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# EXOTIC LEATHER BANNED IN CALIFORNIA

## Why It Doesn't Save Animals

BY CHRISTY PLOTT

At the end of last year, the state of California enacted legislation to ban the sale of many exotic leathers and leather products – including alligators and crocodiles, despite their use as a global conservation success story. The bans go into effect on January 1, 2020 (alligators and crocodiles) and January 1, 2022 (caiman and lizards). Python is already banned. California is the only government in the world to ban commerce of these species, whose skins are commonly used to make luxury leather goods and footwear.

California's ban on these exotic leathers will adversely affect impoverished communities and villages throughout the world who supply eggs and raw skins for the industry. As a matter of fact, this ban will begin to reverse nearly 40 years of reptile conservation achievements worldwide. This ban is *not* going to save one animal. It *won't* save one habitat. The ban will not help *anyone* - except urbanites who want to "feel good" because they think they are "saving" animals. Why? Ultimately, it is legal, regulated trade for products made from snake, alligator and crocodile that saves these animals from extinction. It provides incentives for people around the world, mostly poor, to look after their reptiles and the habitats they need to survive. For so many people, wildlife is their most important natural resource. It is *our* industry that provides the incentives and *saves* these species. The California ban could potentially be the catalyst of a domino effect of bans in other governments that wipes species out.

The trade in leather from exotic species is carefully monitored, governed and agreed upon under CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) – an international treaty with over 180 member countries worldwide. CITES

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Villagers in the Tana River Basin in Kenya farm alligator eggs for a living. Their quality of life has significantly improved since the Nile Crocodile, Ltd. Farm opened in 1997; One of the many benefits the crocodile farm provided the Tana River Basin community in Kenya was the gift of poly boats, which are more durable and sturdier than their traditional wooden, hand carved canoes. These boats are used for fishing and day-to-day transportation, along with collecting crocodile eggs; An elder in the Galili community of Kenya.







**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Tana River Basin villagers rely on the use of natural resources such as fish, crocodiles, and other wildlife for their livelihoods. Note the wooden, hand carved canoe; Grocery stores do not exist in the Tana River Basin community. Shown here is a local fish market; Installation of a deep water well in the Tana River Basin community in Kenya was funded by the Nile Crocodile, Ltd. Farm.



was formed to create a dedicated forum for governments and scientists to share information on their wildlife and conservation programs and jointly decide on mechanisms to regulate trade so it would not threaten the survival of species of commercial interest. As part of their obligation to CITES, each government has dedicated staff biologists and other scientists who work to ensure the survival of these wild plant and animal species (and their habitats). CITES largely works to benefit species, habitats and communities.

Mountains of data come out of complex wildlife management and socio-economic research supporting the sustainability of this economic sector – a system that is highly dynamic and ever changing. So, it's no wonder that legislators and other politicians in America and around the world grapple with understanding the issue – that sometimes saving wildlife means killing it – it's just counterintuitive. As a result, *letting legislators decide the fate of alligators, snakes, and lizards is like asking a dentist to decide the safest and best gauge of steel to use in skyscraper construction.* Few legislators have the scientific expertise to fully comprehend and make decisions on threatened or endangered species and all of them are susceptible to powerful animal rights lobbies. It is ironic that progressive, forward-thinking California has taken a step in the *opposite* direction of saving animals. In taking their unilateral decision to ban trade, California ignored the best scientific advice of the rest of the world (including state and federal governments, the United Nations, the Convention on Biological Diversity and CITES). Legislators have enacted seemingly well-meaning laws, which will ultimately harm the species they are supposedly trying to protect.

**THE FACTS:**

The commercial use of exotic leather has been the savior of many endangered species and their habitats. Why? Because almost all of these animals are serious predators that live in remote, undeveloped lands where local people have little to no money and few livelihood options. The financial incentive for landowners and local communities to earn money from the



## *What the Experts Say:*

"CITES works. Regulated and sustainable trade works. Sustainable use works. I could cite many examples of successes but let me mention just one. Crocodiles were listed in 1975 in response to severe depletion. The crocodile industry is now worth over \$100 million a year; the illegal trade has all but vanished and crocodiles are far more abundant than they were 50 years ago."

