

## Rare Chinese Alligator Colony Found Living in Hempstead Harbor

April 1, 2013 by BILL BREYER / [bull.breyer@newday.com](mailto:bull.breyer@newday.com)



After days of fielding complaints from politicians and residents about strange noises in the lower portion of Hempstead Harbor, county officials have discovered a “large colony” of fully grown alligators residing under the newly re-constructed Roslyn Viaduct.

According to the county’s wildlife expert, Dan Cucci, alligators normally live in freshwater environments such as ponds, wetlands and marshes but can exist in brackish water (a mixture of salt water and fresh water) such as that found in lower Hempstead Harbor.

No one is quite sure how they got there or how long they have been there. Even more puzzling is the fact that these are not the typical American alligator species (*Alligator mississippiensis*) found in North America but the less common Chinese alligator species (*Alligator sinensis*).

The Chinese alligator currently is found mainly in the Yangtze River valley and is considered to be endangered with very few believed to be left in the wild. Indeed, far more Chinese alligators live in zoos around the world than can be found in the wild.

“They may have been carried over with the Japanese Fukushima debris” speculated Carl DiPaulo, a local environmentalist from Sea Cliff.

The colony, estimated to be around 30 individuals most likely subsisted on local shellfish and diamondback turtles which are known to exist in Hempstead Harbor said Jonathan Wilbur-Pines, who is the New York State chapter president of the Chinese Alligator Society of the United States. “These animals have found a successful niche and should be left alone. Trying to move them to another environment would stress them to the point where they may die”.

Others disagree. Joel Sieve, Director of the South Shore Animal League, feared for the small dogs and cats living in the Roslyn Harbor area. "These beasts don't care if it is a turtle or Fluffy and they don't deserve to live here", he said, "they should be dredged up and sent to Suffolk County or turned into steaks for the homeless".

Kevin Blaun, an environmental control specialist from the Town of Kayman, feared that leaving them in the lower harbor would decrease the number of visitors to the shoreline trail that he has been working for years to construct. "No one wants to walk with their five year olds on a trail and come across a Chinese Alligator. It would ruin their day".

Chester Catherine, a Sands Point botanist, pointed out that when alligators construct gator holes in wetlands, they increase plant diversity and also provide habitat for other animals during drought periods. "The Town of Kayman has put a lot of effort into restoring wetlands in the lower harbor. Having the gator holes there will help maintain ecological diversity in this area".

Roslyn Harbor resident Allie Kirkenbender stated that she is thrilled to have alligators in the harbor. "It's like having a little bit of paradise in your backyard. Maybe with climate change, we'll have palm trees in a few years".

Len Chow, a Roslyn resident, added that "we are honored that Chinese alligators have chosen our harbor to reside in. We have always felt that it was a special place. I guess we share that sentiment with these magnificent creatures".

Jim Morley, a marine biologist from the nearby Republic of Oyster Bay, felt that this offered an opportunity for fiscal savings for his cash-strapped municipality. "The Republic has spent thousands on a ferile cat sterilization program. Instead of performing expensive surgeries on these over-populating cats, we could relocate them to the harbor where they could serve as a food source for the alligators".

Seeking to find a way to please all sides, Nassau County Legislator Deidra DeRizzo-Whitley stated that she would propose county legislation to prohibit Chinese Alligators from destroying wildlife, pets and children. "As long as they can obey those rules, they can live in peace in the lower harbor", she said, "Besides – no one really goes into the lower harbor anyway". Fellow legislator Dwayne Dwink agreed to support the bill.

Alligators have been known to grow to 990 pounds and a length of 14 feet. There is no measured average lifespan for an alligator. In 1937, a one year-old specimen was brought to the Belgrade Zoo in Serbia from Germany. It is now 76 years old.

Although alligators have a heavy body and a slow metabolism, they are capable of short bursts of speed, especially in very short lunges. Alligators' main prey are smaller animals that they can kill and eat with a single bite. Alligators may kill larger prey by grabbing it and dragging it into the water to drown. Alligators consume food that cannot be eaten in one bite by allowing it to rot, or by biting and then spinning or convulsing wildly until bite-size chunks are torn off. This is referred to as a "death roll." Critical to the alligator's ability to initiate a death roll, the tail must flex to a significant angle relative to its body. An alligator with an immobilized tail cannot perform a death roll.

Before readers begin to worry about the death roll, remember that it is April Fools!