

GOOD-BYE TO THE GATORS?

A look at how
policies and
perceptions
have impacted

Sanibel's
alligator
population

Betty Anholt thanks the heavens that she wasn't home that fateful, sunny Sanibel day two years ago. Hearing the story secondhand is heart-wrenching enough.

It was July 21, 2004, and Anholt's husband, Jim, a firefighter, had driven home from the station for lunch. He was just beginning to eat when he heard Janie Melsek scream.

Melsek, a fifty-four-year-old landscaper, was working in a yard across the street from the Anholts' home when a nearly twelve-foot alligator lunged from a pond and dragged her into the water.

Nearby neighbors, including Jim, ran to help, and a tug-of-war ensued between man and beast, with Melsek in the middle. "[Jim] was holding her up out of the water so she wouldn't drown until the rescue squad and the police got there," Anholt says.

Melsek didn't drown that day. But she would die two days later from massive infections caused by the alligator's bacteria-ridden bites.

"We still live right next to the pond. We look at it every day," says Anholt. "It will never be forgotten."

According to Chief Bill Tomlinson of the Sanibel Police Department, there was no indication that the gator that attacked Melsek had been fed, there was no evidence that it had any young at the time, and the police department had never received a complaint about an alligator in that area before. "We postulate

that it was just feeding," he says. "Janie may have made herself appear small by crouching on the bank, and she had her back to the water and the gator thought that she was something that it could eat."

Few moments in Sanibel history have been as pivotal as the death of Janie Melsek. Within days, fear spread among islanders and calls to police about alligators skyrocketed. Soon, the city's leaders took a giant step away from the community's nature-friendly image, changing Sanibel's nuisance alligator policy and making it easier to trap and kill gators anytime, anywhere.

"Many people have a different take on alligators than they used to have," says Tomlinson. "Previously, the standard was, 'We're going to live hand in hand with the environment.' That's what Sanibel was all about. But that changed."

Sanibel was always an odd man out when it came to its alligator policy, say state officials. "Sanibel was the only private community that had authority over nuisance alligators, where we allowed them to handle nuisance alligators," says Lindsey

Hord, coordinator of Florida's Statewide Nuisance Alligator Program, or SNAP. "That was unique."

Being an environmentally conscious community, Sanibel's former nuisance alligator policy was more lax than elsewhere in Florida, home to an estimated one million alligators. If a resident complained about a gator that was less than eight feet long, city officials had the option of relocating it to another part of the



SINCE SANIBEL TIGHTENED ITS NUISANCE ALLIGATOR POLICY, MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED GATORS HAVE BEEN REMOVED FROM THE CITY.

BY CHRIS WADSWORTH





PHOTOS COURTESY OF FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION'S STATEWIDE NUISANCE ALLIGATOR PROGRAM

island. Some charge that this allowed bold, smaller alligators to grow into large, deadly predators, like the one that killed Melsek.

When the Sanibel City Council voted to tighten the gator policy, it brought the city's policy into line with Ft. Myers, Cape Coral, Bonita Springs, and most everywhere else. "They now mimic the rest of the state," says Hord. "Any alligator over four feet that is a perceived threat to people or their pets can be removed as a nuisance. Most cases are pretty cut and dried. If it's around a residential area and someone complains, we'll issue a permit and our trapper will get it." And "removed" no longer means "relocated." The gators are killed and their meat and skin harvested.

Initially, statistics showed that Sanibel had changed. In 2004, the year of the Melsek attack, the number of gator calls to the police department jumped to 259, more than twice as many as the year before. In 2005, the number of calls was 212, and at the end of last year, more than one hundred alligators had been taken since the change in policy.

However, in the first three months of 2006, the number of calls to police dropped to about thirty-four. If this trend stays steady throughout the year, the number of nuisance alligator calls on Sanibel would be back to pre-2004 levels.

No one is sure why this is happening. Has the passage of time calmed the nerves of many residents, or has the increased number of gators trapped and killed so reduced the population that there are fewer to fear?

Many islanders believe the latter. "There are very few large adults seen anymore," says Kristie Anders, the education director of the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation.

Indeed, when a large female was spotted near a busy

Sanibel road, it became a tourist attraction and a headache for police. "The public became a nuisance, parking cars and bicycles all over the place. They finally had to build a wall to keep people away," says Anders. "It's because people aren't seeing them anymore. Their curiosity is no longer satisfied."

Janelle Wilson lived on Sanibel at the time of the last attack and subsequent policy change. Today, she lives off island but still drives through Sanibel six days a week on her way to work at Sbarra's Spa on Captiva. She too sees far fewer gators today than she remembers. "They were a lot more common, especially on golf courses and in public areas," she says.

While she regrets the attack in 2004, she questions whether alligators are being unreasonably targeted by the new policy. "We're in their territory," Wilson says. "What happened then was a terrible mistake, but it was not the fault of the alligator."

