

Alligators

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Our understanding of the environment is shaped in large part by our current interactions. As a result, our expectations of where we might find particular animal and plant species does not always reflect where they lived in the past, even the recent past. This static notion of ecology can result in surprise and even confusion when species begin to recolonize areas where they formerly lived. The American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) is a good example of a species whose habitat is expanding back into areas where it was formally present and even abundant. Alligators were heavily hunted in the 20th century and started to become rare. They were listed as an endangered species in 1973 and all legal hunting ceased for many years. In Florida, the sight of an alligator in the wild during the 1970s was uncommon. Alligator populations had receded into the deep swamps and woods away from human habitation. They had also been hunted out of the salt marshes and estuaries along the Atlantic coastline of Florida when Europeans first began populating the area.

When the pressure from hunting was removed, the alligator population began to recover. During this same time, the human population in Florida increased dramatically-almost tripling in size during the last thirty years. Towns and neighborhoods have been developed in areas where virtually no

humans lived previously. These human encroachments into areas where alligators had taken refuge has meant that sightings and encounters are becoming more common. Meanwhile, as the population has recovered, alligators are returning to areas where they have not been seen for decades or even centuries. Coastal areas in particular are starting to see the return of alligators, which can be shocking to someone walking along a marshy area or beach. It ends up that these habitats contain a lot of potential food sources for alligators, despite the fact that brackish and salty waters are less desirable than fresh waters for alligators. This tradeoff, especially for male alligators, seems to be worth it as evidenced by the re-emergence of alligators in these areas.



As alligator populations continue to rebound, humans need to take a deeper, more complex, and more historical look at the ecosystems they live in and realize that they are the recent arrivals. Understanding that alligators call many different parts of Florida home can help people appreciate this magnificent species and lead to better behaviors by humans that minimize negative interactions. One of the major reasons that humans experience aggressive

behavior by alligators is because they have been given food by humans. Alligators will bite the hand that feeds them but this behavior can be avoided by not providing food in the first place. It is also against the law to feed alligators. This simple shift in behavior can lead to much more harmonious interactions between humans and gator. Plus, alligators do not need to be fed-they are quite proficient hunters when left alone!

Environmental anthropologists study the relationships between humans and their environments. At the University of Florida, environmental anthropologists are working with colleagues in ecology and other disciplines to better understand the history and archaeology of human-wildlife interactions. Through their efforts, they hope to have more effective conservation efforts in their state and beyond.

