

TABLE 1. CLIMATE DATA FOR AREAS AND LOCATIONS REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

	Latitude	Elevation (m)	CMM (°C)	CMMM (°C)	Mean length of freeze-free period (days)	MART (°C)	MAT (°C)
Present crocodylian range in North America*	-	<250	>7.0	>1.5	>220	<21.1	>16
Biological limits for <i>A. mississippiensis</i> †	-	-	critical min.=4-5 activity min.=25	-	-	-	-
St. Louis, Missouri§	38°38'N	142	-0.1	-4.4	180	26.5	13.3
Omaha, Nebraska§	41°18'N	337	-5.4	-10.6	160	31.2	10.8
Cheyenne, Wyoming§	41°09'N	1871	-3.6	-9.4	120	22.8	7.0

Note: CMM—coldest month mean temperature; CMMM—coldest month mean daily minimum temperature; MART—mean annual range of temperature; MAT—mean annual temperature.

*Data from Baldwin (1973) ostensibly for the period 1931-1960, based on comparison with the crocodylian distribution map given in Neill (1971).

†Critical and activity temperatures for *Alligator mississippiensis* for comparison with temperatures indicated by their present geographic distribution.

§Data from Müller (1982), for the period 1931-1960.

merged in water (Hagan et al., 1983), even with surface ice 1.5 cm thick, as long as an air hole remained to prevent drowning (Brisbin et al. 1982). Data from escaped alligators across the United States reinforces the idea that individual adults can tolerate quite low temperatures; Barton (1955) described an alligator that seems to have survived in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, for possibly 6 or 7 yr despite a mean temperature for the coldest month that varied between -5.7 and 1.8 °C. However, an adult individual does not constitute a viable population, especially when it has been transposed through human intervention. This concept is important because in the geologic record the presence of a fossil crocodylian must, in terms of simple probability, be seen as evidence of a population rather than as the wanderings of an errant individual. The viability of populations is a function of not only minimum temperatures but more especially of the length of the active season. An extended cold season can result in the postponement of nesting and egg laying such that the season available for incubation and successful hatching may be limited (Joanen et al., 1987) and subsequent growth rates low. Fuller (cited in Hagan et al., 1983) noted that the growth rates of *A. mississippiensis* in North Carolina are about one half those reported in Louisiana, which makes the North Carolina crocodylians more liable to predation. Suggestions that crocodylians hibernate to escape temperature extremes are problematic and depend on the definition of "hibernation" used.

Climatic tolerances based upon isolated observational or experimental data may be founded upon a particular aspect of climate such as the absolute minimum air temperature survivable. However, crocodylian distributions, as for most organisms, are not defined by a single climate parameter but by a combination of factors (Sloan and Barron, 1992). A more meaningful approach is to use the climatic data applicable to the present-day geographic distribution of *A. mississippi-*

piensis (Neill, 1971) to derive general climate characteristics that define a region rather than a point in climate space (Table 1). This is appropriate if present-day alligators are occupying the fullest geographic range allowed by climate rather than a range limited by the effects of Pleistocene glacial climates (Joysey, cited in, but dismissed by, Colbert, 1964). With this approach, temperature (magnitude and duration) appears to be the most important limiting factor for *A. mississippiensis*; there appears to be no relation to precipitation patterns. The presence of water, although important, need not necessarily reflect local precipitation, as the presence of *Crocodylus niloticus* in the Nile River illustrates. It should be noted that the ambient air temperature implied by the climate data may not exactly reflect the immediate environmental temperature for the alligator, which, when in water, would be that of the water body.

FOSSIL CROCODYLIAN DISTRIBUTIONS AND INFERRED PALEOCLIMATE

The distribution of fossil crocodylians in North America, south of Hudson Bay, for four Cenozoic time intervals (Figs. 1-4) are plotted on present-day base maps with superimposed paleogeography and lines of paleolatitude. North American motion during this period was minor and does not account for the changes in crocodylian distributions.

Eocene

Crocodylian and noncrocodylian vertebrate localities are widely distributed in the Eocene strata of North America up to lat $\sim 50^{\circ}$ N (Fig. 1). The paucity of vertebrate data north of this latitude, with the significant exception of Ellesmere Island (Estes and Hutchison, 1980), remains a problem. By analogy with the modern distribution of *A. mississippiensis*, I infer that the climate of areas that had fossil crocodylians during the Eocene was not any more extreme than that of the present-day maritime southeastern

and southern United States (see Table 1). MacGinitie (1969) reached a similar conclusion for Eocene Wyoming on the basis of flora of the Green River Formation, and Wing and Greenwood (1993), also using floras, inferred coldest-month mean temperatures of $8-10$ °C and mean annual temperatures of no less than $12-18$ °C for the region between 40° N and 50° N. The crocodylians do not preclude thermal seasonality, as is often implied by the term "equable," but imply that the seasonality was not as great as that observed in similar continental settings today (compare with the data for present-day Cheyenne in Table 1). Although the ameliorating effects of the Cretaceous Western Interior Seaway had been removed by the Eocene, it is possible that remnants of the Cannonball Seaway remained into this time at least in the form of an expanded Hudson Bay (Fig. 1). If true, this additional inland water may explain the apparent warmth of the Rockies region.

