

# Finding an equilibrium

The allure of crocodile and alligator skins for high-end fashion items never seems to decline. Over the years, the leather industry has played an increasingly important role in conservation, working alongside biologists and researchers to get the numbers up. Jim Banks examines the success of these efforts for farmed animals and the sustainable advantages of using wild skins.

**T**he unique aesthetics of crocodile and alligator skins make them a perennial choice for wallets, shoes, bags and other high-end luxury items, often with a very high price tag, and their use has attracted intense criticism from animal-rights groups. What is often overlooked, however, is the role the leather industry has played in protecting endangered species and,

furthermore, promoting the growth of crocodile and alligator populations around the world.

Key to this success story is the enduring appeal of these skins, with their distinctive markings and the availability of a wide range of skin types. The skins of farmed animals still command the highest prices, but wild skins also play a major role in the industry.

"We see that, in the industry, there used to be a lot of demand for classic crocodilians – those from the Nile region and the US, for example – and, to a lesser degree, caimans. Now, within that first category, we see more demand for high-end, farm-reared crocodilians, while demand for wild crocodilians and caimans is falling. That is because there are a lot of skins on the market, so you





can find high-end skins for a good price. For conservation purposes, however, it is important to use wild skins," says Christy Plott, partner, owner and vice-president of sales at American Tanning & Leather.

"There is a big difference in quality because wild skins have bite marks, scars, damage from leeches and other imperfections. In the past, people would replace damaged scales with a perfect scale to improve the quality of the skin, but that is a lost art now. Using wild skins, however, brings great benefits for the alligator population and for local economies," she adds.

Plott knows the industry inside and out, having worked in it since early childhood with her father, brothers and grandfather. She runs the largest and oldest exotic-leather tannery in the US and provides skins to high-end brands such as Ralph Lauren, Prada and Chanel. The tannery has a commitment to never buying, selling or promoting any endangered species of crocodile or alligator, and provides its clients with only ethically sourced and sustainable luxury leathers.

This focus on sustainability is crucial, as crocodile populations around the world have frequently been under threat over the years because of unregulated hunting for skins, which between the Second World War and 1960s resulted in serious declines in the wild populations of all commercially valuable species of crocodilians – to the point where impending extinction became a genuine concern. The two biggest threats today are the destruction of habitats, often for agriculture, and unwillingness among people to share their lives with predators.

### Back from the brink

In the US, alligators were once on the endangered-species list in Florida, Louisiana and Texas, but populations have recovered dramatically over the years. Their nests are vulnerable to predators, the disruptive effect of hurricanes on their natural habitat and the encroachment of construction projects into the wetlands where they live. Now almost two million alligators live in the Louisiana wetlands, according to the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, thanks to incredible conservation efforts.

Alligators that nest in the coastal wetlands of the US have been harvested for more than 200 years. In Louisiana, they were first harvested in large numbers for their skins and oil in the early 1800s. By the mid-1900s, the alligator population had fallen significantly and drastic action was required (see The Louisiana egg harvest, page 40) to cut down on unregulated harvests and the overharvesting of females, often before they were able to nest or release hatchlings. Through protection, research and management, the state's alligator population has steadily recovered and is now thriving.

The key to this success has been the involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders. More than 95% of the coastal wetlands are located in Louisiana and nearly all of the land is privately owned, so the involvement of landowners is essential. Under the state's current conservation programme, landowners can sell the rights to alligator eggs nesting on their property each year to alligator farmers and ranchers, who receive permits to collect the eggs and transport them to their farms for them to hatch. After a year or two, when they reach around 1m in length, farmers take 10% of these



Inspecting raw skins: Chris, Damon and Chandler Plott check raw skins at the tannery in Griffin, Georgia, US.



Skilled technicians glaze alligator leather at American Tanning & Leather.

alligators and return them to the same area from which they came.

"Alligators don't breed in captivity, so the eggs must come from the wild," remarks Plott, who as well as running a tannery is also an independent consultant and contractor for international marketing and regulatory affairs for the Louisiana alligator programme.

**"People are prepared to put up with crocodiles and protect crocodile habitats if their livelihoods depend on it."**

– Professor Grahame Webb, Wildlife Management International

Under this model, the key driver for conservation is financial. Landowners can benefit financially from leaving their land undeveloped because they receive a fee for the alligator eggs that are collected there, and the release of 10% of hatched animals means that there will be a viable population to produce more eggs the following year. Farmers also benefit from being able to sell meat and skins, so they have a motivation to replenish the wild population of alligators and protect the species. The economy of Louisiana also benefits not only from the economic activity of these landowners and farmers, but also through the \$4.25 hide tag severance tax that is paid to the state. A Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) tag is required for all harvested

alligators. These tags, which guarantee that the skins are part of a sustainable use programme, are issued based on the population estimates derived from nest counts. Tag fees, meanwhile, help to fund the activities of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, which includes the management of the alligator programme and research

projects by biologists into the species. In fact, this is the only government programme in the state that is entirely funded by the trade rather than tax dollars.

Plott, who in May attended the 25th meeting of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s Crocodile Specialist Group (CSG) in Argentina, has seen first-hand how biologists, researchers, leather traders, tanneries, luxury product manufacturers and regulators have come together to ensure that such conservation programmes can work effectively.

