

ORINOCO CROCODILE



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Wisirare Ecopark (Orocué, Casanare—Colombia)

Common name:

Orinoco crocodile
Caimán llanero (Colombia)
Caimán del Orinoco (Venezuela)

Scientific name:

Crocodylus intermedius

Distribution range:

Llanos of the Orinoco (Colombia/
Venezuela)



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Historic estimated population (Colombia and Venezuela):

Between 2 and 4 million (individuals)

Wild estimated population (Colombia):

Less Than 200 adults

Wild estimated population (Venezuela):

1500 individuals approximately

Threatened category:

Critically Endangered (IUCN)

Maximum total longitude recorded

(male): 678 cm (year 1800)

Maximum total longitude recorded

(female): 363 cm

Total longitude of a neonate:

Between 26 and 32 cm

Maximum age recorded:

66 years old (female)

Clutch size:

20 - 70 eggs (average 38 - 44)

Clutch season:

Between December and February

Birth season:

Between March and May

The Orinoco crocodile, distributed exclusively in the Llanos of Colombia and Venezuela, is one of the most threatened species of the family Crocodylidae.

It was intensively hunted between 1930 and 1960 for trade of its valuable skin, bringing the species near **extinction**. At present, it is unlikely to be able to recover by itself.

It is estimated that in Colombia, less than 200 adult individuals exists in the wild, located mainly in four distinct populations (see map below).

Females produce between 20 and 70 eggs, which are laid in nests excavated in the sand on beaches, riverbanks and creeks ("caños") between December and January, when the water level is descending. Eggs remain buried between 70 and 120 days, hatching between March and May.

Eggs and hatchlings present a high mortality rate because of predation by different species that feed on them. At the same time, humans collect eggs for consumption and hatchlings to keep them as pets. This situation, added to habitat destruction and incidental (in fishing nets) or premeditated (because of the fear it provokes) death, inhibits the wild populations from having the capacity to recover by themselves.

In Venezuela, 7,419 individuals raised in captivity on six farms were released in appropriate habitats until 2010. Because of these actions, a new viable wild population was established at the El Frío Biological Station, formed by 400 individuals, in an area where the species had been extinct several decades before.

At present, Colombia has more than 380 specimens raised in captivity at the Roberto Franco Station of Tropical Biology (National University of Colombia), a fundamental institution in the conservation of the species in the country. Reintroductions have not been carried out in Colombia so far. A reintroduction protocol is being elaborated, as well as the identification of suitable natural areas for the species, all within the framework of the National Program for the Conservation of the Orinoco crocodile (*Programa Nacional para la Conservación del Caimán Llanero*, in Spanish).

The Orinoco crocodile plays an important role in the ecosystems of the Llanos, possibly in regulating the populations of carnivorous fishes, in the contribution of nutrients to the water and in the processes of preventing blockages in creeks and the sedimentation of deeper parts of watercourses. At the same time, the Orinoco crocodile is a genetic resource that could contribute to future social and economic benefits for the local populations and the country through activities like ecotourism, agro tourism and scientific tourism. Because of that, it is essential to assure the conservation of wild populations of the species.

The transformation of the Colombian Llanos due to human activities increases the need to take additional measures to guarantee, in the medium and long-term, the conservation of this emblematic and legendary species and the natural areas that it inhabits.



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