

EXPERTS CALL FOR BROAD PROGRAMME TO SAVE CROCODILES

A 5-point programme for conservation of the world's crocodilian reptiles has been recommended by the Crocodile Specialist Group of the Survival Service Commission. The Group met 20-27 March at Ndumu and St. Lucia Game Reserves, Zululand. The new programme is aimed principally at saving 9 species: Cuban crocodile, Orinoco crocodile, Morelet's crocodile, Siamese crocodile, Indian gaviol, false gaviol, Rio Apaporis caiman, broad-nosed caiman and Chaco broad-nosed caiman. All are classified in the endangered category, and will be so listed in the revised Red Data Book Vol. 3. A number of other crocodilians are in lesser categories of danger.

The action programme outlined by the Specialist Group includes the following elements:

- surveys of hide sources, their volume and flow worldwide;
- surveys of wild populations of crocodilians with emphasis on South East Asia, West Africa and South America;
- specific actions favouring the species currently on the verge of extinction;

focusing worldwide attention on crocodilian ecology;

promotion of the establishment of an adequate system of sanctuaries for all species.

The order Crocodylia as a whole is in serious trouble. Essentially they are inhabitants of restricted areas; they do not migrate and their conservation is a local and national problem.

The main cause of their rapid and dangerous decline in recent years has been the uncontrolled killing of these animals for the leather trade. Hitherto, rational management has been the exception rather than the rule and, in some countries, crocodiles are unfortunately still classed as "vermin". As a result, some 15 out of the 21 existing species are already considered by the SSC as seriously threatened.

The crocodilians represent a valuable national asset of many countries, both as a tourist attraction and as a source of high-grade leather available for exploitation on a strictly limited and rational basis. Like other predators and scavengers they also play an important part in maintaining the balance of nature in relation to fresh water ecology. Furthermore, the crocodilians are of immense scientific interest as the only surviving members of the archosaurian group of reptiles which dominated the earth for 100 million years.

The meeting was financed in large part by the New York Zoological Society. It was hosted by the Natal Parks/Game and Fish Preservation Board. The meeting was organised by IUCN and WWF.