

# Trip Report

BANCO CHINCHORRO'S AMERICAN CROCODILES

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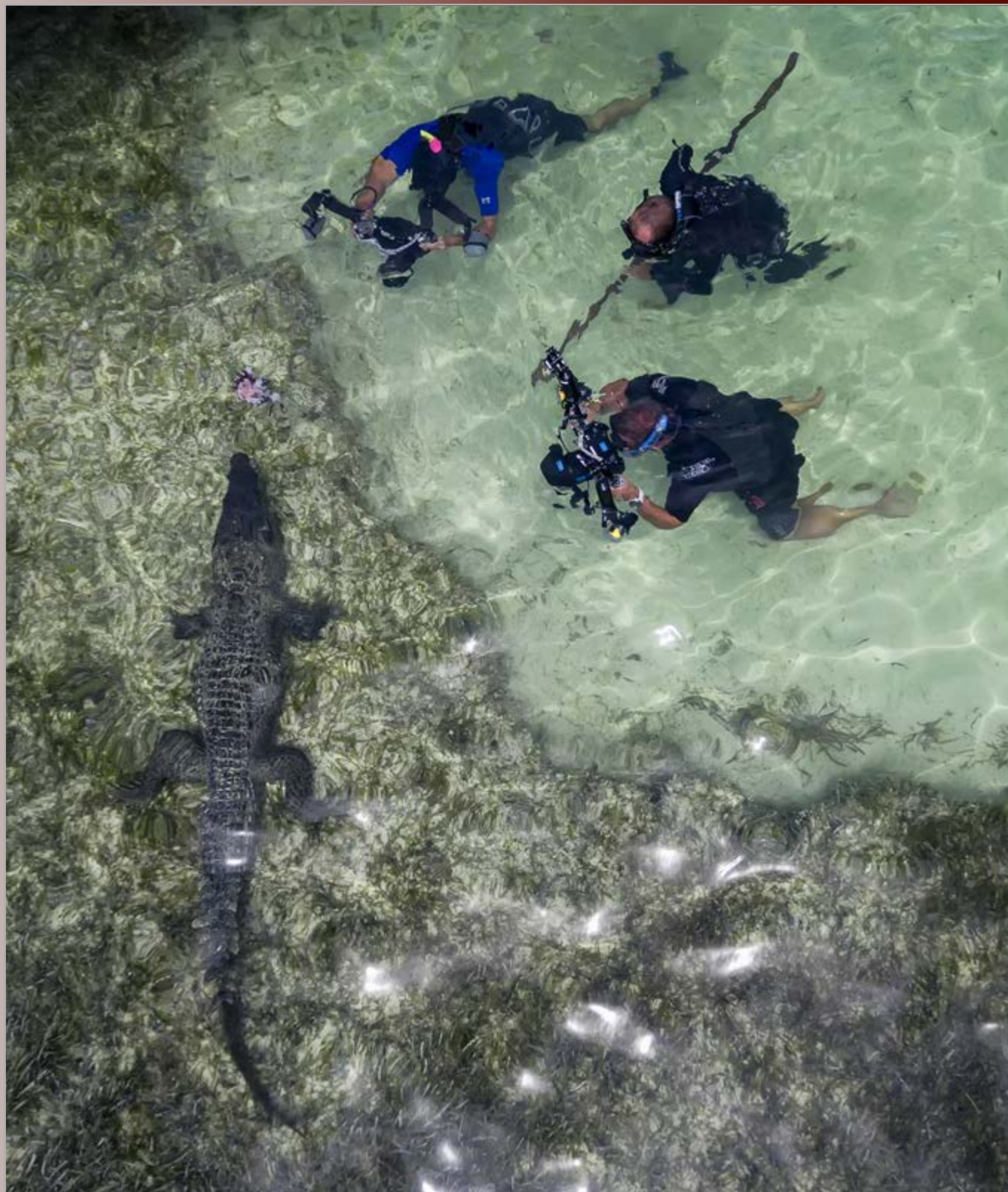
# DIVING WITH DINOSAURS

Our contributor Don Silcock reports on snorkelling in Mexico to photograph the imposing - and intimidating - American crocodile *Crocodylus acutus*



**American crocodile** *Crocodylus acutus*

The American crocodile *Crocodylus acutus* is categorised as a relatively large species, with males reaching maximum lengths of 5 to 6m when fully mature, while females are generally smaller at around 3 to 3.5m. These are very imposing and potentially dangerous animals.



