

Shooting crocodiles

with Chris Knight

I am very lucky to have had the opportunity to dive with some of the world's largest species of shark. Having spent a lot of time around these amazing animals I am now starting to understand them and have realised that they are not the mindless killers that some people, press and films have made them out to be. Although I know they should always be treated with respect and that you should never take for granted the fact that they are apex predators I have to say that I do feel very comfortable around them in the water.

I sometimes watch wildlife documentaries and sit there thinking that I wouldn't be so sure about getting that close to some of the animals they feature. One such animal and one that I never thought I would ever get in the water with was a crocodile or an alligator, however this all changed when my shark contact Eli Martinez featured an American Crocodile expedition on his website – www.sdmdiving.com

I called him up and asked what the deal was with these crocs. He told me about his previous experience at this location and assured me that it was relatively safe to get in the water with them and that it made for a truly amazing experience. Having been convinced that it was going to be an awesome trip – I paid my deposit there and then a few months later flew off to Mexico for a trip that I would never forget!

American Crocodiles

Crocodiles are ancestral animals; whose origin



All the underwater images were shot with a Sony RX100 Mk3 in a Nauticam housing with a UWL 04 fish eye lens.

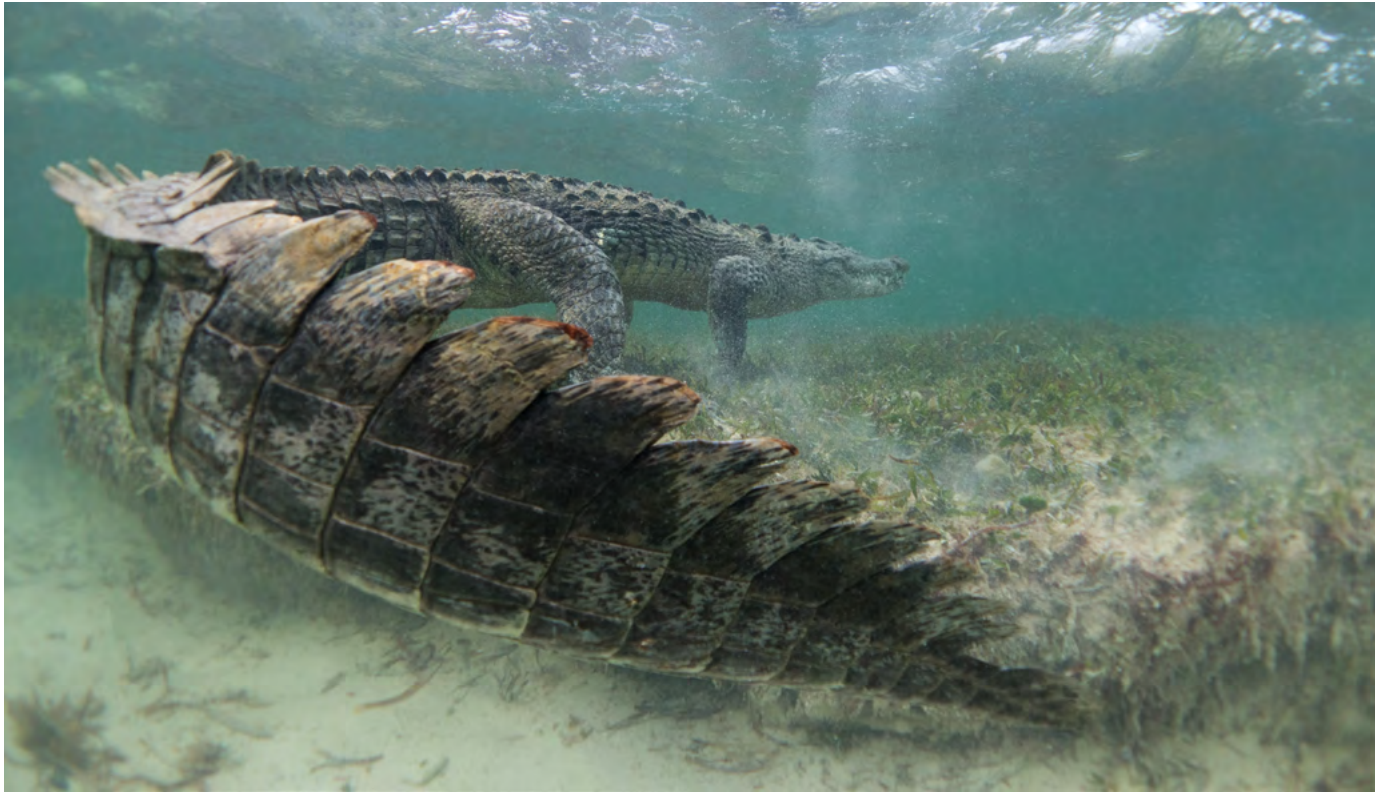
goes back more than 200 million years. They have witnessed the rise and extinction of the dinosaurs as well as the evolution of birds and mammals. Throughout their evolutionary history they have adapted to their environment to become one of the most efficient apex predators that exist.

