

AMERICAN ALLIGATOR

The American alligator is an especially important species for a number of reasons: it is one of the high profile “poster species” used to sell the Endangered Species Act (ESA); in 1975 it was the first species to be declared recovered, albeit over only a portion of its range; and in 1987 it became the first species endemic to the 50 states to be declared recovered.

The conservation of the alligator is one of the most complex for any species, and the issues involved are:

- The alligator is clearly a case of data error because its population was so large and healthy—around 734,000 and increasing—at the time of the ESA’s passage in 1973 that it did not merit the act’s protection.
- The Lacey Act amendment of 1969, not the ESA of 1973, was the tool that effectively shut down illegal hunting and trade. Illegal hunting and trade was the reason why the alligator was listed under the ESA.
- The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) listed the alligator as a political ploy to facilitate passage of the ESA, as well as predecessor legislation.
- The alligator’s listing under the ESA hindered states’ conservation efforts, especially by Louisiana and Florida, the two states that contained and continue to contain the vast majority of the alligator’s total population.
- Conservation through commerce in the alligator’s valuable hide played a key role in the species’s conservation.
- The ESA harmed conservation efforts by stymieing research and commerce.
- The FWS needlessly listed the alligator on the periphery of its range.
- Despite that the FWS appointed a recovery team, no recovery plan was ever finalized because the alligator did not merit one.
- The FWS unnecessarily delayed delisting the alligator.
- On balance, the ESA caused more harm than good to the alligator.