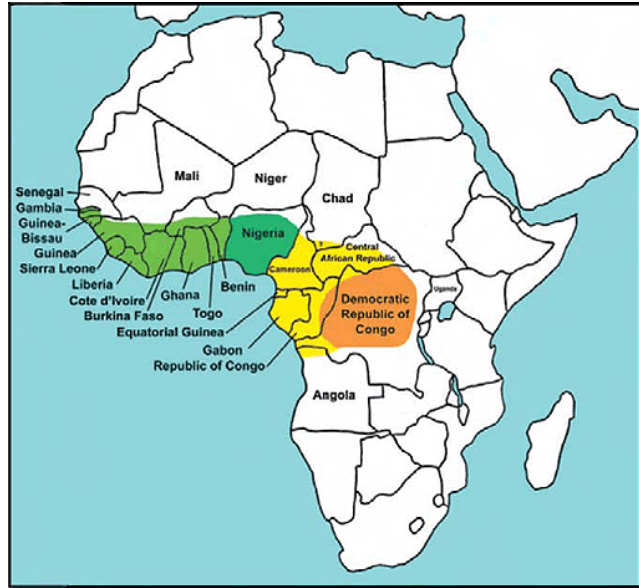


Dwarf Crocodile (*Osteolaemus tetraspis*)

The Dwarf Crocodile is restricted to Central and West Africa (Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo), and its biology and ecology are very poorly known. It rarely exceeds 2 m in length - average adult size is 1.0-1.5 m. In appearance, it resembles the dwarf caimans of South America, but it is of course in a totally different taxonomic group.



The Dwarf Crocodile was originally described by Professor Edward Drinker Cope in 1860, but the basis for his description was a skull of unknown origin and a skin of a different individual from Ogobai River (now Ogowe River), Gabon. In 1919 Schmidt described a new species from the upper Congo basin and named it *Osteoblepharon osborni*, Osborn's Dwarf Crocodile. Due to the lack of distinctive characters the taxon was put as a separate species into the genus *Osteolaemus* by Inger in 1948 and was finally synonymized with the Dwarf Crocodile by Mertens and Wermuth.

However, recent morphological and molecular studies (Brochu 2007; Eaton *et al.* 2009) revealed quite distinct characters throughout the large distribution range of the Dwarf Crocodile. It was suggested that *Osteolaemus osborni* be revived as a valid subspecies (*O. t. osborni*; Congo basin distribution) along with *O. t. tetraspis* (Central African distribution). As for the western populations, there may exist even more cryptic subspecies, which have been provisionally referred to as *Osteolaemus cf. tetraspis*. Additional sampling and further studies are required clarify this issue.

Osteolaemus tetraspis is a nocturnal species, and is rarely seen during the day. Generally docile and timid in nature, it does not congregate in large numbers, and is usually solitary. The species is associated with tropical rainforests, and tends to avoid large watercourses. Frogs, fish and crabs are the major prey items. In captivity, females lay 11-17 eggs in a mound nest around June-July. Large osteoderms in the skin, nocturnal habits and small size have saved the species from the intense exploitation that *Crocodylus niloticus* has suffered, though some hunting still occurs, mainly for meat.



Further reading

- Brochu, C.A. (2007). Morphology, relationships, and biogeographical significance of an extinct horned crocodile (Crocodylia, Crocodylidae) from the Quaternary of Madagascar. *Zool. J. Linn. Soc.* 150(4): 835-863.
- Eaton, M.J., Martin, A., Thorbjarnarson, J. and Amato, G. (2009). Species-level diversification of African dwarf crocodiles (Genus *Osteolaemus*): A geographic and phylogenetic perspective. *Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution* 50(3): 496-506.
- Ross, F.D. (2006). African dwarf-croc quandary persists. *Crocodile Specialist Group Newsletter* 25(1): 19-21.
- Eaton, M. (2010): African Dwarf Crocodile (*Osteolaemus tetraspis*) Pp. 127-132 in *Crocodiles. Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan*, ed. by C. Manolis and C. Stevenson. IUCN-SSC Crocodile Specialist Group: Darwin.