligators in the eastern and western ranges.

WHERE THEY DON'T BELONG



The map illustration shown above (published ca. 2009), adapted from the one by the U.S. Geological Survey, shows points scattered around the United States (colored in burgundy) where American alligators have been found outside their natural range, most or all of which escaped or were released from captivity.*

"It is important to note also that portions of the "natural" range in southern Texas and southeastern Oklahoma reportedly may be inhabited by escaped and/or released captives (and/or their progeny).

As an example of quantity, the Chicago Herpetological Society, which rescues a large number of reptiles, had nearly 300 rescued alligators in its care in 2009!

(When Ohio implemented laws in 2014, banning nonnative animal possession in the state, the hard-line government also *banned the rescue organizations* trying to take in the crocodilians residents were giving up (and only one week after a state agency handed over 12 alligators to an organization for rescue!). This [account](#) describes the details of the absurd situation, which political bodies specialize in producing.)

Shown at right is a portion of an online advertisement featuring alligators for sale (in July 2017).

This author has been contacted by persons or organizations (such as municipal animal control departments) in several U.S. states seeking placement or rescue of a crocodilian, among those locations, Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, Washington State and Wisconsin.

One specimen of the rare and critically endangered alligator from China (*Alligator sinensis*) was intercepted by authorities in Nevada and placed at a roadside [menagerie](#) in Las Vegas, where it dwelled for several years until the facility closed in 2013; the animal was taken into an accredited zoo.

The market for the so-called "white" alligator has grown considerably in the last several years, its popularity probably promoted by the presence of these sensation-inducing animals at public zoos and aquariums and on television programs. The "white" feature of the animal, most commonly *albinism*, is caused by the expression of a genetic trait that uncommonly occurs in the wild. The trait is recessive and unfavorable to the animal. Propagating animals with such physical genetic expression typically involves intentional inbreeding, which has been linked with abnormal, debilitating and sometimes lethal conditions, effecting the nervous system, hide and organs.

Pictured below is a captive albinistic American alligator.



formally rejected any such inbreeding by its member institutions, but this does not affect independent commercial reptile breeders or non-member zoos and wildlife facilities.

CAIMANS

The aforementioned caiman (species: *Caiman crocodilus*) has been released or escaped into the wild in considerable number. In the northern U.S. states, these caimans expire when the regional climate turns cold. However, the results in Florida and Puerto Rico are relatively small groups of caimans, some regularly breeding in colonies. Populations have been identified in Florida in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, with

A screenshot of an online advertisement titled "Crocodilians for Sale". The text in the ad reads: "These ancient reptiles are incredible examples of... menu below displays our crocodilians for... alligators, dwarf caimans, and crocodiles. W... crocodilian from us, you are guaranteed it will a... excellent condition. We also have alligator food...". Below the text is a small image of an American alligator. To the right of the image, the text reads: "American Alligator", "Alligator mississippiensis", "Captive bred", and "\$149.99".

breeding confirmed at two of those locations. The tropical species probably could not survive as a colony north of southern Florida because of the more frequent freezing conditions. Some were reported in the more northerly Seminole County in the 1970's but those may no longer live. Even where they thrive in Broward and Miami-Dade, they must deal with the presence of their larger and more populous alligator relatives, as well as with human pressures.

Pictured here is a pair of young which are only several weeks old. Many thousands of these were imported in the period from the 1950's to the 1980's. The "spectacles", represented by the bony ridge circling and connecting the eyes, can be clearly seen on these two hatchlings.

Efforts have been made to remove these from the wild, but have not been a priority for state wildlife officials, who must channel limited resources to deal with many other nonnative animal species (more than 500), some of which are so populous that they are considered "invasive", and pose a threat to local ecosystems. (You may learn more about the caiman's status in Florida, as well as that of many other nonnative species, [here](#).)



Other species of the tropical caiman have been taken in by welfare facilities, and among those animals are *Caiman yacare*, and the diminutive *Paleosuchus palpebrosus* and *P. trigonatus*. The "dwarf" or smaller-sized crocodylians tend to make popular "pets" due to their limited size, a group which consists of most caimans, the Chinese alligator and the West African dwarf crocodile.



