

American Crocodiles

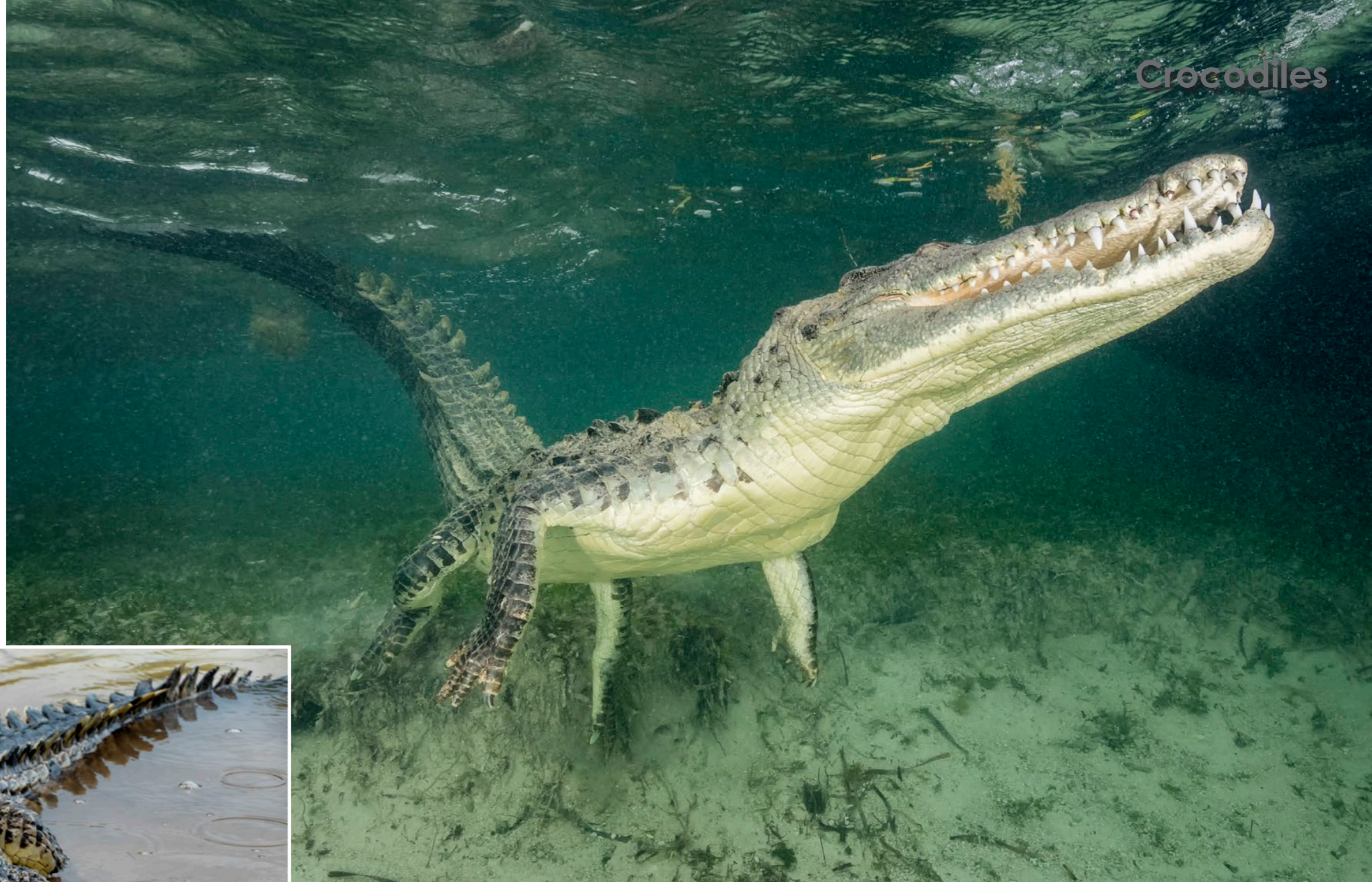
of Banco Chinchorro, Mexico

Text and photos by Don Silcock



The American crocodile (right, below and previous page) is considered a "Vulnerable" species by the IUNC Red List and prefer to hang out in warm shallow waters. The extensive mangroves of Cayo Centro at Banco Chinchorro offer a nearly perfect environment.

