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Is it time to reevaluate our alligator policy?

By Barbara Joy Cooley, President, Committee of the Islands

At the Sanibel Congregational United Church of Christ, Pastor John Danner puts on puppet shows for the children. One of the star characters is Chompers, a crocodile who talks, attends church, and could go to Sanibel City Hall if he wanted to.

In the real world, however, the alligators of Sanibel cannot go to City Hall and speak up. So on this sanctuary island, maybe it's time for the rest of us to do so, and ask if we should reevaluate our alligator policy.

In 2004, responding to two fatal alligator attacks, the City of Sanibel changed its policy for dealing with alligators. Prior to that time, the policy was relatively lenient, but the attacks and the growing population of these crocodilians -- indeed, maybe an overpopulation -- led to a more aggressive policy. Here is how that policy works in practice:

- A resident or visitor calls the police to complain about a nuisance alligator.
- The police call in a state-certified alligator trapper.
- The trapper can then destroy (they're *killed*, not "removed") the nuisance alligator. In addition, if the police chief or his designated representative elects to do so, he can also authorize the trapper to destroy every other alligator in the area that exceeds four feet in length.

The first two and a half steps of the current program deal strictly with the nuisance alligator that the citizen called to complain about, which is what many if not most people might expect. The next half step, killing every 4-foot-plus alligator in the area, may not be what we expect. Since the alligators don't breed until they're six feet long, we could be on our way to eliminating these reptiles from our sanctuary island.

Two Key Questions

So these questions come up: Are we indeed on our way to eliminating alligators from Sanibel? And if so, is that what we want?

We don't pretend to have the answer to the first question, but there are some signs -- both anecdotal and statistical -- that it could be "yes." So it may be well to take a second look at these early indicators and then seek more definitive information. First the numbers:

The City reports that 32 alligators were destroyed in 2009 and 16 more through September of this year. Overall, 297 Sanibel alligators have been destroyed since the new policy was initiated in 2004. That's an average of almost one a week over the six-year span.

Is that too much? Does it mean we may be losing alligator population?

I was first drawn to this question when I realized that I wasn't seeing as many alligators as I used to see near my home in Gulf Pines, along the West Sanibel River Preserve. I began asking others who live in alligator-prone territories on Sanibel. Almost all of them say the same thing: We don't see as many alligators, and the ones we do see tend to be quite small.

So the anecdotal information seemed to square with the numbers showing almost 300 alligators killed in the six years since the new policy was implemented. And the defining feature of that policy is this: When the City of Sanibel changed its nuisance alligator policy to closely mirror the state's policy, it obtained a nuisance alligator permit allowing the city to handle the complaints via the police department instead of having citizens call the state hotline for nuisance alligators; *but in addition to the nuisance alligator permit, the City also requested and obtained an "open harvest area designation," which has now been renamed a "targeted harvest area."*

It is the *harvest area* designation that means trappers can go beyond the original nuisance alligator and also destroy any other alligators they find that are over 4 feet long. And, as we mentioned above, alligators do not breed until they reach about 6 feet in length. So, over time, if enough alligators over 4 feet long are destroyed, it is theoretically possible that alligators could disappear from this sanctuary island.

It is that same harvest area designation that makes the Sanibel nuisance alligator program one of the more aggressive in the state. Only the City of Sanibel can request this harvest area designation for itself, and only the City of Sanibel can remove the designation, according to Lindsey Hord, the coordinator of the Statewide Nuisance Alligator Program.

Needed: More Information

Since 2006, the staff at J. N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel have been conducting regular alligator counts in the Refuge. Although their count is conducted on refuge properties, it is important to keep in mind that alligators in the Refuge often move around on the island, coming into neighborhoods such as mine in Gulf Pines and Gulf Shores.

The data from the Refuge's counts does cause some alarm. In 2006, the count was 45; it dropped every year until reaching only 20 in 2010.

Author and historian Charles LeBuff recently made an excellent presentation at the Sanibel Community House as part of the Celebrate Sanibel program. During the question-and-answer session after his presentation, he described the City's post-2004 program on nuisance alligators, and he said perhaps it is now time for the City to reevaluate that program.

I'm not an alligator expert, but I think it is time for the experts to take a look at our harvest area designation to see if it is really needed. More study and examination of the data is needed. Fortunately, the experts may agree. Paul Tritaik, the Refuge manager, recently said that perhaps "this is something our biological committee could discuss." The biological committee he refers to is made up of biologists from places like the City of Sanibel and the Refuge.

Perhaps simply responding to nuisance alligator complaints is enough; the harvesting of the other alligators over 4 feet in an area may be, well, overkill. And if it is, we need as a community to answer the other question I posed earlier: Do we want an island without alligators -- not only one on which these creatures are no longer a part of our wildlife experience, but also one on which the natural balance has been dramatically altered? If so, would we then see an imbalance in the food chain and a population explosion of raccoons, snakes, and others that are the natural prey of alligators? Would such an increase in numbers of raccoons and snakes harm the bird population? So there are practical matters to consider in addition to the diminution of our wildlife experience.

What Do You Think?

The Committee of the Islands would like to hear what you think about the City's policy of dealing with alligator control under a “targeted harvest area” designation. Of course, we must have a nuisance alligator program since the public safety absolutely requires one. But is it time for us to investigate whether the harvest area designation should be either modified or discontinued ? We are, after all, one of only a few municipalities in Florida to have such a designation. How does that fit with our vision of Sanibel as a sanctuary island, one on which the public safety must come first, but in a way that enables us to enjoy the unmatched natural diversity and abundance that surrounds us? Email your thoughts to: coti@coti.org.