


A large crocodile is the central focus of the image, resting on a sandy bank. Its head is in the lower-left foreground, and its body extends towards the upper-right. The crocodile's skin is dark and textured with scales. To the right of the crocodile, there is a small pool of water that reflects the crocodile's head and the surrounding environment. The background consists of a sandy bank with some green grass and reeds. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

After while,
CROCODILE!

SRU alum Cherie Chenot-Rose helps humans
learn to coexist with crocodiles



When Cherie Chenot-Rose graduated from Slippery Rock University in 1989 with a pair of bachelor's degrees in biology and psychobiology to her credit, she hoped that it would enable her to travel the world doing research among a variety of animal populations.

While she didn't know at the time where her travels would take her, she didn't anticipate one of those locations being the back of a crocodile. But as the founder, executive director and primary research biologist at the American Crocodile Education Sanctuary in Ambergris Caye, Belize, that is often exactly where she finds herself.

At ACES, Chenot-Rose and her staff rescue problematic and ill or injured crocodiles and rehabilitate the reptiles for rerelease into the wild. Those that can't be released are kept in secure natural habitats where they are studied, used to train Belize Forest Wildlife officers and police in safe crocodile handling, and serve as an educational tool to teach the public about crocodiles and their importance in the environment.

"It's been a wild journey," said Chenot-Rose, who recently moved to Colorado to write books about her experiences. "We've saved hundreds of animals and hundreds of human lives."

After graduating from SRU, Chenot-Rose worked in various field positions, conducting marine studies on fishing boats in Alaska for the National Marine Fisheries Service, tagging peregrine falcons and Canadian geese for the Colorado Division of Wildlife, and working as the first mate on several fishing boats in Florida.

While working as a caretaker at a private wildlife resort in Eagle, Colorado, during the off-season from her job teaching snowboarding, she met her future husband, Vince. The couple married on top of Aspen Mountain in 2002.

"We had exhausted our home search on both coasts, so we took out a world map and chose Belize randomly," said Chenot-Rose of the couple's selection of a new residence. "We'd always wanted to dive the Blue Hole, so we bought 40 acres in Punta Gorda with the goal of living off the grid."

Always the scientist, Chenot-Rose started noticing illness in the local crocodile population, as well as a complete lack of concern on the part of the people tasked with protecting the species, which is listed as either threatened or endangered worldwide.

"Everyone was telling us to just kill them, but these are a protected species with less than 10,000 animals remaining," said Chenot-Rose, adding that the American crocodile has a less than 1 percent survival rate in the wild.

The couple reached out to the government, and after a year, received permits to rescue, rehabilitate and rerelease crocodiles into the wild. They were also given permission to keep problematic animals in captivity instead of having them put down.

"People are afraid of what they do not understand," said Chenot-Rose, who, along with her team, traveled all over the country to teach residents about the species.





To that end, and in what can only be described as a scene from the 1931 classic film "Frankenstein," the unthinkable happened to Chenot-Rose while in San Pedro, Belize, in 2010.

"Villagers stormed our property and burned all of our structures to the ground because a local psychic told them that we were feeding children to the crocodiles," said Chenot-Rose with a catch in her voice. "There was nothing left; we had nothing to our name."

"I feel a huge responsibility to the species because if we hadn't been called out to save one, we would have been there when the arson occurred," she said, adding that no one has ever been prosecuted for the crime. "They saved my life, so now I save theirs."

Following the incident, Chenot-Rose and her husband moved to Ambergris Caye, Belize, refusing to give up on their dream. They re-established the sanctuary, which for the last eight years has been funded by the Brigitte Bardot Foundation, a French foundation dedicated to animal protection that was created by the French actress in 1986, as well as through various fundraisers, grants and money raised by taking tourists out at night to experience catching and tagging crocodiles in the wild.