— Inger Anderson, Executive Director, United Nations Environment Programme

"The benefits of Louisiana's alligator industry to alligators are the tip of the iceberg; the industry is exponentially more beneficial to Louisiana's coastal wetlands and the thousands of species of plants and animals that inhabit it."

— Jeb Linscombe, Alligator Biologist Program Manager, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (USA)

"People should come and see the benefits for themselves. The message should no longer be "this industry is awful." It should be "buy a crocodile handbag and save five more crocodiles, and countless other species."

— Dr. Daniel Natusch, Biologist and Ecologist specializing in Snake Conservation (France)

"What Works" is the only definitive measure of a conservation program, and as the US alligator programs work spectacularly well, benefiting alligators, people and wetlands, they deserve accolades ... not punishment."

— Dr. Grahame Webb, Biologist and Chairman of the IUCN Crocodile Specialist Group, the world's leading authority on crocodile conservation (Australia)

"Restricting legal, sustainable trade just hurts poor people and doesn't save any alligators."

— Dr. Perran Ross, Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation - University of Florida (USA)

"Sound wildlife conservation and regulatory oversight have paved the path to the American alligator conservation success story. Wildlife conservation agencies and commercial alligator industries have cooperated together to reverse the threat on the status of alligators across its range, resulting in thriving populations and ample product for industry supply and demands."

— Ricky Flynt, Alligator Biologist Program Manager, Mississippi Department of Parks and Wildlife (USA)

"There are several cases in which populations of some species have decreased to near extinction due to their commercial value and irrational use; and yet, for some economic reason, those species have been recovered as a result of the active participation of local people through the implementation of sustainable-use programs. On the contrary, in cases where people have not benefited by these programs, the species continue to the path towards disappearance".

— Dr. Pablo Siroski, zoology, biology and conservation expert (Argentina)

"The proof is in the pudding - or in this case, in the species. Of the world's 27 crocodylian species, the only ones that aren't imminently threatened with extinction are those that are being valued for commercial purposes. The remaining 7-10 species will be lost forever, some as soon as tomorrow, because local communities don't value or benefit from them. Sustainable use saves wildlife, it saves habitat, and it saves people."

— Dr. Matt Shirley, Conservation Scientist, Florida International University (USA/West Africa)

"Florida's alligator management program provides commercial and recreational opportunities, and has been nationally and internationally recognized as a model for the sustainable use of a renewable natural resource. The economic benefits associated with participating in the FWC's alligator management programs supports the research, management and law enforcement activities that contribute to the conservation success of Florida's alligator population. Opportunities for sustainable use also create ambassadors for the long-term well-being of the state's alligator resource."

— Dwayne Carbonneau, Alligator Biologist Program Manager, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (USA)



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Tana River Basin community of Galili must raise livestock or fish to add protein into their diets. Livestock were vulnerable to crocodile attacks before fencing was installed; Dedication of Galili Maternity Wing; The Nile Crocodile, Ltd. Farm in Kenya observed that women in the Galili community had to travel nearly 3 hours by canoe to safely deliver babies in sterile conditions. The farm gifted the community with the construction of a maternity ward which is powered by solar electricity. Community members are showing off their solar panels.