The adult male spectacled caiman pictured at left measured 5ft/ 1.5m in length and was among several caught in 2011 living wild at Homestead Air Force Base near Miami, Florida.

CROCODILES

Crocodile species tend to be more valuable and sell at relatively higher price points, making their trade less common and their keepers more responsibly behaved with their considerable investment; hence, finding crocodiles loose in nonnative territory is much less common.

The image at right features the Nile crocodile, *Crocoylus niloticus*, a species known to reach lengths of more than 15 feet and to kill more humans than any other



An African crocodile species (*Crocodylus niloticus* and/or *C. suchus*) has established itself in the warm climate of the Florida Everglades, [according](#) to scientists. These likely originated from facilities in the state that breed the crocodiles for the commercial animal trade; in such cases, the animals became nonnative in the wild *before they were shipped to customers*. The Nile crocodile (*C. niloticus*) may reach or exceed 15ft/ 4.6m in length and a mass of 1300lbs/ 590kg, and is known for killing more humans each year than of all of the world's crocodilians. These crocodiles are so bold in their attacks that confirmed accounts relate testimony of the crocs surging from the water to take a human from a boat, among other tactics. It is left to the imagination how this could one day occur in Florida.

(A very rare specimen of the critically endangered Philippine crocodile (*C. mindorensis*) was stolen in a brazen heist from a private zoological facility in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, circa 2008, probably by and/or for a private hobbyist. The animal abducted was a valuable conservation specimen, now presumably in the possession of a private collector. This account also demonstrates the effort some may exert in order to obtain a crocodilian for private keeping; in this case, it is likely the valuable animal will be well cared for by the thief.)

Several other species among the tropical, "true" crocodiles (in addition to the aforementioned alligators and caimans) are known to this author to have been rescued/placed by the U.S. by government and other qualified organizations, including the following: the endangered Siamese crocodile (*Crocodylus siamensis*), the Mexican Morelet's crocodile (*C. moreletii*), New Guinea crocodile (*C. novaeguineae*), African slender-snouted crocodile (*C. [Mecistops] cataphractus*), Indian Mugger crocodile (*C. palustris*) and West African dwarf crocodile (*Osteolaemus tetraspis*).

SOLUTIONS?

Some crocodilian "pet" owners looking to be rid of their reptile may believe that they may contact a local zoo for assistance in placing the animal. This may seem like an obvious solution, but it's important to note that [AZA](#) and the [Zoological Association of America](#) (ZAA) and their institutional membership, generally, have no stated interest in rescuing or placing discarded or unwanted crocodilian pets, as their efforts, with limited resources, extend to helping overcome the seemingly endless obstacles of the conservation of endangered wild species in their natural habitats worldwide ("*ex situ*") and at professional facilities ("*in situ*").

Zoological institutions which are members of these organizations do not in practice set aside a portion of their very limited funds for saving imperiled exotic animals discarded by pet owners. Furthermore, some zoos' insurance policies do not cover offsite animal recovery, making zoo managers reluctant to be involved, even if against their personal compulsions.

There is little chance of zoo assistance, limited numbers of qualified rescue organizations, and limited resources to care for incoming animals, so recovery options are insufficient to handle the case load of unwanted reptiles.

Consider also a point of economic reality when it comes to the cost of transporting a single rescued alligator: A tiny hatchling alligator, 8-12in/ 20-30cm long, may cost \$20-\$35 to ship, but once it reaches 30in/ 51-76cm the shipping costs (i.e. shipment from a northern U.S. state to Florida) escalate to about \$200 minimum via air cargo and involves time-consuming hassle of additional shipping regulations and paperwork due to the greater mass of the animal. This sum is more than the market value of the alligator since the reptile's market value seems to plunge once it reaches this size, a result of the conflict of demand for a small gator versus shipping cost.

In conditions of such unchecked commercial activity, the marketplace's proverbial unseen hand drops blows of an iron fist on the helpless, captive crocodilian.

This article contains portions which were adapted from others by the author.

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