



USE IT OR LOSE IT?

Sustainable use of crocodiles in the Andaman islands

SALTIE LEATHER

Crocodile skin is highly prized in the fashion industry and is commonly used in the production of high-end luxury items such as handbags, shoes, belts, and wallets. The skin of the saltwater crocodile (especially the belly portion with its wide, flat scales) is sought after on account of its smooth, uniform arrangement and the lack of bone content. Crocodiles that are farmed or ranched are ready for harvesting between 3-4 years (i.e. when the belly skin on the widest part measures 38 cm or more).



THE MARKET

Currently, Australia produces the finest grade crocodile leather from farmed crocodiles. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) reports legal exports of over 1.5 million crocodile and alligator skins from over 30 countries. Crocodile meat is also widely consumed in some countries and is a significant nutritional source. Recent market research has pegged the worldwide crocodile market (including skins, meat and other products) at USD 6.3 billion in 2023 with a CAGR of nearly 12%. The market is projected to grow to approximately USD 19 billion in 2033.

THE CBD AND SUSTAINABLE USE

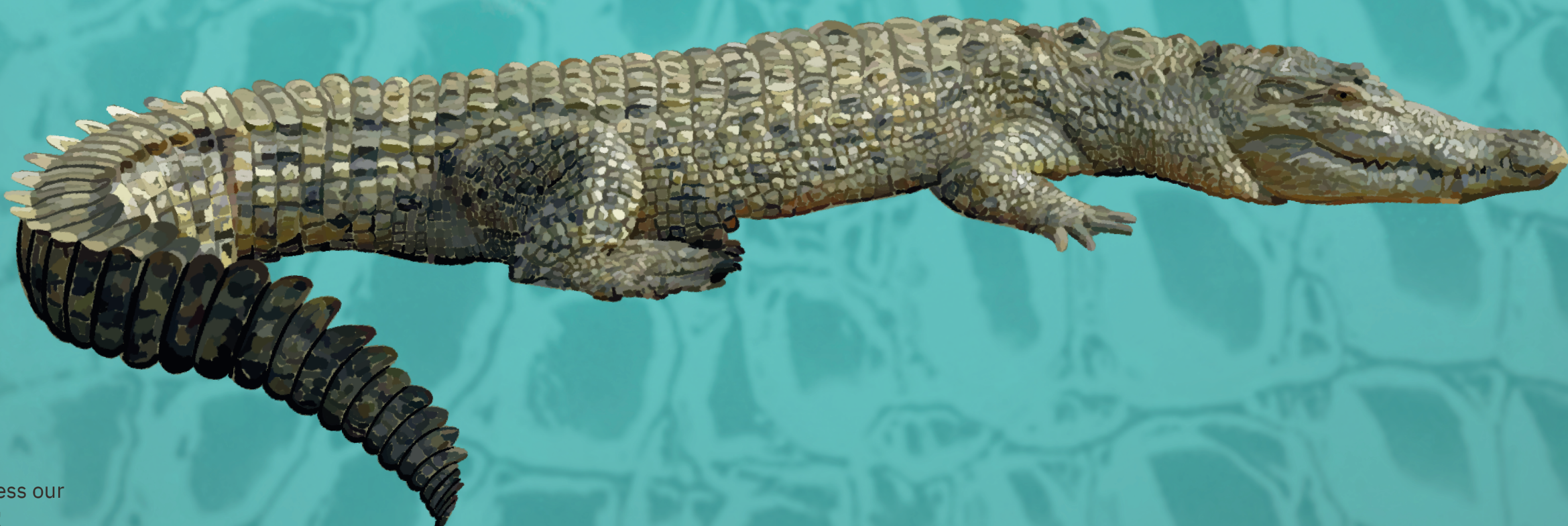
The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) (to which India is a signatory) has three central tenets:

- The conservation of biological diversity
- The sustainable use of the components of biological diversity
- The fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources

The CBD defines sustainable use as “the use of components of biological diversity in a way and at a rate that does not lead to the long-term decline of biological diversity, thereby maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of present and future generations.”

POSSIBILITIES?

In a region where the increasing population of saltwater crocodiles have sparked a polarized debate between continued high-level protection to the species and culling, sustainable use via ranching or farming provides a pragmatic middle ground. Sustainable use can simultaneously bring benefits to local communities, and add value to the continued presence of crocodiles. In the Andaman Islands, where local settler communities do not have taboos or cultural inhibitions prohibiting hunting and harvesting of crocodiles, could an ethically sourced, use-based industry be the alternative to large-scale culls?



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