

The calls that can kill

By Barbara Joy Cooley, president, Committee of the Islands

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In December, I wrote a Sanibel newspaper commentary asking “Is it time to reevaluate our alligator policy?” Ever since, I have been amazed and surprised at the responses to that commentary, which was published on December 10, 2010. More than 200 Sanibelians have either emailed, phoned, or stopped me in the grocery store, in restaurants, or at island events to give me their thoughts about it. Except for two, all of these comments expressed misgivings about the city’s nuisance alligator program.

This is clear: people on Sanibel are concerned about the survival of the island’s alligator population. Many are worried that our nuisance alligator program has been operated in a manner that is too aggressive, killing more alligators than may be necessary. The only official alligator count kept on the island, in the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge, shows a dramatic drop in the number of alligators from 2006 to 2010. Many people have told me they are alarmed because they are seeing far fewer gators than they once saw, and the ones they do see are relatively small.

The other surprise for me is the large number of people who were unaware that: (1) When someone calls the police to report a nuisance alligator on Sanibel, that alligator is destroyed, not relocated; and (2) that the police have the option of also ordering the destruction of any other alligators in the area who are over four feet long. Thus many people did not know about this death sentence until they read the December commentary; nor did they know that other alligators in the vicinity of the nuisance alligator could be killed.

Raising Public Awareness

Raising awareness about this fact has seemingly had an effect. After the harvesting of two alligators on the Dunes golf course in mid-November, there were no complaints and no alligators destroyed in December and January. But in February, three nuisance alligator complaints resulted in three of these animals being destroyed through the city’s nuisance alligator permit/program. Their sizes were 5-foot 3-inches, 6-foot 3-inches, and 7-foot 10- inches. We intend to learn more about the circumstances by reviewing the police reports.

Here is what we, at the Committee of the Islands, have decided to do, in order to maintain awareness about the alligator situation:

- On a monthly basis, we will check with the Statewide Nuisance Alligator Program office in Okeechobee to learn how many alligators were destroyed on Sanibel during the preceding month. Then we will determine the circumstances of those incidents. When alligators have been destroyed, we will report this information to you through the local newspapers.
- We will also periodically place advertisements in the local newspapers to remind Sanibel residents and visitors about the fact that nuisance alligators are destroyed, not relocated.

At the Committee of the Islands, we are heartened by the display of deep and widespread concern for wildlife on Sanibel. The spirit of the sanctuary island lives on.

The mission of the Committee of the Islands is to develop and promote policies and positions designed to maintain and enhance the quality of life on Sanibel and to preserve its unique and natural characteristics – including its wildlife. For more information, visit www.coti.org on the web or email us at coti@coti.org.