"Everything is funded by tag fees," she explains. "The funding comes from the industry. Population growth and the growth of the local economy are driven by the value of the skins. Not a penny comes from the state or from animal-

## The Louisiana egg harvest

Louisiana now has more alligators than in the days of our grandfathers, and populations are steadily increasing. Coastal nest counts have increased from 8,600 in 1970 to 58,000 in 2016. The estimated wild population is more than 1.5 million, with a further 900,000 alligators on ranches in the state.

There are several key years of note:

**1962:** The Louisiana alligator season is closed and research into alligator populations begins.

**1972:** After ten years of the species being completely protected, around 1,350 alligators were harvested.

**1986:** Ranch programme begins, taking eggs from the wild and rearing alligators in captivity; 2,903 eggs were collected.

**1994:** The alligator population grows significantly; 266,408 eggs are collected.

**2017:** The population booms; more than 616,000 eggs were collected.

**Today:** Farmers have two years to return 10% of their healthy alligators of around 1m in length to the wild.

Source: American Tanning & Leather

rights groups. In fact, the state of Louisiana estimates that it receives \$100 million from the alligator industry. That is not counting any of the value that goes out of the state, though I would say the figure is more like \$160 million."

Thanks to the involvement of all stakeholders, including the leather industry, the survival rate of wild alligators in Louisiana has tripled from 3% to 9%.

"People conserve things if they value them positively," says Professor Grahame Webb, managing director of Wildlife Management International (WMI) in Darwin, Australia, and chairman of the IUCN's Crocodile Specialist Group.

"So, the intrinsic value of crocodiles is appreciated by some, including me, but for the population as a whole, the utility values – especially financial – are the only incentive capable of getting widespread public support. This is where sustainable-use programmes, generating economic returns from successful conservation, came into their own with crocodilians. People are prepared to put up with crocodiles and protect crocodile habitats if their livelihoods depend on it."



Certain reptiles will not breed in captivity so they must be released into the wild to produce offspring.



"The ideal security for the crocodiles is to have them economically valuable to the community, to as many people as possible, for the greatest diversity of reasons. Hence it is not ecotourism or harvest; it is ecotourism and harvest. CITES was extremely effective in curtailing international trade and awakening the fashion-leather industry to the realisation that their supply of skins had more ramifications than simply depending on a trader here or there to supply them. To trade, even through intermediaries, meant compliance with a new set of CITES rules linked to the producer nation. The industry has, by and large, adapted to this, despite CITES regulations making trade in legal products still something of an onerous complication. In the future, we have to ensure that the diverse stakeholders all understand the end game, and are in the same boat rowing in the same direction. Conservation must work if all stakeholders are going to benefit," he adds.

For Plott, the programme in Louisiana has many important lessons for other conservation efforts, which could benefit from recognising the mutual interests of all stakeholders.

"This could be the model for any species worldwide," she says.

### The call of the wild

The conservation programme in Louisiana could have important implications for the leather industry, which typically favours farmed skins but is increasingly driven by a desire to meet a demand for sustainably sourced raw materials. Wild alligator skins are more reasonably priced than farm-reared alternatives, but their appearance alone could draw the eye of more high-end fashion brands, especially if the lost art of improving the skins' cosmetic qualities is revived. The biggest draw for fashion brands and consumers, however, could be the fact that buying products made with wild skins would help foster the protection of wild habitats and contribute to the improvement of alligator populations in Louisiana.

"Some brands are now gravitating towards wild skins because of the



Damon and Chandler Plott of American Tanning & Leather inspect skins before descaling them.

impact on sustainability. We are also seeing some companies, including cowboy-boot manufacturers, using very big alligators, and the wild alligators in Louisiana are bigger, at around 4m long, and have very interesting patterns. Wild skins and farmed skins are two very different markets. Some people want a \$60,000 crocodileskin bag, but other people don't want the Hermès or the Louis Vuitton. Instead, they might want a bag that costs \$2,000," says Plott.

Plott. "This kind of conservation programme cannot be done by government. It must be done by the industry and landowners, who have a reason to protect nesting habitats. People must learn from this model, so the industry has to explain the benefits of buying crocodile goods. As an industry, we have to look at both wild and farmed skins if we are to improve sustainability."

"Industry needs to recognise conservation as a fundamental obligation

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– Christy Plott, American Tanning & Leather

"Wild skins are also well suited to furniture, large luggage, yacht interiors and other applications because of the potentially larger sizes of the skins. They are also being used by individual craftspeople that see wild skins as providing great value for bespoke products that can be produced at a lower price," she adds.

Above all, Plott emphasises the fact that sustainability works in the interests of the leather industry, rather than against it.

"This is an industry that has the welfare of animals at its heart," adds

of their corporate social responsibilities, and not simply as a compliance pain," adds Webb. "Conservationists, likewise, need to recognise industry well-being as a fundamental obligation of their corporate social responsibilities, and not an exercise in dancing with the devil to get funding. Crocodiles need to become something that contribute as much as possible to society – then their conservation, and the conservation of the habitats they need to survive, will be assured. Make conservation profitable and you will not have to push industry to conserve – they will push you." ■