

Big Mean Killing Machine

It is hard to imagine that an animal only 8 inches long at birth can become one of the most dangerous creatures on Earth. The saltwater crocodile is such an animal.

Saltwater crocodiles live only in the tropical regions of the world. They can be found in coastal areas of India, Malaysia, and Australia. They may reach 30 feet in length and live up to 100 years.

Saltwater crocodiles are the largest reptiles on Earth. Like all reptiles, they are cold-blooded animals. They lay eggs the size of chicken eggs. The mother watches over the eggs until they hatch. After the young hatch, they must fend for themselves. They may even become food for other crocodiles. The young that survive grow about one foot per year. They reach adulthood at the age of ten. They continue to grow after age ten but at a slower rate.

Crocodiles are among the world's ugliest animals. Their skin is thick and scaly. They are shaped like lizards with long bodies and short legs. Their tails are long and powerful. Their snouts are long and narrow. One lower tooth on each side of the mouth is always **visible** even when their mouths are closed. This gives them a **fiendish** look.

Crocodiles are most at home in water but they can also travel on land. They move quickly through the water by using their pow-

Words you'll need to know

capsized tipped over

documented recorded or reported

fiendish wicked

infested filled with

legends stories from the past that may or may not be true

prohibited not permitted

vanished disappeared

visible can be seen

erful tails as oars. They are silent swimmers leaving only their eyes, ears, and nostrils above water. They can move quickly on land but only for a short distance.

Saltwater crocodiles are fearless hunters. They will often attack animals larger than themselves. Horses and cows that move too close to the water's edge have become victims. Crocodiles have even attacked and **capsized** fishing boats. They catch water animals with their powerful jaws. They will lunge at land animals or knock them into the water with their powerful tails. Once the victims are in the water, the crocodiles will either drown them or tear them to pieces. Small animals are swallowed whole.

Ancient people feared crocodiles and for good reasons. Those living in coastal areas often became victims. Local **legends** tell of these attacks and describe them in detail. One such report states that a single crocodile killed 62 villagers. Another report talks of children disappearing at the water's edge without a



trace. There is little doubt that crocodiles were a deadly threat to these early people who lived and worked near the waterways.

Crocodiles appear to be less of a threat to humans now than in ancient times. Warning signs are placed in areas where crocodiles have been sighted. Swimming in crocodile-infested waters is **prohibited**. Fishing from small boats is discouraged. But attacks on humans still occur. A few of these attacks are well **documented**.

In 1933, two girls from Queensland, Australia, **vanished** while on their way to school. They were later found. One girl was drowned. The second girl's body was found in the stomach of a saltwater crocodile.

During World War II, nearly a thousand Japanese soldiers died in swamp waters near the Burma coast. The soldiers entered the swamp to escape from British troops. Rather than a way to freedom, the swamp became their death trap. Some drowned but crocodiles killed most of them. Screams were heard

throughout the night as powerful jaws crushed the victims. In the morning vultures cleaned up the human remains. Only about twenty of the soldiers survived that terrible night.

Accurate records of crocodile attacks on humans are not always available. From 1975 to 1988, Australia documented only twelve cases. Others may have been killed during this period but proof was lacking. Records from other countries are also incomplete. Crocodiles are good at hiding the evidence.

If you find yourself in areas where crocodiles live, follow a few simple rules and you will be safe. (1) Read the warning signs. (2) Do not wade or swim. (3) Do not walk in the area at night. Crocodiles are very active after dark. (4) Stay at least 10 feet from the shoreline. Saltwater crocodiles can lunge from the water very quickly. You need time to react if you are the target of an attack. (5) Stay away from areas where humans have been attacked before. Crocodiles will often return for a second meal.

Questions and Discussion

1. Circle F if the statement is a Fact. Circle O if the statement is an opinion.

Saltwater crocodiles

- F O a. live only in warm regions.
- F O b. are ugly.
- F O c. have a fiendish look
- F O d. swallow small animals whole.
- F O e. hate people.
- F O f. are fearless hunters.

2. Circle T if the statement is true. Circle F if the statement is false.

The article states that crocodiles

- T F a. are the most dangerous animals on Earth.
- T F b. kill only in the water.
- T F c. can run a long distance.
- T F d. can kill horses and cows.
- T F e. take good care of their young.
- T F f. chew their food.
- T F g. sometimes drown their prey.
- T F h. weigh a ton.
- T F i. are more active after dark.
- T F j. have thick skins.

3. Does the title of the article reflect a fact or an opinion? Write your answer on the lines below.

To search the Web for more information, use the following key words or phrases:

Crocodiles

Australian animals