The disappearing alligators on Sanibel have many worried, even those close to that horrible July day. "It's an extermination process over time," says Anholt, who fears the population on the island

is being adversely impacted by the new policy that allows gators as small as four feet to be removed. She understands gators don't usually breed until they are at least six feet long.

"They may be going a little bit too far," she says. "Just because someone sees an alligator and says 'I'm afraid,' I don't necessarily think they should be pulled out."

Based on what he hears and the calls his department gets, Tomlinson is a bit skeptical. He feels there are still plenty of gators around. "The trapper that had trapped several of the alligators for the state went out to the Beach View Golf Course and said he counted thirty alligators in one night," he says. "From that anecdotal evidence, I would say there are still



AMERICAN ALLIGATORS CAN LAY BETWEEN TWENTY AND EIGHTY EGGS, WHICH TAKE SIXTY-FIVE DAYS TO INCUBATE.

FACTS ABOUT THE AMERICAN ALLIGATOR

The word alligator comes from the Spanish words "el lagarto," which mean "the lizard." The name was used by early Spanish explorers in the Americas.

American alligators have been clocked swimming at speeds of up to twenty-five miles per hour.

An American alligator usually eats once every three to four days. An adult alligator can eat up to 440 pounds of food per week but can also go months without eating at all.

American alligators can lay between twenty and eighty eggs, with the average laying around thirty. The eggs take sixty-five days to incubate.

About twelve thousand to fourteen thousand nuisance alligators are reported in Florida annually. About five thousand of these are captured and killed by specially licensed trappers.

Source: www.floridaevergladesalligator.com

plenty of alligators on Sanibel.”

The issue could be settled soon. The island’s J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge is in the middle of a fifteen-month study to determine what is happening to Sanibel’s ecological balance due to the policy change. This includes the alligator population, its impact on wildlife on the island, and residents’ perceptions of the creatures. The study is set to wrap up at the end of 2006.

In the meanwhile, the big question on the minds of many Sanibelians is how do they intend to live with the alligators among them? The reptiles were here first, having been in the area for thousands of years. Few residents are calling for ridding Sanibel of them completely.

SNAP’s Hord makes the argument that the city’s policy change has actually remedied the problem and is now helping the island strike the right balance of people versus nature. “We have lots of alligators,” he says. “We don’t have to protect every individual alligator. I think there’s room for a reasonable compromise there, and the reasonable compromise is to live with the alligators that are just being alligators and remove alligators that present unreasonable risks to safety.”

Anders isn’t so confident. She lectures about alligators for a

living and for years has told people that the animals wouldn’t bother people unless they had been fed or were protecting babies. But when friends die, things aren’t so black and white.



EVEN THOUGH A NUMBER OF GATORS HAVE BEEN REMOVED ON SANIBEL, PLENTY STILL CALL THE ISLAND HOME. AND IT’S BEST TO ASSUME THAT THERE’S AT LEAST ONE LIVING IN ANY BODY OF FRESH WATER FOUND ON THE ISLAND.

Anders knew Melsek personally. She also knew Bob Steele, who was killed by a gator on Sanibel in 2001. His tragic death got nowhere near the attention of Melsek’s because of the day on which it happened—September 11.

“I’m still mixed,” Anders says. “I have an incredible amount of respect for the ecological integrity of this island. I have really conflicting views on the subject.”

Anholt says her husband is still haunted by what he saw that day as he

tried to save Janie Melsek’s life. Like so many other nature lovers on the island and elsewhere across Southwest Florida, he’s torn emotionally.

“He doesn’t blame the alligator or alligators in general because it happened,” she says. “But he certainly doesn’t blame Janie or feel she did anything wrong. It’s just a tragedy all around.”

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STAYING SAFE

One fear that is foremost in the mind of Chief Tomlinson of the Sanibel Police Department is that some residents or visitors on Sanibel may become lulled into a false sense of security.

Just because the policy has changed and alligators have been removed doesn’t mean people can let their guard down. “Whenever you have a body of fresh water, you should expect there to be an alligator in that body of water,” Tomlinson says. With that in mind, here are a few alligator safety tips:

•Don’t swim outside of posted swimming areas or in waters that might contain large alligators. Stay within marked swimming areas.

•Don’t feed or entice alligators. Alligators overcome their natural shyness and become accustomed or attracted to humans when fed. Alert authorities if you see someone feeding an alligator, which is a violation of state law.

•Don’t swim at night or dusk when alligators most actively feed. Even during the day, avoid areas of thick vegetation along shorelines. These areas provide a good natural habitat for alligators.

•Don’t throw fish scraps into the water or leave them on shore. Although you are not intentionally feeding alligators, the end result is the same. Instead, dispose of fish scraps in garbage cans.

•Don’t allow pets to swim near waters known to contain large alligators or in designated swimming areas with humans. Dogs suffer many more attacks than humans, probably because dogs more closely resemble some of the natural prey of large alligators.

Source: University of Florida