**Photographing the American crocodile** *Crocodylus acutus*  
 Never take your eyes off the crocodile - give them space, but don't allow them to command it. This is done by using the large wooden stick as a vertical barrier.

TEXT AND PHOTOS  
 BY DON SILCOCK

The pursuit of unusual and compelling photo-opportunities has led me on some interesting journeys over the last few years, but few come close to the raw excitement of photographing the American crocodiles of Mexico's Banco Chinchorro. I have come to realise that photographing big and charismatic animals underwater actually borders on the addictive, because the more of those trips you do, the more encounters you hear about and the "must-do list" just keeps on growing... So it was when a conversation over an après-dive adult beverage led to the subject of in-water encounters with crocodiles. Being an Australian citizen, my thoughts were immediately drawn to the Salt-water crocodiles *Crocodylus porosus* of the Northern Territory, an animal that hits the headlines quite regularly because of its deadly attacks on humans...Although, in the animal's defence, it must be said that those attacks are often on either foreign tourists, who have completely ignored the very prominent "No Swimming" signs, or local guys out fishing who fail to understand

the basic link between excessive alcohol and poor judgement around dangerous wild animals. "Salties", as we affectionately refer to them Down-Under, take their name from the fact they are not limited to murky fresh-water rivers and lakes that most crocodiles are found in. Instead they have developed a tolerance for salt-water which allows them to prowl coastal waters and occasionally swim quite far out to sea. Thoroughly dangerous, there appears to be no way to safely photograph salties underwater, or even get close to them, except perhaps by using some form of motorised cage. As I was to learn, the less well known American crocodile *Crocodylus acutus*, is infact a cousin of the Australian apex reptilian predator which has also developed a tolerance for salt-water. But unlike its antipodean relative, they are not considered to be aggressive to humans and only a few (unverified) cases of fatal attacks have been reported. As its common name suggests, *Crocodylus acutus* can be found all the way from the Everglades on the southern tip of Florida, throughout the

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**American crocodile** *Crocodylus acutus*

Like all reptiles they are cold-blooded and breath air, so they are most comfortable in warm shallow waters and the extensive mangroves of Cayo Centro at Banco Chinchorro offer an almost perfect environment. They are apex predators, and any aquatic or terrestrial animal they encounter in freshwater, riparian and coastal saltwater habitats is potential prey.



**American crocodile** *Crocodylus acutus*

American Crocodiles are currently on the IUCN Red List as “Vulnerable” principally because its skin is a commercially viable product which led to significant hunting of the animal from the 1930’s through to the 1970’s. Their overall population declined by at least 20% during that period, but habitat destruction is now considered as their greatest threat.



**Banco Chinchorro**

The Banco Chinchorro biosphere is formed by rings of coral reef with shallow lagoons on the inside with steep drop-offs on the outside and is part of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef.

Caribbean and Central America, down in to northern end of South America in the countries of Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela, with the largest known population inhabiting the land-locked hypersaline Lake Enriquillo in the Dominican Republic. But by far the best place for reliable and up-close underwater encounters with the American crocodile is Banco Chinchorro, in the south-east of Mexico, near the border with Belize. Some 12 months on from that après-dive drink, a lot of Googling and flurries of emails saw me sat in a van driving south from Cancun airport on Mexico's Yucatan peninsula (after the obligatory marathon journey from Asia...) with a small group of like-minded characters I would come to know quite well over the next few days.

**Banco Chinchorro**

Although hardly a household name, Banco Chinchorro is in fact one of the largest coral atolls in the Northern hemisphere and a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Covering an area of almost 800 km<sup>2</sup>, and located some 35 km offshore, the reefs of Banco

Chinchorro are very healthy and a real joy to dive. But if it's the crocodiles you're after, Cayo Centro is where you need to be! Although only just under 6 km<sup>2</sup> in size, Cayo Centro is the largest of the three islands on the atoll, and it is home to a permanent estimated population of between 300 to 500 American Crocodiles. It also hosts a small seasonal population of local fishermen who have built a scattering of about 10 huts on stilts, called *palafitos*, above the shallow waters of the lagoon on the east shore of the island and a similar number onshore called *cabañas*. Quite how and when the crocodiles took up residence is not clear, but the dense mangroves of Cayo Centro offer the perfect habitat for them, with the rich waters around the island providing plenty of sustenance. The crocodiles and the fishermen have an almost symbiotic relationship, tolerating each other's presence in this remote location with the main signal for interaction being the noise of the chopping tables. The fishermen fillet their catches on tables above the lagoon at the *palafitos* and at the water's edge at the *cabañas* and the crocodiles will

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**American crocodile** *Crocodylus acutus*

The American crocodile *Crocodylus acutus* is a species of crocodylian found in the Neotropics. It is the most widespread of the four extant species of crocodiles from the Americas, with populations present from South Florida and the coasts of Mexico to as far south as Peru and Venezuela.