The pursuit of unusual and compelling photo opportunities has led me on some interesting journeys over the last few years, but few come close to the raw excitement of photographing the American crocodiles of Mexico's Banco Chinchorro! I have come to realise that photographing big and charismatic animals underwater actually borders on the addictive, because the more of those trips you do, the more encounters you hear about and the "must-do list" just keeps on growing. So it was when a conversation over an après-dive adult beverage led to the subject of in-water encounters with crocodiles.



Crocodiles



Being an Australian citizen, my thoughts were immediately drawn to the saltwater crocodiles of the Northern Territory, an animal that hits the headlines quite regularly because of its deadly attacks on humans. In the animal's defence, it must be said that those attacks are often on either foreign tourists, who have completely ignored the very prominent "No Swimming" signs, or local guys out fishing who fail to understand the basic link between excessive alcohol and poor judgement around dangerous wild

animals.

"Salties," as we affectionately refer to them Down Under, take their name from the fact they are not limited to murky freshwater rivers and lakes, which most crocodiles are. Instead, they have developed a tolerance for salt water, which allows them to prowl coastal waters and occasionally swim quite far out to sea.

Thoroughly dangerous, there appears to be no way to safely photograph salties underwater, or even get close to

them, except perhaps by using some form of motorised cage. As I was to learn, the less well-known American crocodile, is in fact a cousin of the Australian apex reptilian predator, which has also developed a tolerance for salt water. But unlike its antipodean relative, they are not considered to be aggressive to humans and only a few (unverified) cases of fatal attacks have been reported.

As its common name suggests, *Crocodylus acutus* can be found all the



Crocodiles

THE BANCO CHINCHORRO BIOSPHERE

UNESCO describes biosphere reserves as “learning places for sustainable development”. In practice, that means strategies are developed and then tested in the specific reserve to allow a degree of development that does not destroy the original biodiversity and to manage potential conflict between stakeholders—the “developers” and the “incumbents”. It does that by establishing three zones within the overall area of the biosphere, consisting of a core area, a buffer zone and a transition area.

The core area, as the name suggests, has the most sensitive biodiversity, is strictly protected and is a research-only zone. While the surrounding buffer zone can be used for ecologically sound activities, including tourism, recreation and human settlement. Finally, the transition area seems to be somewhat of a “grey zone” that provides some wriggle room during difficult negotiations between the stakeholders.

The Banco Chinchorro biosphere is formed by rings of coral reef, with shallow lagoons on the inside with steep drop-offs on the outside, and is part of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, which extends from the southern half of the Yucatan Peninsula to the Bay Islands of Honduras. The area was declared a reserve in 1996, with the specific aims of protecting the coral reefs and marine biodiversity, while also enabling fishing cooperatives to maintain their livelihoods based upon the sustainable extraction of lobster, conch and scalefish. ■

way from the Everglades on the southern tip of Florida, throughout the Caribbean and Central America, down to the northern end of South America in the countries of Ecuador, Columbia and Venezuela. In addition, its largest known population inhabits the land-locked hypersaline Lake Enriquillo in the Dominican Republic. But, by far the best place for reliable and up-close underwater encounters with the American crocodile is Banco Chinchorro in the southeast of Mexico, near the border with Belize.

Some 12 months on from that après-dive adult beverage, a lot of Googling and flurries of emails saw me sitting in a van driving south from Cancun International Airport on Mexico's Yucatan peninsula (after the obligatory marathon journey from

Asia) with a small group of like-minded characters I would come to know quite well over the next few days.

Banco Chinchorro

Although hardly a household name, Banco Chinchorro is, in fact, one of the largest coral atolls in the Northern Hemisphere and a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (see sidebar). Covering an area of almost 800 sq km, and located some 35km offshore, the reefs of Banco Chinchorro are very healthy and a real joy to dive.