The American Crocodile is the most widely distributed crocodile of the new world. A small, remnant population lives in southern Florida, but most are found in southern Mexico, Central

America, the Caribbean, and northern South America.

These prehistoric-looking creatures are distinguishable from their cousin, the American Alligator, by their longer, thinner snout, lighter colour, and two long teeth on the lower jaw that are visible when its mouth is closed.

Their habitat consists mainly of coastal areas of salt and brackish water such as rivers, lagoons and swamps. They have a high tolerance to salinity,



similar to the salt water crocodile.

The American Crocodile which can live up to 70 years is a relatively large species, with males reaching a length of around 5-6 meters, weighing in at up to 900kg's and grown females generally measuring around 3-3.5meters.

Although the American Crocodile rivals the Salt Water and Nile crocodile in size, it is not as aggressive and does not include human beings as part of their diet as the other two species do.

Their diet consists mainly of small mammals, birds, fish, crabs, insects, snails, frogs, and occasionally carrion. They have been known to attack people, but are far more likely to flee at the sight of humans.

The remote Banco Chinchorro Biosphere Reserve in southern Quintana Roo, Mexico at 800 km² is the largest coral reef atoll in the northern hemisphere. Being a Biosphere Reserve with no permanent settlements and very limited access, it is among the last few truly unspoilt, majestic natural wonders remaining.

In and around Cayo Centro, the largest island of three that are on the atoll, lives one of the largest known populations of American Crocodiles. Due to their interaction with the small group of seasonal fishermen in the reserve, they have become accustomed to coming out to clear, shallow water where you can achieve some truly close encounters with large and often multiple crocodiles.

The American Crocodile population in Banco Chinchorro is of great importance to the conservation of the species in the Yucatan Peninsula. It is one of the last two genetically pure populations in the Mexican Caribbean, has a relatively large size with individuals in all age ranges, has a good nesting success rate and is protected by being in a Biosphere Reserve that is subject to few threats due to its isolation from the continent.

Another important characteristic of Banco Chinchorro is water clarity. In some parts of the Reserve it is possible to observe crocodiles like in no other place. One of the difficulties of researching crocodiles is that these animals are difficult to observe in their natural habitat. This is particularly true of behavioural observation, with most studies having been carried out in captivity. Banco Chinchorro presents conditions suitable to carry out these types of behavioural observations in the wild because individuals allow humans to get close and because the water clarity allows us to photograph and film individuals underwater with a clarity that cannot be observed anywhere else.

The trip of a lifetime

We flew in to Cancun and transferred via minibus to the small fishing village of Xcalak which took us about 4.5 hours. With a population of around 400 it is the southernmost town on the Mexican Caribbean coast, on the border with Belize and within the Xcalak Reef National Marine Park.

We arrived at the XTC Dive Centre which at the time was the only operator that provided this unique trip. Staying there for a couple of days before the croc trip allowed us the time to dive at a location called the Tarpon Hole. This trench is a



unique geographical formation and the only one in the entire Great Maya Reef. Geologists are still uncertain about the development of this trench that runs parallel to shore for about ½ a mile. Like a box canyon, the trench begins shallow then becomes wider and deeper. On one side is a coral wall, on the other a sand hill slopes down from shallow water.

Due to the strong currents and rich nutrients in the water, this is the favourite hangout for lots of big fish. It was here that we had the opportunity to dive with 3-7-foot tarpon that would just school around us while we were moving through the trench.

