

## **West African Dwarf Crocodile**

### ***Osteolaemus tetraspis***

Tiny and tough, dwarf crocodiles live in shallow streams that flow through tropical forests in western Africa. They crawl onto land to sun themselves and build streamside burrows and nests from rotting plants. Thick, dark scales cover their necks, backs, and tails. Young crocodiles are about 11 inches long at hatching and have a brown-banded tail; mature ones are about as long as an adult human is tall.

#### **What They Eat**

West African dwarf crocodiles are flesh-eaters. The young eat worms and insects while older animals eat fish, amphibians, crustaceans, and small mammals. They generally swallow their prey whole and will eat dead animals they find. If they try to eat something too big to swallow whole, they shake it back and forth until it breaks into bite-size pieces.

#### **Where They Live**

These water-loving reptiles are found in the forested streams, swamps, and banks of western Africa. They are adapted for life in water with their streamlined bodies, flexible tails, and stubby legs. Unable to move fast to flee, dwarf crocodiles find protection in their thick, tough skin. In water they propel themselves by wiggling their tail.

#### **What They Do**

African dwarf crocodiles get their start in life inside small eggs buried in vegetation and warmed by the heat given off by the rotting process. Females build nests and lay around a dozen eggs at the start of the wet season in May or June. They guard the nest for the three months or so it takes the young to develop inside the eggs. When the young hatch they make loud “urk” noises. The mother then digs them out of the nest and carries them to the water. She cares for the young until they are old enough to protect themselves from harm.

Although female dwarf crocodiles stay close to their young, adults generally hang out by themselves rather than in groups. They spend their days resting at the water’s edge, often in a burrow or protected by plants. At night they swim through the water, using their strong jaws and sharp teeth to capture and eat prey.

#### **How They’re Doing**

Habitat destruction, hunting for their meat and sometimes their skin, and capture for the pet trade have made the west African dwarf crocodile vulnerable. More research is needed to understand this species’ conservation needs. We know little about how threatened African dwarf crocodiles really are. In some places, populations appear stable, while in others people are concerned they could be eliminated locally by habitat loss and hunting.

#### **How The Minnesota Zoo Is Conserving**

The African dwarf (*Osteolaemus tetraspis*) and slender-snouted (*Mecistops cataphractus*) crocodiles are considered the least known crocodylians in the world. They often occur in the same places, preferring forested rivers and wetlands throughout the Upper Guinea and Congo Basin forests of West and Central Africa. Both species have been highly susceptible to deforestation and illegal harvest over the past century, and as a result, there have been large-scale local and regional extinctions. In preparation for a potential reintroduction project, a research group is conducting surveys and habitat assessments in Senegal and Gambia. The Minnesota Zoo supports this research through its Ulysses S. Seal Conservation Grant Program.

#### **Interesting Facts**

- Some crocodiles can stay under water for an hour without coming up for air.

- Crocodiles have see-through eyelids they can close to protect their eyes in the water without blocking their vision.
- A special valve in a crocodile's throat keeps it from swallowing water when it swims with its mouth open.
- Some ancient crocodile species grew to be up to almost 50 feet – that's longer than a school bus!
- The temperature at which a crocodile egg incubates determines the gender of the infant.
- People hunt and eat dwarf crocodiles.
- Dwarf crocodiles weigh 40-70 pounds, averaging 5 feet in length. They can live 50-100 years.