But if it's the crocodiles you are after, Cayo Centro is where you need to be. Although only just under 6 sq km in size, Cayo Centro is the largest of the three islands on the atoll and is home to a permanent estimated population of between 300 to 500 American



Small fishing huts called *palafitos* dot Banco Chinchorro (above); Croc at surface (top left) and resting on seagrass bed (top right)



Dive boat moored at a small fishing hut, or *palafitos* (above), while divers in the water photograph a croc on the seagrass bed; Croc eating lionfish bait (left); Croc raising its head for a breath (right)



crocodiles. It also hosts a small, seasonal population of local fishermen who have built a scattering of about 10 huts on stilts, called *palafitos*, above the shallow waters of the lagoon on the eastern shore of the island and a similar number onshore called *cabañas*.

Quite how and when the crocodiles took up residence is not clear, but the dense mangroves of Cayo Centro offer the perfect habitat for them, with the rich waters around the island providing plenty of sustenance. The crocodiles and the fishermen have an almost symbiotic relationship, tolerating each other's presence in this remote location with the main signal for interaction being the noise of the chopping tables.

The fishermen fillet their catches on tables above the lagoon at

the *palafitos* (and at the water's edge at the *cabañas*) and the crocodiles will immediately gather when they hear the knives on the chopping boards. For the crocodiles, it is snack time, while for the fishermen it is automated waste disposal.

How it works

In-water encounters with the American crocodiles of Banco Chinchorro are done on snorkel, as it is too shallow for scuba near the *palafitos*, plus it is easier to manoeuvre when unencumbered. Positioning and visibility are the key to safe encounters and our *palafito* had some prime real estate just in front of its main porch in the form of a large sandy patch that stretches out to the left of the hut.



Local fishermen rest inside their fishing hut at Banca Chinchorro



Crocodiles

THE AMERICAN CROCODILE

The American crocodile is categorised as a relatively large species, with males reaching maximum lengths of 5 to 6m when fully mature, while females are generally smaller at around 3 to 3.5m. Like all reptiles, they are cold-blooded and breathe air, so they are most comfortable in warm shallow waters, and the extensive mangroves of Cayo Centro at Banco Chinchorro offer an almost perfect environment.

American crocodiles are currently on the IUCN Red List as “Vulnerable” principally because its skin is a commercially viable product, which led to significant hunting of the animal from the 1930s through to the 1970s. It has been estimated that their overall population declined by at least 20 percent during that period, but times have changed, and habitat destruction is now considered their greatest threat. ■

Eyeball to eyeball

Of course, all those eminently sensible logistics were far from my mind as the time came to get in the water for the first encounter, and I was very nervous as I descended the ladder at the back of the boat that first time. Then, suddenly in front of you is a serious-looking piece of reptilian hardware that is watching you as intently as you are watching it. Inscrutable is the word that comes to mind.

Underwater encounters with big animals are rarely, if ever, static—they move, often constantly and occasionally very fast. In contrast, the American crocodiles of Banco Chinchorro remain completely still, but with a coiled-up energy that is unleashed when they attack.

The problem is that there is virtually no way of knowing when they will attack, so there is an intense tension as you manoeuvre closer to get good images knowing that should that trigger happen, you are very reliant on that wooden stick and the reaction time of the crocodile wrangler.

Most of the lagoon has a rich coating of seagrass on the bottom, with which the crocodiles blend in perfectly when they submerge, making them hard to spot from the surface. The sandy patch makes it very easy to see who or what is there, and the basic concept is to keep the humans on the sandy patch and the crocodiles on the seagrass.

By mooring the boat alongside the palafito, one direction is blocked, and the sandy patch means that any crocodiles sneaking in can be spotted. By feeding them from the front of the boat, the “encounter zone” is quite well-defined and controllable. The actual control in the water is done with a wooden stick—albeit a large one—but a stick none-the-less. It is used by the wrangler to warn and calm the crocodile when it gets excited or aggressive, and as a vertical barrier if it advances on to the sand. Despite my initial doubts on its usefulness, it turned out to be remarkably effective.