On the second evening, we had our dive briefing for the crocs and were told to go pack up our gear ready for the 2-3 hour open ocean crossing to the atoll the next morning.

In the morning, we got in to an open top boat with an outboard engine that had already been packed with our gear in a number of large waterproof cases. We were told to wear a bathing suit, sunscreen, sun glasses, hat and a waterproof jacket as it can sometimes be a rough journey. The trip that had just returned from the crocs the day



before endured a perilous 3.5 hour journey in storm conditions with waves that were nearly higher than the boat! Although the captain wasn't too worried I think the passengers were very happy to have made it back to shore in one piece.

We were lucky with the weather and had a pretty smooth 2.5 hour crossing and arrived at the atoll to clear water, clear skies and a Crocodile who seemed to be waiting for us to arrive.

Although we were relieved to have stepped off the boat it was a bit of a shock when we saw our accommodation for the next 3 days. Our new home was basically a large wooden shed on stilts with 2 smaller sheds attached to it – one being the kitchen and the other a toilet. Six customers and three crew members all squeezed in to this hut sleeping on hammocks tied up to the ceiling rafters. With no running water and only a hole in the floor for a toilet you could see that some people were going to find it a challenge adjusting to this primitive way of life.

These huts on stilts situated in the shallow waters next to the mangrove are used by fishermen who travel out to the atoll to the rich fishing grounds



that surround the area. They fish the local waters and live in the shacks only to return when the boat is full of fish.

After a long day of fishing they come back to their shacks and gut all of the fish and pack them into cool boxes. It was this action of gutting the fish and throwing the waste in to the water that lured the crocodiles out of the mangrove and over to the shacks.

They would often recognise when the boats were coming in and would make their way over and lay in wait of a free meal of fish guts and carcasses that were discarded.

The fisherman had been doing this for years and thought nothing of it, however when news of this unique behaviour got out someone decided to investigate and see just how well behaved these crocs actually were. Having witnessed this relaxed and fairly predictable behaviour people actually started getting in the water with them and it was soon apparent that if you were careful and followed a few guidelines it was actually ok to get in the water to photograph, film and view them.



The next morning, we woke up early and took the boat to a local reef where we spent an hour spearfishing for Lion Fish. Lion fish pictures This species is widely known around the world as a pest due to their high breeding rates and voracious feeding habits. They have decimated the varied population on many reefs around the world and some areas are trying to control this by hunting them. Having done our part for the reef we brought the lion fish back, gutted and filleted them, unbeknown to many people that even though this is a highly poisonous fish the flesh tastes amazing. We chopped up the fillets to make ceviche and threw the guts in to the water to attract the crocs (which didn't take long). Our guides would also put the fish carcasses on to lengths of fishing line in order to cast out and pull it back in to lure the crocs towards us.

Having sorted the fish, it was time to kit up



with our snorkel and mask and get in the water. I have to say I was a bit nervous but thoroughly excited at this unique opportunity.

We used the step ladder on the back of the boat to lower ourselves three at a time into a section of waist deep water with a sandy bottom that was about the same size as our boat. Surrounding this was a shallower area of water that had a good covering of sea grass. It's here that the crocs like to stay as the water is shallow enough for them to straighten their legs and raise themselves up out of



the water in order to take a breath and have a quick look around.

They are also quite happy to have a good grip on the bottom due to the sea grass covering.

We positioned ourselves next to the grassy bank where the crocodile was already waiting and got our cameras ready. One of the crew members would flick the fish carcass in and out of the water near to the croc in order to keep his interest and to help us get the shots we wanted. Occasionally the croc would catch the fish carcass when the guide



wasn't quick enough on the line resulting in them getting the feed that they came for.

Realising that they were way more interested in the lion fish than us I started to relax into it and concentrate a bit more on getting some great shots. With my concentration fixed on the crocodile in front of me, I totally freaked out when something came from behind me and touched my leg. Luckily it was only my buddy Don who unbeknown to me was using me as a human shield and shooting over my shoulder just in case.

We spent the next couple of days in the water getting some great

pictures under the careful observation of our guide – Mathias who was next to us in the water holding a very large stick (just in case!) pic of me and croc with Matthias next to me

The crocs were quite predictable and behaved very well with each of us sticking to our positions in the water and not encroaching on each other's space. The only hairy moment was when a new and unknown croc turned up. The guides recognised and had names for most of the ones that we saw however this one had not been seen near the boat before. He was approximately 3 meters in length and quite bold. He made his way over to us and was ferociously snapping for



the bait which made for some amazing photos.

