

Alligators In Mississippi Then & Now



Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, & Parks

Alligators in Mississippi – *Then and Now*

BY RICKY FLYNT

Alligators have existed in the Magnolia State for thousands of years, according to fossil records, and alligators and crocodiles are probably the closest living creature to a dinosaur still in existence. Their pre-historic appearance is partly responsible for the reaction of fear that most people have when they come in close contact with one. Its secretive behavior, protective bony covering on its back and powerful jaws and tail demand respect by all creatures within its environment – including man.

The American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) boldly sits at the top of the food chain in southeastern wetlands, and no other North American creature challenges it for that position. However, due to over harvest and lack of conservation regulations protecting it, alligators became endangered of being forever removed from the food chain in the early to mid-1900s. Markets for its durable and exotic hide from the 1890s-1960s brought about action from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) who, in 1967, placed the American alligator on the Endangered Species List throughout its entire southeastern United States range.

Following its endangered listing, stiff penalties curtailed illegal alligator harvest and, amazingly, populations recovered more quickly than anticipated. In 1987, their status was changed to threatened due to similarity of appearance, which allows wildlife officials to identify alligator parts from other endangered crocodylians entering commercial trade. Shortly thereafter, people in alligator markets began experimenting with farming alligators and commercial alligator farming was successfully created in Louisiana and Florida, with regulation oversight from the USFWS and state wildlife agencies.

Restoring Gator Populations

Now, after years of research and closely regulated monitoring,



MS Game & Fish Commission transferring alligators to private landowners in 1971. L-R, Former MGFC Deputy Director John Camp, MGFC Biologist George Chandler and MGFC Biologist Tommy Shropshire.

GEORGE CHANDLER

alligators can be commercially raised from an egg to marketable sizes of 42 to 48 inches in 10 to 14 months. In the wild, growth rates are much slower and may take 4 to 6 years to reach such marketable sizes. The alligator farming business in Louisiana is annually a multi-million dollar commercial operation with international impacts on alligator products. Thus, alligator farming has provided resources to commercial markets, which have contributed significantly to reducing illegal harvest of wild alligators.

Mississippi's alligator population during this time was severely impacted by habitat destruction and overharvest. According to journal entries by Ms. Fannye A. Cook, who founded the Mississippi Game and Fish Commission in 1933, alligators were primarily located in the lower Mississippi River floodplain – on the Yazoo, Big Black, Pearl, Leaf and Pascagoula rivers. To restore Mississippi's alligator population after it was placed on the Endangered Species List, the Game and Fish Commission relied heavily upon the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. During 1970-1978, approximately 4,000 alligators were captured from the Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge in Grand Chenier, La., and transported to Mississippi. Most relocated alligators were less than 4 feet long, but occasionally alligators over 8 feet long were



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released. At the time, Mississippi landowners could request the release of alligators on their property in hopes of controlling snakes, turtles and beaver. Annually, pick-up trucks and occasionally 18-wheeler trailers were loaded with captured alligators destined for relocation in Mississippi.

Carl Mason, a wildlife and fisheries graduate student at Mississippi State University in 1970, now retired from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, released alligators in Neshoba County and the Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge as part of a research project to study how effective alligators could control existing beaver populations. Mason released alligators and beaver together in large holding pens and observed them daily. The smallest alligator he released was 6 feet long; most were longer than 8 feet. According to Mason, it did not take long to realize that alligators and beaver would co-exist. He noted that, if an alligator's jaws did not get a firm hold of an adult-sized beaver's head, then the alligator received viscous biting and swift kicks from the beaver! Alligators soon learned to avoid larger beaver and only occasionally preyed upon young beaver. These research results took "wind out of the sails" of biologists who hoped to use alligators as a natural method to control increasing timber damage caused by beaver.

The Mississippi Game and Fish Commission's relocation efforts, combined with federal regulations protecting alligators, allowed the alligator population in Mississippi to rebound. In some cases, alligators rebounded beyond expectations into areas where they were not common prior to being listed as endangered. A statewide survey of conservation officers in 1977 indicated that alligators occurred in 55 of 82 counties. A similar survey in 2006 reported an increase to 77 of 82 counties with alligators.

Gator Hunting

As alligator populations recovered and continued to grow in the Southeast, hunting has become a useful tool to assist state wildlife agencies in population management. Louisiana began its first alligator hunting season in 1972 and has since been joined by Florida (1981), Texas (1984), Georgia (2003), Mississippi (2005), Alabama (2006), Arkansas (2007) and South Carolina (2008). This expansion of alligator hunting opportunities has been equaled by a huge growth in interest from hunters!

When Mississippi initiated its first alligator hunting season in 2005, opportunities were extremely limited. A 16-mile section of the Pearl River north of Ross Barnett Reservoir was opened to 50 lottery-based permits. There were over 1,200 applications submitted by Mississippi residents who hoped to participate in this inaugural opportunity. By 2007, our alligator hunting season

expanded to two hunting zones, the Pearl River/Ross Barnett and the Pascagoula River Zones, with 240 available permits. In 2008, a private lands alligator season was initiated in 7 west-central counties (Hinds, Rankin, Madison, Warren, Issaquena, Yazoo and Holmes). In 2008, there were over 1,600 applications submitted for public water hunts, and 16 landowners qualified for private land alligator permits.

Alligator hunts over the past 3 years in Mississippi have been very successful for many reasons. One major cause of success was requiring a mandatory alligator hunting training course for all permittees. This training course includes 4 hours of training on alligator history, biology, alligator research, capture and harvest methods, harvest tagging and reporting, skinning and processing instructions and hunting and boating safety.

Alligators are an integral part of wetland ecosystems in the Southeast. Their resurgence from almost extinction is one of the true wildlife conservation success stories of the 20th century and is a testament to the importance of wildlife conservation laws. Since alligators are now prevalent throughout the Southeast, these populations are managed as a renewable resource through sustainable, regulated harvest by hunters throughout its range.

As the MDWFP Alligator Program continues to grow, alligator hunting opportunities continue to expand each year. For 2009, the private lands hunting season will expand from 7 to 13 counties; Hinds, Rankin, Madison, Holmes, Humphreys, Yazoo, Washington, Issaquena, Warren, Claiborne, Jefferson, Adams and Wilkinson. For more information on alligators or alligator hunting, please visit www.mdwfp.com/alligator.

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