"No one else was protecting them," Chenot-Rose said of the species. "There are ambassadors for jaguars and for monkeys, but crocodiles are overlooked because they don't have fur

or big eyes. They are also extremely misunderstood – just like a bear, they can plot, plan and remember. Despite their small brain size, as the only reptile with a developed cerebral cortex, they are extremely intelligent."

Chenot-Rose has used the education that she received at SRU to study the animals and her efforts have attracted the attentions of top crocodile researchers from France and Germany who have traveled to Belize to learn about ACES' safe crocodile capturing methods. "We have more American croc captures under our belts than anyone else in the world," she explained.

"One of my goals in college was to have my research published in scientific publications, and I've accomplished that," added Chenot-Rose, whose work has been included in the Herpetological Review and the Crocodile Specialist Group Newsletter. She has also received two Rufford Small Grants for Nature Conservation for her work documenting crocodile population structure and habitat viability with the goal of creating an effective management program.



Seven movies have been made about Chenot-Rose and ACES, including an hour-long episode produced by National Geographic Poland titled "Woman at the End of the World." She has appeared on U.S. and U.K. episodes of Animal Planet, the Travel Channel, a World Wide Fund for Nature (Poland) episode, on Swedish TV, and has been covered in French journals.

In addition to publicizing the plight of the American crocodile, Chenot-Rose is also helping to educate new generations of students.

"We have interns who come down to take part in a 10-day program and end up staying for a month," she said. "We've even had some students start a second crocodile conservation organization in Belize."

Most important, she is helping to educate the local populace on the much-maligned creatures.

"Since we started ACES, we have seen an immense change in attitudes," she said. "People used to call us to come get an "alligator," and now they know that they are

crocodiles. We've taught children about the dangers of feeding crocodiles, so now they rat out their parents when they see them doing it, which lessens the chance of people or animals getting hurt. People who are illegally feeding these animals are reported immediately.

"The number of calls we get has increased each year, and the number of deaths of crocodiles at the hands of humans has decreased. People are learning that they don't need to fear these animals and instead are helping us to protect them."

As for the future of ACES, Chenot-Rose's long-term plan is to turn the organization over to Chris Summers, a local man who began as a volunteer but now serves as ACES' operations manager and lead field researcher.

"The goal has always been to have localized control of Belize's crocodile conservation, and I'm very glad that the next

person will have come from within our organization," she said.

"I'll be proud to leave it to the next generation."

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Crocodile Rock (the boat)

Imagine jumping into a 20-foot Carolina skiff in the moonlight, only to realize that the long steel box on the floor of the boat – the one your feet are resting beside – is filled with an angry, 8-foot crocodile that you're going to release into the wild. That's when things get real for visitors who join ACES for a nighttime ride into the mangrove habitats of Isla Bonita.

As one of the most unique ways ACES raises money for crocodile rescue, research, education and conservation, participants join the experienced crocodile wranglers as they capture, tag and release the saltwater reptiles as part of an ongoing population survey in Ambergris Caye, Belize.

Terri Marshall, visiting Belize from New York City, chose to take the roughly three-hour trip to learn more about the organization's work.

"It was a thrilling experience. It was exciting to be so close to a crocodile, but it was also a little bit chilling when it started hissing," she said with a laugh. "But where else are you going to get the opportunity to tag a crocodile?"

During the outing, those on board not only got to help take measurements and watch as ACES' staff tagged and released the massive croc into the wild, but also got to hold a baby crocodile while it was being tagged.

"I couldn't believe it when this fearless intern just jumped into the water after hearing the cry of a baby croc and brought it back to the boat," said Marshall. "We were terrified that the momma crocodile would get her first, but she calmly climbed back in the boat, recorded the information, and then released the baby back into the water. It was unbelievable.

"I learned a lot and I think that it's great that ACES spends so much time teaching the local population about crocodiles, which creates less danger for the community."

To learn more about ACES' work, visit www.AmericanCrocodileSanctuary.org