

American Alligator



HABITAT

Wetlands such as rivers, swamps and marshes are potential alligator habitats. They prefer slow moving relatively deep water. Occasionally alligators can be found in brackish water, areas where salt and freshwater mix, like salt marshes.

AQUARIUM LOCATION

Coastal Plain

FUN FACTS



South Carolina Aquarium

- The American alligator and the Chinese alligator are the only two species of alligators in the world.
- Have a lifespan of 35-50 years, and have been known to live up to 80 years in captivity.
- Can stay underwater for 45-60 minutes.
- Go dormant (not a true hibernation) when the weather gets cold.
- Typically have 80 – 100 teeth in their mouths. When teeth wear down, new teeth grow in. An alligator may go through 2,000 – 3,000 teeth in a lifetime.

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DIET

Alligators will eat just about anything that will fit in their mouths. When they are young, alligators eat animals like small fish, frogs, and insects. As they get larger, so does their food. Adults eat a variety of things including fish, mammals and birds.

COOL ADAPTATION

The American alligator has about 80 teeth, which are constantly replaced throughout its life (up to 70 years). Alligators are “ambush” predators, lying concealed usually in the water waiting for prey to come close. Then with a quick burst of speed, the alligator will grab the prey with its teeth, exerting over 3,000 lbs of pressure per square inch. From there the alligator will pull its prey down to drown it. Once the prey is dead it is swallowed whole. Though alligators have very powerful bites, they lack serious strength in opening their mouths. Once their mouths are closed, they can be kept closed with a thick rubber band (DO NOT try this at home).

CONSERVATION CONNECTION

The American alligator was once almost extinct because they were hunted for their meat and skin. Alligators were also killed because they were feared and misunderstood. In the 1970's strict hunting regulations were put in place to protect the remaining alligators. Management plans also began to help increase the number of wild alligators. Alligator farms began to raise alligators for the meat and skin trade so that wild alligators were not killed. With these improvements, the number of alligators in the wild has increased and they are once again a commonly seen reptile in the Lowcountry of South Carolina as well as the rest of their range. One current major threat to alligators is the loss of wetlands. Many wetlands are being drained, filled in or channelized (digging a straight, deeper path for water to flow through instead of flooding land naturally). These areas are then being developed, leaving no natural habitat for the alligator. With a loss of wetlands, alligators are moving into places where humans live and occasionally are found in backyard ponds, swimming pools or ditches. This forced cohabitation is dangerous for both humans and alligators. People sometimes feed the wild reptiles. Wild animals should NEVER be fed. The alligators get used to people and, instead of fearing humans, they begin to expect people to feed them. This can lead to alligators being considered aggressive and a “nuisance species”. This generally results in alligators being relocated.

CAREGIVER NOTES



SCIENTIFIC NAME

Alligator mississippiensis

RANGE

Florida to coastal North Carolina

DIET

Fish, mammals and birds

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DISCOVER
South Carolina