

NEWS RELEASE

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

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WITNESSES STEP FORWARD IN CROCODILE CASE; REWARD OFFERED

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Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) investigators called for the public's help Thursday in tracking down those responsible for the recent shooting deaths of two endangered American crocodiles on Sugarloaf Key.

Witnesses who heard gunshots on several nights in late February already have stepped forward, helping investigators pinpoint the location of the killings - Sugarloaf Boulevard and Wahoo Lane. But they believe someone actually may have seen the shootings.

"We have received tremendous help from residents on this case. We are asking for more," FWC Officer Gordon Sharp said. "These were endangered animals, protected animals. People in this area who have lived alongside these crocodiles for years are angry."

The carcasses of the two crocodiles, one 7 feet long and one 8.5 feet long, were dumped several miles apart on State Road 4A. They apparently had been shot in their heads with different types of firearms.

The crocodiles, which appeared otherwise healthy and well-nourished, have been identified as two that had lived in the area for about seven years. Though residents had complained about their presence, there were no reports of any aggression on their part towards humans or pets. In fact, there have been no documented attacks by American crocodiles on human beings in the United States. Crocodiles are protected under both state and federal laws. Killing one is a third-degree felony in Florida, punishable by up to five years in prison.

Anyone with information about this or any other wildlife law violation can report it anonymously to FWC's Wildlife Alert Reward Program at (888) 404-FWCC (3922) or online at MyFWC.com/law/Alert. Anyone with information that leads to a conviction may be eligible for a reward of up to \$1,000. Cellular phone customers throughout most of the state can make a free Wildlife Alert call by dialing *FWC or #FWC depending on service carrier.

Defenders of Wildlife, a non-profit conservation organization, has offered additional reward money in this case. For more information, visit www.defenders.org.

Living With Crocodiles

The American crocodile lives along the coasts in parts of Mexico, Central and South America, the Caribbean and at the northern end of its range in South Florida. Historically, crocodiles lived in coastal areas from Key West to the lower Indian River on the Atlantic Coast and Charlotte County on the Gulf Coast. They thrive in brackish and saltwater habitats and are found in ponds, coves and creeks of mangrove swamps.

American crocodiles differ from American Alligators in several ways: Crocodiles are grayish-green in color, while alligators are darker in color. The fourth tooth on either side of the crocodile's lower jaw is exposed when the mouth is closed. Crocodiles have narrower, more pointed snouts than alligators.

The American crocodile is an endangered species success story. Since it was listed in 1975, its numbers have grown in Florida from fewer than 300 to more than 1,000, not including hatchlings. The number of documented nests has increased from 10-20 to more than 80. As a result of this continued recovery and the increasing numbers of people living and recreating near water in south Florida, the number of crocodile-related complaints has risen.

Some people may be frightened by the sight of a crocodile. However, American crocodiles are normally shy and reclusive. Often the best course of action is simply to leave the crocodile alone. For American crocodiles to continue to recover, people must learn to coexist with them whenever possible.

A few tips for living with crocodiles:

- Closely supervise children when they are playing in or around water.

- 1 Crocodiles are most active between dusk and dawn. Therefore, swim only during daylight hours.

- 2 Do not allow pets to swim, exercise or drink in waters that may contain crocodiles. Dogs are more susceptible to being attacked than humans, because

dogs resemble the natural prey of crocodiles.

3 Use fencing and other barriers to separate you and your pets from crocodiles.

4 Leave crocodiles alone. State and federal law prohibits killing, harassing or possession of crocodiles.

5 Never feed or entice crocodiles. It is dangerous and illegal. When fed, crocodiles may overcome their natural wariness and learn to associate people with food.

6 Dispose of fish scraps in garbage cans at boat ramps or fish camps. Do not throw them in the water. Although you are not intentionally feeding crocodiles when you do this, the result can be the same.

7 Never remove a crocodile from its natural habitat or accept one as a pet. It is illegal and dangerous to do so. Crocodiles cannot become tame in captivity, and handling even a small one could result in a bite.

8 Observe and photograph crocodiles only from a distance. Remember they are an important part of Florida's natural history as well as an integral component of the ecosystems in which they live.