

Update: How's It Going For The Sanibel Alligators?



by Barbara Joy Cooley, president, Committee of the Islands

In past commentaries, we've described how Sanibel alligators were too often being destroyed without sufficient regard for the

impact on the survival of this animal in our carefully balanced ecosystem. This was often the result of people complaining about "nuisance alligators" who were then sought out and destroyed by the City, in addition to other gators in the same vicinity who were over four feet in length.

After these commentaries were published, many readers responded that they assumed such alligators were being relocated, when in almost all cases they were being killed -- literally hundreds of them over an 8-year period -- by licensed trappers.

How many Sanibel alligators have been destroyed so far this year? The answer is 15, and two more were relocated. But we think it would contribute to a better understanding of this issue if we look beyond the numbers and take a closer look on a case-by-case basis.

We start with an incident on February 20 on Eagle Run Drive. A man living there called the police to complain about



Homeowners associations often post signs warning people away from alligators

two alligators on the bank of a body of water behind his home. When the police approached, the alligators retreated into the water, just like they are supposed to do. Other people who were accustomed to seeing these two alligators in the area said they never bothered anyone, and always retreated away from people. However, according to the police report, the man who called to complain about these gators said they "bother his dogs." One of these two gators was about 6 feet long, the other five to five-and-a-half feet long. They were both captured and destroyed.

That case appears to be an unnecessary destruction of alligators, and caused



These signs are in the Gulf Pines neighborhood on Sanibel

anguish among neighbors who did not want to see them harmed.

Alligators fed by people

The next incident was like several others so far this year: an unfortunate and tragic case where the alligator was behaving as if it was used to being fed by people. This one also happened in February, and also involved a 6-foot gator. A woman living on Palm Lake Drive called the police to complain that the alligator approached when items were tossed into the water, and several other neighbors also complained about the alligator approaching. The trapper was called, and the alligator was removed and destroyed.

Four more cases this year -- two in May, one in July and one in August -- also seemed to involve alligators behaving as if they expected to be fed by people. One of these was a 7-footer reported in May by a homeowner on Ibis Lane, off of Periwinkle Way near Cheeburger Cheeburger. The same homeowner reported another alligator in early July - a large alligator next to a dead smaller alligator. When the police arrived, the large gator behaved as if it had been fed and lost its fear of humans. The third was a big 10-footer at Spanish Cays condos on Middle Gulf Drive. The fourth was a 9-footer in a pond near a barbecue grill being used at a residence on Causey Court in the Dunes.

In April, a woman caring for an elderly resident on East Rocks Drive complained that people across the lake at a house on Boulder Drive were throwing items at an alligator in the water. The police contacted the owner of the Boulder Drive home, who said that the alligator seemed to follow people walking along the shoreline and did not retreat when approached. However, when the police officer approached the gator, it did retreat about 15 to 20 feet.

So it isn't so clear whether this animal had been fed by people. The police officer advised the homeowner of the state law and city ordinance forbidding the feeding and/or harassment of alligators. According to the report, the homeowner responded by saying that "he and his guests are in fear of the alligator due to its aggressiveness and would like to see

it removed." He added that he also has a pet dog and cat, and worried about their safety. Two days later, the trapper removed and destroyed an 8-foot alligator from the lake.

Similarly, the Ibis Lane homeowner who had reported two alligators earlier (in May and early July) reported yet another alligator behind his home later in July. This 10-footer swam away from the policeman who arrived; nevertheless, the trapper was called and the alligator was removed and destroyed.

While it may be tragic yet understandable that alligators who have been fed and who've lost their fear of people need to be removed, it is not clear or understandable why the alligators who are fearful and who do retreat were destroyed.

Alligators in the wrong place at the wrong time

In April, an alligator went into the retention pond near the main lobby of the Holiday Inn. When a manager approached it, the alligator hissed at her. She called the police. This 8-and-a-half-foot alligator was removed and destroyed.

Also in April, a passerby noticed an alligator in the bushes near a front door of a home in the Dunes. He called the police to report it. The police came out, saw one alligator in a pond behind the home, and then another alligator was observed nearby in Roadside Park the next day. Both of these gators, one 10 feet long and the other 11 feet, appeared to have lost their fear of humans, according to the police officer. They were removed by the trapper and destroyed.

On August 31, a 10-foot alligator made the mistake of trying to visit a Koi pond on Punta Caloosa Court, just outside the JN "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge. A resident of that street called the police and said he almost hit the gator with his car, and he was worried about the dogs in the neighborhood. When the police arrived, the alligator was in the driveway, and then moved into the Koi pond. The trapper took it away the next day and destroyed it.

A couple weeks earlier in August, the police received a call reporting an alligator in the middle of San-Cap Road, about 200 yards west of Tarpon Bay Road. It had been hit by a vehicle. When the

night-shift police arrived, the 6-foot long gator was still alive, but was in shock. It was moved out of the road. By the time the day-shift police checked on it, the animal had died. The trapper was called to remove it.

The case of the strange permit

In an unusual incident in early May, a restaurateur living in Gulf Shores was able to receive her own permit from the state of Florida to have an alligator removed from the water behind her home on Fish Crow Road. Because she received her own permit and called the trapper directly, the Sanibel police were not involved and were only notified well after the fact. Several neighborhood residents were upset and disturbed by the removal and destruction of this 8-foot gator, and felt that this homeowner should have fenced in her yard instead of having the gator removed. In responding to the strange issuance of a permit to an individual on Sanibel, the state alligator program coordinator said that this situation has been "fixed" and a "similar situation will be avoided in the future."

The survivors

In two other incidents in May, alligators were removed and relocated, not destroyed. One involved a 7-foot gator in the pond behind Periwinkle Place, in an area near children. The other was a 7-foot, 7-inch gator near the Sanibel River off of Casa Ybel Road.

Finally, an alligator reported by a man on Middle Gulf Drive was spared removal and destruction in July when the responding police officer determined that the animal was not aggressive, retreated from him, and was less than 4 feet long.

What can you do?

If you see someone feeding an alligator, or even just throwing food into a pond, swale or lake, report the incident to the police at 472-3111. Feeding an alligator is a serious offense, and it is also a death sentence for the alligator when it consequently loses its fear of humans.

Keep your cats indoors, and when dogs are outdoors, keep them on a leash and under your control.

Do not fish from the bank of a fresh water body, especially at dawn and dusk.

Recognize that the presence of alligators is important to the balance of nature on Sanibel, and strive to be sure all of your neighbors understand that, too.

Make sure your homeowners' or condo association educates new residents about the importance of alligators and the laws against feeding them.

Committee of the Islands welcomes your input on this subject. Please email your comments to: coti@coti.org. Commentaries on other island issues are available on our website at www.coti.org. You can also visit Committee of the Islands on Facebook.✧

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