

# What's the Problem With Alligators? People!

**W**HAT'S THE PROBLEM? THAT MAY be the question some Mississippians ask when they hear the term "problem alligator", mainly because many Mississippians have never encountered an alligator in the wild. Alligators have been reported in Mississippi since the days of Desoto. General Ulysses S. Grant reported "numerous alligators and moccasins" in the creeks and bayous north of Vicksburg in 1863. Abundant populations were reported by residents of the coastal counties of Mississippi during the 1930s and early 1940s; however, by the mid-1900s, alligators were eliminated from much of their former range. Unrestricted hunting and harvest for meat and hides were the primary culprits. In 1967 alligators were placed on the list of endangered species by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Soon after the listing, surveys began to indicate that populations were more abundant than previously thought. Consequently, in the early 1970s, the status of alligators in several parts of the southeastern U.S. was downgraded from endangered to threatened. A statewide survey of conservation officers in 1977 indicated the occurrence of alligators in 55 of 82 Mississippi counties. Results from 27 of those counties indicated stable populations, while results from 28 counties indicated increasing populations. In 1987, the status was reduced to threatened classification across the entire range. Later in 1987, the Mississippi Legislature passed legislation giving the Mississippi Commission on Wild-

life Conservation the authority to set regulations for the management of alligators.

In 2000, the MDWFP surveyed 15 routes along 317 miles of waterways in 13 counties. Using survey results, in conjunction with satellite imagery to identify alligator habitat, the MDWFP has developed a fairly clear picture of the distribution of alligators and their habitat in Mississippi. Recent estimates indicate a population of 32,000-38,000 alligators and about 408,000 acres of alligator habitat in Mississippi. Jackson County is home to approximately 24% of the state's alligator population. Other



counties with high populations include Hancock (12%) and Rankin (7.4%). The vast majority of Rankin County's population is located around the upper portion of Ross Barnett Reservoir and the Pearl River to near Ratliff Ferry.

There are problem alligators in Mississippi.

We refer to them as "nuisance alligators." What causes them to become a nuisance? Usually two things: (1) proximity to human populations and (2) association with humans through feeding.

According to U.S. Census Bureau information, Mississippi's human population has only increased 1.14% since 1980. However, significant population increases have occurred in certain regions of the state. For

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instance, in the Gulf Coast area Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson counties have experienced increases of 35.3%, 14.7%, and 14.0%, respectively. Population increases were also observed in adjacent Stone (26.7%) and Pearl River (25.6%) counties. Rankin and Madison counties in the Jackson metro area have also increased 32.3% and 38.8%, respectively. However, Hinds County has experienced a decrease of 1.4% since 1980. According to data collected by the MDWFP, these areas contain about 52% of the state's alligator population.

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So, are the alligators to blame for the problem? No! More and more people are moving into rural areas surrounding metropolitan communities. As human populations continue to increase, we continue to encroach upon and destroy the habitats used by alligators and other species of wildlife. Alligator populations have responded to protection afforded by their endangered and threatened status. Put all these factors together and opportunities increase for alligator - human conflicts.

Naturally, alligators tend to draw a crowd when they are observed in populated areas. This becomes a problem when people become curious and begin to feed alligators. Alligators that have become associated with humans through feeding have the potential to become a threat. They lose their fear of humans, which could lead to a "perceived" attack - "perceived" because the alligator does not distinguish a "hand" from a "hand-out." This is why feeding alligators is illegal. In fact, it is illegal to: 1) disturb an alligator nest; 2) buy, sell, take, or possess alligator eggs; 3) buy, sell, hunt, kill, *[Cont. on 13]*



## ALLIGATORS

*[Cont. from 11]* catch, chase, or possess alligators or parts except under permit from the MDWFP. The best advice is to keep a safe distance and avoid close contact with alligators. Appreciation for the alligator should always be from a distance.

Not all alligators should be considered a nuisance just because of their proximity to humans. Chances are humans have moved into the "backyard of the alligator" rather than the alligator moving into the "backyard of the human." A nuisance alligator is one that has shown aggressive behavior towards humans, pets, or livestock. Most nuisance situations can be managed through capture and relocation to remote areas. If the alligator can not be relocated, lethal means may be required to insure safety of people and animals.

Recognizing that legitimate nuisance situations do occur, the Commission enacted alligator regulations and the MDWFP created the Alligator Management and Control Project in 1989. The primary objectives of the alligator program are to: 1) monitor alligator populations, 2) control nuisance alligators, and 3) educate the public on alligators and safety around alligators.

All nuisance alligator complaints are handled by MDWFP personnel or agents licensed through the agency. Nuisance situations are handled on a case-by-case basis. A report that an alligator has been seen in a populated area does not necessarily justify removal or destruction of the animal. Alligators are a natural part of Mississippi's ecosystem. As human populations continue to encroach on alligator habitat, the MDWFP will continue to manage the problem. So, what causes the nuisance alligator problem? Most of the time, it is PEOPLE.

To report a nuisance alligator or illegal activity associated with alligators, call your local MDWFP District Office. **WI**