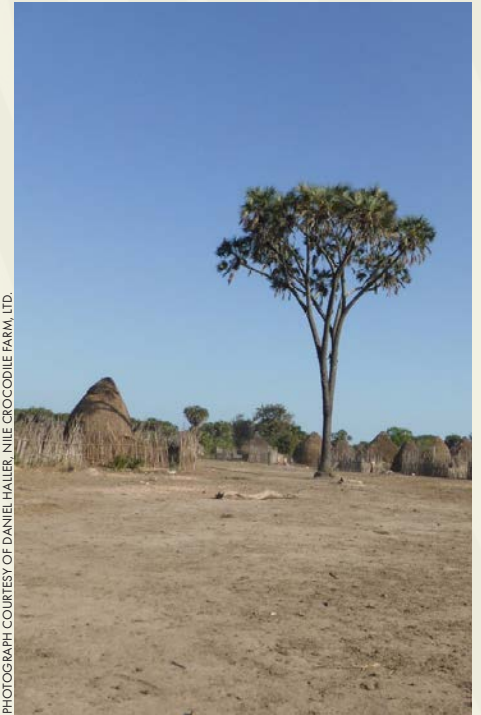


sale of raw skins and eggs encourages people to conserve the species and habitats – you can't sell what no longer exists! Demand for exotic leather products is the driving force behind conservation efforts. Ultimately, consumer demand for alligator, snake, lizard, and crocodile products positively impacts the lives of impoverished people around the world – and saves species from endangerment or possible extinction.

For example, in the Tana River Basin in Kenya, crocodiles were a very real threat to the people. In these communities, there is no running water, electricity or even roads in some cases. The people live off the land and every day is a struggle against nature. In the past, many people were attacked and killed at the river's edge while collecting drinking water. Livestock would go to the river and get taken by crocodiles – jeopardizing people's food security and income. When desperate people are faced with challenges in meeting their basic needs, they deal with them the best way they can – by poisoning crocodiles and removing the threat. In 1997, Nile Crocodile, Ltd. Farm was opened, and it changed the game for the people and the crocs. The crocodile farm was willing to pay the villagers to collect crocodile eggs, but the crocodile population needed to be healthier to provide enough eggs to commercialize the farming operation. The poisoning had to stop. The farm improved the lives of the local community by installing a deep well-water pump – this ended the risk of crocodile attacks and incentivized the community to actively protect the crocodiles and their nesting sites. The farm started paying for eggs and the community members pooled their earnings to install fencing to protect the livestock. As a result, today there are more crocodiles than ever before, but no mortalities for people or livestock, and people have more money available to meet their basic needs. The people's standard of living is increasing. Wild crocodiles are thriving. However, these benefits stop if there is no demand for crocodile leather products. This is a classic example of how local communities can have a better life and save species through sustainable use.

The alligator population in the United States has gone from near population collapse in the 1960s to over 5 million individuals today because of science-based alligator management programs, which include sustainable wild alligator harvest and alligator farming and ranching programs. In Louisiana, Texas, Georgia and Florida, alligator farmers contract with private landowners and local and state governing bodies to purchase the rights to collect alligator eggs. The landowners restore and enhance the wetlands in order to have a more productive alligator nesting habitat and egg harvest. These restoration and scientific management programs result in better habitats for over 8,000 other species of plants and animals. The farmers collect the eggs (before hurricanes can flood nests or predators like raccoons can eat the eggs), hatch the baby alligators and release 10% back to the wild once they are 3-4 feet in length – bolstering wild alligator populations to grow and thrive. Alligator hunters play a role too. The wild culls of 20,000 – 30,000 alligators per year keep the wild populations healthy under pressures of urbanization and different land management regimes. The Louisiana alligator industry provides jobs to local communities and infuses nearly \$150 million into the state economy. The conservation program works, period.

When governments, retailers or brands ban exotic leathers, they HURT conservation. Industry members like us have a role to play in educating the public on the benefits of using exotic leather. We have failed in educating ourselves and our customers, and we need to do a better job. Science and the global experience are on our side. Unless we begin to tell these success stories – linking our products to conservation benefit, poverty alleviation and to a better world – I am afraid that more states will enact narrow-minded, singular decisions. I hope that leather workers across America will do their part to tell these stories and turn things around in California next year. ♦



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**FROM TOP DOWN:** Homes are made from mud and straw in the Tana River Basin community of Galili. There is no electricity in the village; Alligator eggs; Forty years of reptile conservation achievements worldwide are largely in part to the success of alligator farming.