

Alligators and How They Live

Synopsis

The American alligator, found in the waters and lowlands of the southeastern United States, is the focus of this documentary. Once hunted to the point of extinction, this species of alligator was classified as an endangered species in 1967, and has since made a strong comeback. In fact, by 1977, the alligator population in Florida and other southern coastal regions had grown so much that the American alligator was reclassified as a threatened species, permitting tightly regulated hunting.

Alligators are reptiles; they belong to the crocodilian group, as do related reptiles called caimans and gavials. They are differentiated from crocodiles in many ways, including their lighter skin and more tapered snout. Alligators also are much less aggressive than crocodiles.

American alligators have thick, tough skin that is olive green and dull gray in color. They are ectothermic, or cold-blooded, creatures; this means that their body temperature fluctuate to match the temperature of the air or water around them. Their bodies are nicely adapted to life in and out of water. They swim by propelling themselves through the water with their powerful tails at speeds of up to 20 m.p.h.

An examination of alligator mating habits and young alligator development nicely rounds out this in-depth program.

Questions to Ask Before Viewing

- Do alligators eat people? Do crocodiles?
- Why do you think alligators were once hunted to near-extinction?
- How would you expect an alligator's skin to feel?

Questions to Ask After Viewing

1. What geographical region do most crocodilians have in common? (The equator-most crocodilians live within a few hundred miles of it.) Where is the American alligator found? (In the rivers, swamps, marshes, and lakes of the southeastern United States; they are also found in South America.)
2. Name the two other crocodilians discussed in the film, aside from the alligator and crocodile. (The gavial, found in India, and the caiman, found in Central and South America.)
3. What is the estimated life span of the American alligator? (Fifty to 60 years.)
4. Alligators are vertebrates. What does that mean? (Animals that are vertebrates have backbones.)
5. What happens if an alligator breaks a tooth? (The tooth grows back.)
6. Do alligators see in the same way humans do? (No-alligators see only shades of black and white.)
7. How do alligators swim? (They propel themselves through the water by moving their large tails from

side to side. They use their legs to paddle only when swimming slowly.)

8. Alligators are carnivores. What does that mean? (Animals that are carnivores are meat-eaters.) What do alligators eat? (Alligators eat fish and small animals, such as snakes, frogs, raccoons and other mammals, and birds. When an alligator wants to eat something large, like a raccoon, it generally drowns the animal first.)
9. Alligators only need one big meal a week. What can this be attributed to? (Alligators are cold-blooded, or ectothermic. Cold-blooded animals do not require as much food as warm-blooded animals because they don't need to maintain their body temperature at one level. The body temperature of ectothermic animals fluctuates to match the temperature of the air or water around them.)
10. Why will alligators die without water to immerse their bodies in? (Alligators need the cool water to help regulate their body temperatures.)
11. When do alligators enter their mating season? (In early spring.) Why do the male and female alligators bellow at another? (It is a sort of mating ritual.) Where do alligators mate? (Underwater.)
12. What happens approximately two months after mating? (The alligator lays their eggs-they're not much larger than those of a chicken. She lays anywhere from 20 to 60 eggs, which will hatch in about 59 days.)
13. How is the sex of an alligator determined? (By the temperature of the incubating embryos. Warmer

eggs tend to become males, while colder eggs tend to become females.)

14. In what ways does the mother alligator help her young? (She protects the eggs from predators during the incubation period. When the first babies begin to hatch, she helps them out of their shells and out of the nest. The mother will protect her young for a year or more after their birth.)

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Length

- 17 minutes

Subject area

- Life Science

Audience Levels

- Intermediate-Junior High

Catalog Number

- 8391

Annotation

This program introduces students to the very special characteristics of the American alligator. It describes the features they share with other reptiles and other crocodilians, and explores the unique traits they have evolved in order to survive on land and in water.

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Discussion Guide

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Objectives

- To explain the American alligator's relationship to other species of crocodilians.
- To describe the habitat, unique physical features, and behaviors of the American alligator.
- To describe alligators' courtship, mating, nest-building, and egg-laying activities.
- To show how alligators raise their young.
- To explain the food requirements of alligators -- what they eat and how they eat.

