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Alligator hunts raise questions in South's swamps

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Facing more than 500 complaints a year about giant alligators in suburban swimming pools, ditches, and culverts, South Carolina has joined seven other Southern states in an ambitious effort to recruit thousands of would-be gator wranglers to cull the toothy and well-armed brood.

They didn't have to look far. Nearly 1,500 aspiring Steve Irwins, most of whom had never before chased gators, signed up for 1,000 new licenses in South Carolina's first public alligator hunt in 44 years.

While the goal in part is to force a fear of humans onto the alligator population, the chief aim is to save the venerable descendant of dinosaurs from the jaws of public opinion, says South Carolina wildlife biologist Jay Butfiloski.

But the circumstances around the massive new hunt, including a controversial killing of a 12-foot, 7-inch giant on Lake Marion, S.C., by three novices, is now raising questions about whether appealing to man's quest for adventure in the swamps is really the best and most ethical way to ease growing tensions between gators and people.

"When they first started, the hunt was more of a commercial hunt than a sport hunt," says Franklin Percival, an alligator expert at the Florida Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit in Gainesville. "They've gone in more recent years toward something that involved a lot of people who had never done it before."

To critics like Joe Maffo, an animal control expert on Hilton Head Island, S.C., it could be a disaster waiting to happen.

Mr. Maffo has joined a call for the state to abandon the hunt following an incident on Sept. 20 where three North Carolina men needed 18 shots from a large pistol to kill a gator that weighed as much as a Harley-Davidson motorcycle.

"It was barbaric," says Maffo. "It was something from the prehistoric era where you spear your game and then you track it down. You need to leave [this hunt] to the pros."

Alligator population growing

After nearly collapsing in the 1960s, the American alligator has rebounded to such an extent in the South that the ancient recluse has become a commonplace sighting along roadways and ditches in eight low-country states. There are an estimated 100,000 animals in South Carolina alone and perhaps 1.5 million in Florida.

During the same period, millions of people have moved into the historic alligator range. Research in Florida shows that what amounts to a territorial conflict has elicited both fear and fascination with an animal that reached its evolutionary peak 200 million years ago.

"Alligators are a nuisance because we've made them a nuisance," says Mary Martin, a Jupiter, Fla., writer and proprietor of animalperson.net, an animal rights website. "We keep encroaching and we keep doing things [like feeding them] that bring them closer and make them less fearful."

Another problem is that the vast majority of gators in the wild are now adults, many stretching over 10 feet long. Officials say 419 people have been bitten in Florida since 1948, including 20 fatalities - two in 2006. Officials say 141 of those incidents happened while an alligator was being moved or provoked.

"The real fundamental question isn't whether to use inhumane methods to eliminate these guys, but what do you do when society is divided like this, when some people are scared to death and some people just love these alligators," says Michael Conover, an expert on human-animal interactions at **Utah State University** in Logan.

South Carolina has an alligator nuisance program, but it's costly and time-consuming, says Derrell Shipes of the Department of Natural Resources.

Mr. Butfiloski, alligator program coordinator at the agency, points out that the new hunt will cull no more than 300 out of the state's estimated 100,000 gators. "Right now for a lot of people an alligator is a potential menace," he says. "But if you have a core alligator hunting constituency, there's a value in wanting to protect the animal."

The number of rookie gator wranglers in Florida has increased, as well, with 5,125 permits issued this year - the most in 10 years. Professional trappers and guides have been recruiting residents by bringing them along for hunts.

"We don't necessarily need a large public involvement to properly manage the alligator population, but there is a high level of public interest," says Steve Stiegler, an alligator biologist at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. "There is a segment of people who are interested in alligator hunting because they are a dangerous animal, and there is a higher thrill level than other types of hunting and fishing."

South Carolina officials say the Lake Marion incident has caused them to review the hunt. This year, only 300 out of the 1,000 permit-holders attended training sessions. "It's really hard to play Monday morning quarterback about what was going on at 2 in the morning," says Butfiloski. "But somewhere there's a lack of technique."

Inexperienced gator hunters

The key with a gator hunt is to snare the animal with a fishing pole or cross-bow arrow attached to a line, and then tire the animal out before it's secured to the boat and shot. What seems to have happened in the Lake Marion case is that the inexperienced men, working at night and caught in an adrenaline rush, may not have had the alligator close enough when they fired at it.

But the three North Carolina hunters defend their actions. "It's not like we were shooting wildly into the night," says Chris Samuels, a Hickory, N.C., arborist. Mr. Samuels says the main problem was that the state wouldn't allow shotguns on the hunt. The .45 caliber pistol, he says, simply wasn't powerful enough to penetrate the giant gator's hide. Samuels says his group felt ethically bound to kill the animal once they had begun firing.

"People on the lake were so grateful to us that we had taken that gator out of water where children swim," he says.

South Carolina wildlife biologist Philip Wilkinson says he does see a value in having a public alligator hunt. But he points out that one reason alligators have survived so long is that their cannibalistic tendencies make them masters of population control. "Sometimes those big ones, if you can tolerate them, do the job for you."

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