**Fishermen and bait**

The highly invasive Lionfish *Pterois volitans* - a serious threat to the local fish ecosystem - is present in great numbers on the reefs and it is proving of great use as crocodile bait.

immediately gather when they hear the knives on the chopping boards. For the crocodiles it's snack time, while for the fishermen it is automated waste disposal.

**How it Works...**

In-water encounters with the American Crocodiles of Banco Chinchorro are done on snorkel, as it is too shallow for scuba near the palafitos, plus it's easier to manoeuvre when unencumbered. Positioning and visibility are the key to safe encounters and our *palafito* had some prime real estate just in front of its main porch in the form of a large sandy patch, that stretches out to the left of the hut. Most of the lagoon has a rich coating of seagrass on the bottom, which the crocodiles blend in perfectly with when they submerge, making them hard to spot from the surface. The sandy patch makes it very easy to see who/what is there, and the basic concept is to keep the humans on the sandy patch and the crocodiles on the seagrass. By mooring the boat alongside the *palafito*, one direction is blocked and the sandy patch means that any crocodiles sneaking in can be spotted and by feeding them from the front of the boat the "encounter zone" is quite well defined and controllable. The actual control in the water is done with a wooden stick, albeit a large one... but a

stick none the less. It is used by the wrangler to warn and calm the crocodile when it gets excited or aggressive and as a vertical barrier if it advances on to the sand. Despite my initial doubts on its usefulness, it turned out to be remarkable effective.

**Eyeball to Eyeball**

Of course, all those eminently sensible logistics were far from mind as the time came to get in the water for the first encounter and I was very nervous as I descended the ladder at the back of the boat that first time. Then, suddenly in front of you is a serious looking piece of reptilian hardware that is watching you as intently as you are watching it. Inscrutable is the word that comes to mind... Underwater encounters with big animals are rarely if ever static – they move, often constantly and occasionally very fast. Whereas the American crocodiles of Banco Chinchorro remain completely still, but with a coiled-up energy that is unleashed when they attack. The problem is that there is virtually no way of knowing when they will attack, so there is an intense tension as you manoeuvre closer to get good images knowing that should that trigger happen you are very reliant on that wooden stick and the reaction time of the crocodile wrangler.

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**American crocodile** *Crocodylus acutus*  
According to those who have worked with them in the waters of Banco Chinchorro, young individuals are by far the most dangerous because they are unpredictable. The big crocodiles may look fierce and very threatening, but they are not particularly aggressive and tend to be much calmer than the young ones.



**American crocodile** *Crocodylus acutus*

Adults have no natural predators. Interestingly, they are known predators of lemon sharks, and sharks avoid areas with American crocodiles. An estimated 1,000 to 2,000 American crocodiles live in Mexico, Central and South America, with 500 to 1,200 in southern Florida.

### Final Words...

Is it dangerous? Probably and possibly are the best descriptors as there is no doubt that they could inflict serious harm, but nobody has been attacked yet. Is it special? Yes, for sure it is – being so close to such large and potentially dangerous reptiles is something else. Plus, the whole experience of staying in the fisherman's *palafito* hut with no running water and just a small generator for power is very different! Was it worth the marathon journey? Australia is a long way from everywhere, but a really long way from Chinchorro, but yes, it was definitely worth the long-haul. Would I do it again? Probably.... ●

Don is based from Bali in Indonesia and his website [www.indopacificimages.com](http://www.indopacificimages.com) has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region.



**American crocodile** *Crocodylus acutus*

The habitat of the American crocodile consists largely of coastal areas. It is also found in river systems, but tends to prefer salinity, resulting in the species congregating in brackish lakes, mangrove swamps, lagoons, cays, and small islands. They can be found on beaches and small island formations without any freshwater source.