Late Oligocene

During the late Oligocene, North American crocodylians were found only in maritime localities (Fig. 2). Other vertebrates are known from the continental interior, but the number of localities represented, even allowing for the shorter length of the late Oligocene compared to the Eocene or Miocene, is greatly reduced. The overall lack of crocodylian localities may partly reflect this paucity. However, the number of crocodylian localities diminishes proportionally more than vertebrate localities in general (from 17% to 6.5% of all vertebrate localities). In combination with the contemporary distribution of control points in interior sites, this fact would seem to indicate that the absence of crocodylians there is significant. Perhaps more significantly, the nature of the crocodylian fauna changed at this time, with the loss of all members of the family Crocodylidae. From the late Oligocene until the present, the family Alligatoridae remains the dominant group in North America in terms of both generic diversity and numbers of localities where it is found. It is this family that today includes the most poleward members of the Crocodylia, *A. mississippiensis* and *A. sinensis*.

Miocene

Fossil crocodylians are found in Miocene fluvial deposits of the Great Plains, which may have been at elevations similar to the present (the linearity of crocodylian localities in Nebraska, South Dakota, and eastern Wyoming may mark the traces of the paleo-Niobrara or Platte river systems, which had their sources to the west). The contrast between the climate of this region in the Mio-

cene and that of today can be best illustrated by comparing the climate implied by the present distribution of *A. mississippiensis* with the climate of Omaha, Nebraska, situated close to the Miocene crocodylian locations (Table 1). This return of crocodylians to the continental interior is consistent with the renewed global warmth implied by other evidence such as the marine isotopic record (Miller and Fairbanks, 1985).

Pleistocene-Holocene

With the establishment of ice sheets at both poles and consequent changes in the global climate system, the crocodylians were once more restricted to the major river systems of Texas and the coastal plain of the southern and southeastern United States. Migrations up the Mississippi, Red, and Brazos rivers, for example, during warmer interglacial climates may explain the presence of crocodylians beyond their historical distribution (see Fig. 4). The distribution of noncrocodylian vertebrate localities shows that the crocodylian distribution shown for this time is well constrained.

CONCLUSIONS

By analogy with the climate limitations of living alligators, the distribution of fossil crocodylians implies that both Eocene and Miocene interior climates in North America were warmer and underwent less thermal seasonality than at present with coldest-month mean temperatures of $>7^{\circ}\text{C}$, mean annual temperatures of $>16^{\circ}\text{C}$, and mean annual temperature ranges of $<21.1^{\circ}\text{C}$. For the Eocene, which has been the subject of recent work, these results agree with the climate implied by the floral data (Wing and Greenwood, 1993). The distributional changes portrayed here are also consistent with an overall latitudinal pattern showing equatorward shifts in crocodylian ranges during times of purported glaciation at high latitudes (Markwick, 1992). Along with the interpretation of such glacial periods is the interpretation of increased aridity in continental interiors, which has also been used to explain vertebrate distributions through this period (Hutchison, 1982, 1992). It is unclear what ultimate causes were responsible for the Cenozoic climatic changes suggested by the proxy data, but it is not perhaps insignificant that recent modeling experiments have highlighted the importance of uplift in the Rockies for cooling climates and creating increased aridity in the Great Plains (Kutzbach et al., 1989). The climatic implications of an ice-free Arctic have yet to be explored and may also be important.

As interest in global change increases, the need for large global data sets of geologic climate proxy data becomes more pressing, as does the need for a fuller understanding of the limitations and biases such data sets inherently include.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the Paleogeographic Atlas Project for use of their paleogeographic maps; A. M. Ziegler, D. Rowley, S. Wing, M. Parrish, D. Greenwood, and P. McA. Rees for reading earlier drafts and providing helpful criticism; L. Sloan, H. Hutchison, and J. Zachos for helpful comments; and H. Hutchison for drawing my attention to additional fossil crocodylian localities.

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Manuscript received December 9, 1993
 Revised manuscript received April 4, 1994
 Manuscript accepted April 8, 1994