The caves: refuge of crocodiles and caimans (*Crocodylus acutus* and *Caiman crocodylus*) before adverse conditions in an area of the coast of Chiapas, Mexico

Yessenia Sarmiento Marina*[1,4], Edgar Sarmiento Marina[2] and Luis Sigler[3]

[1]Estudiante-Posgrado en Ciencias Biológicas y Conservación de Ecosistemas Tropicales, Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas (UNICACH) (yessenia.marina@gmail.com)
[2]Reserva de la Biosfera La Encrucijada (edgar.sarmiento@conanp.gob.mx)
[3]The Dallas World Aquarium, Texas, EE.UU (luis@dwazoo.com)
[4]YEDMALIM A.C.-Conservación y Gestión Ambiental de los Recursos Naturales, Chiapas, México. (yedmalim.ac@gmail.com)

Abstract: Crocodiles and alligators are considered key species because they maintain the structure and function of the ecosystems where they live. Among their activities, they avoid dusting by opening roads and channels for water flow, which at the same time serve as microhabitats for other species. The objective was to describe the habitat of crocodiles and alligators (*Crocodylus acutus* and *Caiman crocodilus*) in the eastern portion of the Puerto Arista Estuarine System, Chiapas, Mexico. Day tours were conducted in 5 transects established in the study area, by canoe with outboard motor, canoe rowing and walking tours. In each of the transects the coordinates, the type of vegetation and the conditions of the site were recorded. In the 5 transects, the mangrove was registered as the main type of vegetation (between 2.5 and 7 meters high) consisting mainly of four tree species: *Rhizophora mangle* (red mangrove), *Avicennia germinans* (black mangrove or mother salt), *Laguncularia racemosa* (white mangrove) and *Conocarpus erestus* (buttonwood mangrove). 11 caves were located in three of the transects. In the Estero Prieto transect, 6 cavities with the presence of crocodiles and alligators were counted. For the Las Manzanas transect, 4 caves and a Crocodylus acutus nest near them were counted, but there were no specimens present. In the Laguna transect, 1 cave was counted, with the presence of an alligator. Despite the drought presented this year, several interconnected channels and caves were observed that maintained the flow of water in the Estero Prieto and Laguna transect, effective strategies for the survival of these species when used as refuge and thermoregulation areas. The above shows that these shelters satisfy the basic biological requirements of the species in the face of adverse conditions, however, it is necessary to continue monitoring these wild populations.

Keywords: Caves, Crocodilians, Alligators, Puerto Arista estuarine system

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