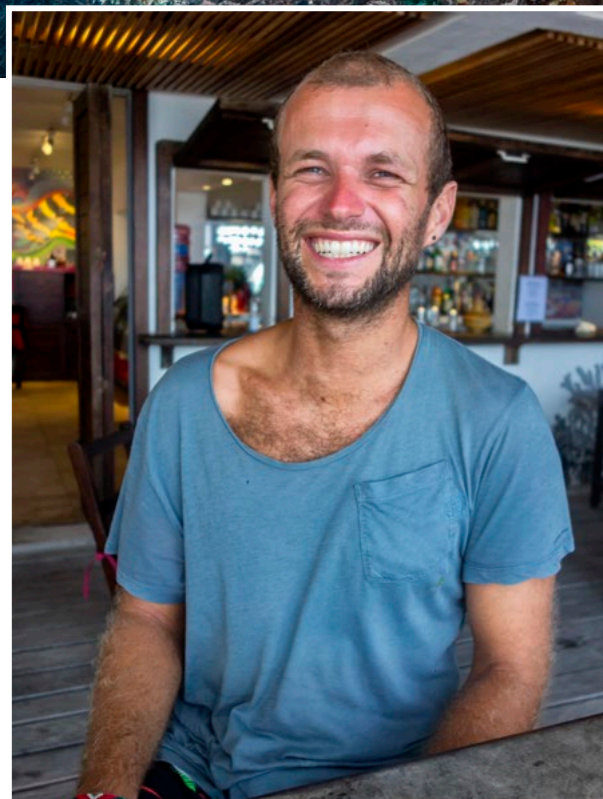
American crocodile on seagrass bed (above); Profile of croc at the surface (top right); Divers photographing crocs at Banco Chinchorro (top left)





Crocodiles

Crocodile resting on seagrass bed (above); Banco Chinchorro reef scenes (left and right); Lionfish bait (lower left) are the crocs' favourite food



Mathias Van Asch, the croc whisperer

The crocodile whisperer

So how do you become the “guy with the stick” who is responsible for keeping guests safe and ensuring no harm comes



to the animal—even PADI has yet to come up with a speciality course for that. In the case of Mathias Van Asch from Belgium—not a country normally associated with large and potentially dangerous reptiles—it was a case of being in the right place at the right time. Arriving in Xcalak as dive instructor, it turned out that the incumbent had decided to move on but stayed around long enough to provide

some very hands-on initial training in the not-so-gentle art of crocodile wrangling.

With some three seasons under his belt now, Mathias freely admits that he was hyper-nervous the first time he got in the water with the Chinchorro crocodiles, but over time he has clearly identified certain key behavioural patterns—starting with the young ones, which are by far the most dangerous because they are unpredictable. The big crocodiles may look fierce and very threatening, but they are

not particularly aggressive and tend to be much calmer than the young ones.

The golden rule is to never take your eyes off the crocodile—allow them space, but do not allow them to command that space by using the large wooden stick as a vertical barrier between them and the guests. Mathias believes that attacks do not happen because the guests, with their cameras

and dome ports are the biggest things they have seen underwater, and their reflections in the dome ports basically confuse the crocodiles—so they are very wary.

Final words

Is it dangerous? Probably and possibly are the best descriptors, as there is no doubt that they could inflict serious harm, but nobody has been attacked. Is it special? Yes, for sure it is—being so close to such large and potentially dangerous reptiles is something else. Plus, the whole experience of staying in the fishermen's palafito hut with no running water and just a small generator for power is very different. Was it worth the marathon journey? Australia is a long way from everywhere, and a really long way from Banco Chinchorro—but yes, it was



Location of Banco Chinchorro, Quintana Roo, on map of Mexico

definitely worth the long haul. Would I do it again? Probably. ■

Asia correspondent Don Silcock is based in Bali, Indonesia. For extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the world's best diving locations and underwater experiences, see his website at: Indopacificimages.com.

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