

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release January 12, 1977

Levitt 202/343-5634

MOST U.S. ALLIGATORS COME OFF ENDANGERED LIST

One of the most significant accomplishments of America's conservation movement was announced today when most of this nation's alligators were removed from the endangered species list and placed on the less restrictive threatened list, Nathaniel P. Reed, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, said.

"This shows we can do it," Reed said. "We can reverse the trend toward extinction and save a species...if we want to. Only 20 years ago these magnificent reptiles were headed toward extinction as hide hunters indiscriminately slaughtered them and their habitat was steadily being destroyed by development.

"But it was the conservation community and a number of officials in southern States who insisted that Federal and local legislation be passed to protect the alligator. They withstood the disinterest and ridicule from a largely uninformed public long before the word 'conservation' became fashionable. And in about 20 years, it was the conservation community that succeeded in rescuing a species that had already existed for 50 million years. That's quite a feat."

The action, published in the January 10, 1977, Federal Register, removed the alligator from the endangered category and placed it in the threatened category in all of Florida, and the coastal portions of Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Texas. Almost 600,000 alligators, representing more than 75 percent of the U.S. population, inhabit this area. The alligator remains classed as endangered in all of Mississippi, Alabama, Oklahoma, and North Carolina, as well as inland areas of South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. However, less than one-fourth of the total U.S. alligator population inhabits those areas.

An earlier rulemaking in 1975 had already recognized the unique status of alligators in Louisiana's Vermilion, Cameron, and Calcasieu Parishes where the population is biologically neither endangered nor

(more)

threatened but had to be treated as threatened because of its similarity of appearance to the endangered alligators. This procedure was intended to avoid illegal traffic in hides of animals that are truly endangered. Under Federal regulations, the State of Louisiana last year and again this fall conducted strictly regulated, but successful, commercial hunts of alligators in those areas. When properly tagged, these hides can be manufactured into products and legally entered into interstate commerce.

The new rulemaking also allows designated Federal employees, and State employees or agents in States operating under a Cooperative Agreement with the Service, to take sick or dangerous alligators as well as specimens for scientific or conservation purposes, and to sell the hides according to strict regulations.

Alligator populations vary from State to State, but nationwide there are more than three quarters of a million of the reptiles--three times the number in the early 1960's. They are most numerous in Florida where they number over 400,000 and most uncommon in Oklahoma, which has fewer than a dozen. In all areas where the alligator is classified as threatened, the population trend is increasing. Conservative population estimates based on a 1974 survey are as follows:

Areas Where the Alligator is Classed as Threatened

Coastal South Carolina.....	32,500
Coastal Georgia.....	15,853
Florida.....	407,585
Coastal Louisiana.....	94,779
(excluding Cameron, Vermilion, and Calcasieu Parishes)	
Cameron, Vermilion, and Calcasieu Parishes.....	100,000
Coastal Texas.....	19,292

Areas Where the Alligator is Classed as Endangered

Inland South Carolina.....	16,200
Inland Georgia.....	14,101
Inland Louisiana.....	7,352
Inland Texas.....	7,492
Mississippi.....	4,740
Alabama.....	12,715
North Carolina.....	1,314
Arkansas.....	1,900
Oklahoma.....	10

Despite the high figures in the areas where the populations are increasing, the alligators there are still considered "threatened" within the definition of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Alligator numbers in areas where they remain classified as endangered are significantly lower, and the species is nowhere as abundant and widespread as formerly. Large parts of its range have been occupied and modified by man to such

an extent that they are unusable by the alligator. The areas where reclassification has occurred are entirely within the rapidly developing coastal sections of the Southeastern United States. Alligators in these areas are now considered numerous enough and sufficiently protected legally not to require endangered status, but the past history of decline gives cause for concern. When coupled with the history of commercial exploitation of the alligator, the prospects for future habitat loss fully justify the "threatened" classification, Fish and Wildlife Service officials believe. This species has a very high commercial value and could easily be wiped out over large areas in a relatively short time if controls were lifted altogether.

This is only the second time since the Endangered Species Act of 1973 was enacted that an animal species has improved to the point where it could be taken off that list. Last year, three species of western trout were reclassified from the endangered to the threatened category and limited sport fishing was allowed.

Combined Federal-State management and law enforcement programs over the last decade are generally credited with reducing the illegal alligator hide market and thereby enabling the remaining population to begin to recover.

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