There was a moment when the smaller croc next to him had caught the bait and had it in his mouth.

The larger croc started snapping for the other fish and accidentally trod on the other one. The one with the bait jumped and maybe thought that the larger one was trying to steal his catch. A mini scuffle ensued and the water went from clear to zero visibility in seconds due to the sand that flew up from the tussle. As quick as this happened the smaller croc emerged from the sand cloud at high speed straight towards me. I jumped in the air and the croc passed directly

under me between my legs and it quickly became apparent that he was only trying to get away from the other one and eat his catch in peace. We got back on the boat for a moment while we waited for the sand to clear and then got back in the water with the larger croc who carried on performing for the camera enabling us to get some more shots.

This was a truly amazing, special experience and definitely a trip that I hope to go and do again one day. It has also left me wondering what I am going to get in the water with next!



Photographing crocs

I approached photographing crocodiles in the same way that I do when working with sharks. I ask the people that are running the trip for as much information as they can give me about the particular animal, its behaviour and how I should act when I am in the water with it. Once I have a good understanding of the animal I will start to think about my camera settings.

Shutter Speed:

How fast does the animal move in general and what is going to be the best speed for me to use to catch it and also what will the animal be doing while we are photographing it.

These crocodiles are fairly relaxed around you and if there is no food presented they are often happy to calmly sit in front of you just basking in the sun and posing for the camera. In this instance, you could quite possibly get away with a shutter speed of 125 however I would choose 250 just to be on the safe side. When the crocs are feeding, and snapping they are incredibly fast and in order to freeze their motion you will need a very high shutter speed. You will see from my pictures of them



snapping that my chosen shutter speed of 500 was a bit too slow. On one hand, I think that shooting at this speed does show the motion of the snap due to the slight blur of its jaws closing however I feel that I would have preferred to have gone up to around 650 – 800 to truly freeze the croc with its jaws wide open.

Aperture:

When I started shooting the crocs I had my camera set to shutter priority and let the camera choose the aperture and ISO. In some cases, I feel that this gave me good results but in others I was disappointed and now that I have a bit more confidence and knowledge I will often try to dial in all my settings rather than letting the camera decide.

The pictures of the crocs snapping were set at f5 and I feel this did a fairly good job of getting the head and mouth in focus whilst leaving the body and some of the water behind it blurred. Reviewing my photos and knowing what I know now I think I would have chosen an aperture of f8 for my general shooting. This would have given me the happy medium between having most of the crocodile in focus but also allowing me to keep my ISO down



and therefore reducing image noise.

ISO

As I mentioned I originally let my camera choose the ISO and to be honest most modern cameras will do a very good job of deciding what setting is best, however again I now like to have full control of what my camera is doing. I will often set my camera up to the settings that I want and either jump in or hold the camera in to the water and rattle off a couple of test shots to check my levels. In the case of shooting the crocodiles we were blessed with shallow relatively clear water and pretty good weather. I found I could mostly leave my camera on the same settings unless the clouds came over or the water conditions changed where I might have needed to raise my ISO a little

Safety

I always try to get my camera set right prior to getting in or getting close to the animals that I work with. Spending time checking your settings or reviewing your pictures will take your concentration away from the dangerous animal in front of you. I also tend to shoot with a fish eye lens and in this case, it is quite easy to point and shoot by using a



calculated guess of where to hold the camera in front of the animal. The very wide angle of the lens allows you a lot of leeway when it comes to framing the shot and getting the animal in. This also means that you don't have to try and look through the viewfinder or at the small screen on the camera as this will distract you from what is going on around you. It's much better to miss the shot than not to notice the shark or crocodile sneaking up on you from behind or to one side!

Please note that the tips I have given are what I felt worked / would have worked best for me. Things can vary greatly depending on the

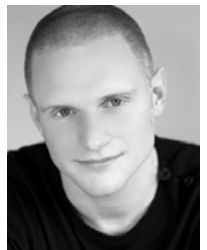
equipment you use, the subject you are shooting and the way you want your image to look, I just hope that these tips can help you make the right decisions when it comes to your shoot.

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