

Alligators and crocodiles have fascinated people for centuries. Many “tall tales” have been told about these giant reptiles with the long tails. They are the original models for many dragons, “serpents,” and other fairy tale monsters.

The true story of alligators and crocodiles is even more fascinating. The name “crocodile” was first used about 2,000 years ago by Greek adventurers who were traveling in Egypt. The huge crocodiles reminded them of a tiny lizard called “krokodeilos” that lived back in their Greek villages. So the world’s biggest reptile got its name from one of the world’s smallest. Alligators got their name in a similar way. Spanish adventurers exploring the coast of Florida gave them the name “el legarto,” which means “the lizard.”

There is one other animal very closely related to alligators and crocodiles. It is called a *gharial* (GAIR-EE-UL). This word comes from India, where gharials live. It was a name first used for *jars* that were long and thin. In the case of this animal, however, it is the *jaws* that are extremely long and thin.

Together, alligators, crocodiles, and gharials make up the group of animals known as *crocodilians* (CROCK-UH-DILL-EE-UNS). Crocodilians are the world’s largest *reptiles*. A reptile is a cold-blooded animal that has scaly skin, lays eggs, and breathes with lungs. Crocodilians continue to grow throughout their lives. Some males grow to be more than 15 feet long (4.6 kilometers). And they may weigh over 500 pounds (227 kilograms). Females are usually smaller than the males.

There are also “dwarf” species of alligators and crocodiles which seldom get longer than 4 or 5 feet (1.2 to 1.5 meters). And, of course, others can grow to gigantic sizes. A Saltwater crocodile captured near the coast of India was reported to be 27½ feet long (8.4 meters) and weighed over a thousand pounds (450 kilograms).

No one knows exactly how old this crocodile was. But we do know that crocodilians can live a long time. An alligator in a zoo once lived for 56 years. But some scientists think that crocodiles living in the wild can live to be over a hundred years old.

