

Student

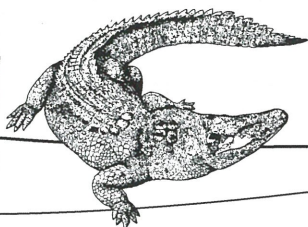
Fact Files



Australian Government

Great Barrier Reef
Marine Park Authority

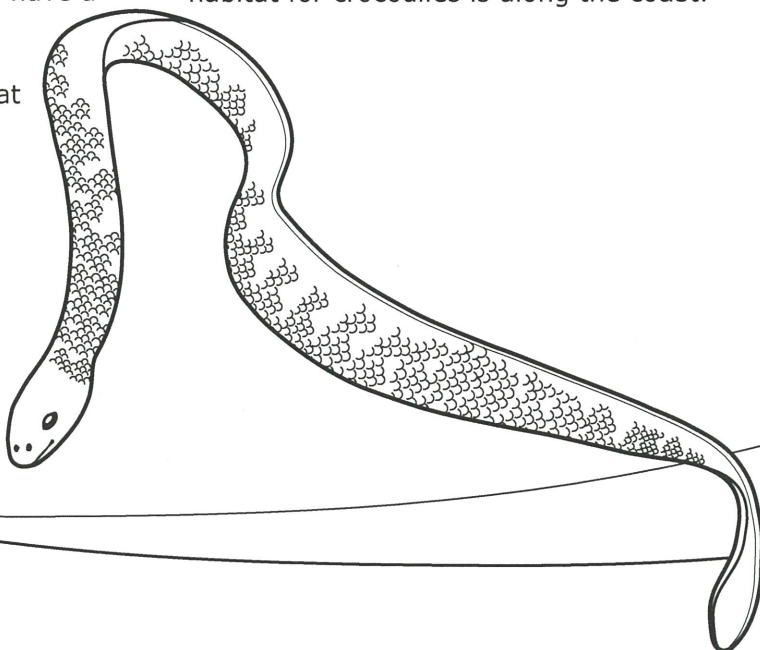
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Sea snakes and crocodiles

- There are 17 species of sea snakes in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.
- Sea snakes and crocodiles are protected in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.
- Sea snakes are among the most venomous snakes in the world.
- Unlike snakes on land, sea snakes have a paddle shaped tail.
- Sea snakes have only one lung that occupies two-thirds of their body.
- Sea snakes mainly feed on small fish.
- Most sea snakes have short fangs and are not aggressive. Divers and snorkellers should look, but not touch or chase.
- Estuarine crocodiles have been recorded swimming in the open ocean a long way from the nearest land however the primary habitat for crocodiles is along the coast.



our great barrier reef
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Sea snakes

Seventeen species of sea snakes have been reported in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Some species are found mostly on and around coral reefs, whereas others are found over sandy and muddy areas of seabed. The olive sea snake (*Aipysurus laevis*) is most commonly encountered by divers on the Great Barrier Reef.

Sea snakes are among the most venomous snakes in the world, possessing some of the most potent toxins known. Most are extremely curious and will approach divers. However, except for during the breeding season, sea snakes are not generally aggressive.

Sea snakes have adapted to life in the water by developing a flattened or paddle tail and a body shaped like the keel of a boat. They breathe air and have valved nostrils so that when they dive they do not get a nose full of water. They are excellent swimmers and usually stay underwater for about 20 or 30 minutes before coming up for another breath of air. Sea snakes have just one lung, which occupies two thirds of their body. Apart from breathing air at the surface, sea snakes can absorb about 30 per cent of the oxygen they need from water through their anus and skin.

Like all other snakes, sea snakes have scales. They may feed on fish eggs or burrowing eels, but most feed on fish. They give birth to live young in the sea.

The limited information available suggests that the main human activity threatening sea snakes is incidental catch in trawl nets (bycatch). In addition, threats (e.g. declining water quality, climate change, physical damage) that affect habitats such as coral reefs and seabed communities may have indirect effects on sea snakes that rely on these habitats.

Estuarine crocodiles

Estuarine crocodiles, also known as 'salties', occur along the coast of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and can be regularly found on islands in the Far Northern section of the Reef. They are generally considered temporary migrants to the Great Barrier Reef, as they do not spend much time in these waters, but prefer to live in coastal river systems. However, estuarine crocodiles are tolerant of an extremely wide range of freshwater and marine habitats and have been recorded swimming strongly in the open ocean a long way from the nearest land.

Past hunting severely depleted Queensland's estuarine crocodile populations. Recent population surveys suggest that crocodile populations have only marginally increased since they were protected throughout Australia in 1974. Many human activities such as coastal development, mesh netting of tidal rivers and removal of riparian vegetation are believed to limit the growth of crocodile populations.

Be mindful of warning signs and always take extreme care when visiting areas where crocodiles might live.

Crocodiles and sea snakes are protected species in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park

A protected species is a plant or animal in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park that is protected by law and needs special management. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, the Australian Government management agency for the Marine Park, works to conserve protected species by identifying those species that are threatened, iconic or at risk; identifying threats to their survival and developing appropriate management actions.

To learn more about protected species in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park go to www.gbrmpa.gov.au.