

Knowledge and perception of tour operators on crocodiles (*Crocodylus moreletii*) as a tool for dissemination and conservation

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Abstract: The correct interaction between humans and wildlife has been basic in the conservation of species, a strategy to promote it, is the ecotourism, which has been successful around the world having benefits for wildlife and people. The Catemaco Lake (Veracruz, Mexico), has a population of *Crocodylus moreletii* that has been included as one of the tourist attractions of the place, however service providers do not have the necessary information to offer tourists an optimal service that promotes species conservation. This study aims to analyze the knowledge and perception of tour operators of the Catemaco Lake about crocodiles as a tool for the conservation of the species. A semi-open survey of 15 questions was applied to the tour operators of the Catemaco Lake boardwalk. Forty-seven percent of respondents know at least one way to exploit crocodiles, mainly skin and tourism; 95% believe they are important in ecosystems, however only 26% know a particular important role of crocodiles, the rest of interviewed partially or totally unknown any role of crocodiles importance; 75% recognize some risks that crocodiles face in the lake. Regarding tourist activity, 95% of respondents receive questions from visitors about crocodiles, however only 63% say they know how to answer these questions, in the same way 95% of respondents are interested in receiving more information about crocodiles. The level of knowledge that tour-operators possess about crocodiles is insufficient to satisfy both tourist inquiries and the need of knowledge and awareness for conservation. Nevertheless, interest of tour-operators and tourists, to increase crocodile background information, crocodile observation as part of the tours is a promising tool for science communication and conservation not only of crocodiles but also of its environment, aimed at a wide audience.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Human-crocodile interactions, Science communication, Local ecological knowledge

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