

“Living with Crocodiles” in the Northern Territory of Australia

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CROCODILES and their kin have been on earth with hardly a change in body form for over two hundred million years. That is not to say that they have not been continually evolving — they no doubt have been. But their body form was one of an efficient, large carnivore and this quite clearly did not require change in order for crocodiles to survive in a changing world.

When modern man began to appear, crocodiles were already well established. The ancestors of man no doubt learned to live in harmony with crocodiles, perhaps initially with fear and respect. With the advent of “awareness”, man began to worship such animals in the same way he worshipped other mysterious and powerful forces of the earth, in their many and varied forms. Such relationships between man and crocodiles exist today in some societies (see Lanhupuy Chapter 14).

Within Australia, saltwater crocodiles (*Crocodylus porosus*) are the only large predator capable of taking man on land. Prior to European settlement in northern Australia, in the mid-1800’s, Aboriginal people used and worshipped both the saltwater and freshwater crocodiles (*Crocodylus johnstoni*). They are portrayed in their many forms of art, and it is interesting to note that each art form is an expression of a religious story. For these to be *seen* by the general public, must first be approved by the traditional custodians of those stories. As a result, much of the finest art of this type is not available for public display.

The coming of the White man changed the balance between Australians and crocodiles. The animals were hunted because they were large predators and later for their valuable skins. They were also destroyed indirectly through habitat destruction as stock and fire changed the landscape. The Australian crocodile populations were greatly reduced, and there was concern that they were close to extinction. Both species were placed on the totally protected lists in the three States in which they occur.

In the Northern Territory, saltwater crocodiles were protected in 1971. In the first few years after protection, large numbers of hatchlings and small juveniles began to appear in the rivers, but they were rarely seen and public education about crocodiles did not seem essential. However, by the late 1970’s these smaller animals had grown and the public was rapidly becoming aware of crocodiles in the wild. In 1979-80, there were two fatal and two near-fatal attacks and a public education and awareness programme for this much maligned and decimated species came into being.

Australia contains a wide range of poisonous snakes, redback and funnelweb spiders, sharks and similar deadly wildlife, and they account for many more deaths per year than crocodiles. However, crocodiles are large, they are widely distributed in coastal wetlands, they are readily apparent in the wild, their attacks are particularly violent and, very recent history tells us that they are “exterminate-able” — it may not be possible to rid the oceans of sharks, but perhaps it *is* possible to rid the rivers of crocodiles.

Public education is not something which can be done easily. Many people by choice reject any such efforts as an encroachment on their personal liberties. Even in the Northern Territory, where determined efforts at public education have been made, crocodiles are still regarded as dangerous and unpleasant animals by many people, and there is no way some people will see them in any other light. The problem of course is that crocodiles *are* dangerous and on almost any aesthetic scale one were to rate them on, they are also perceived as being “unpleasant”. However, to fear crocodiles out of ignorance is completely different to being cautious about crocodiles based on a sound understanding of their biology and behaviour.

Although events dictated that public education about crocodiles be given a high priority, it was contained within a general “conservation awareness” programme being undertaken in the Northern Territory. Such programmes are neither new, nor

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Pages 229-31 of WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT: CROCODILES AND ALLIGATORS ed by Graham J. W. Webb, S. Charlie Minolis and Peter I. Whitehead. Surrey Beatty and Sons Pty Limited in association with the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory.

are they restricted to the Northern Territory, but they are essential. People "like" animals that can be broadly categorised as "little cuddlies", "soft furries", and "pretties". Yet the long-term conservation of even these animals is dependent on habitats rather than on single species conservation. The main thrust of the Northern Territory conservation awareness programme has been to educate people to accept whole ecosystems, and *all* their components, instead of only the "pretties" or the useful-to-man segments.

A specific problem that exists with crocodiles, relates to the distribution of people in Australia relative to the areas that contain crocodiles. Conceptual support for crocodile protection comes mostly from people who have never met a crocodile face-to-face. That is, mostly from people living in the southern parts of the nation. Yet these people are often bombarded with conflicting ideas, attitudes and information about crocodiles, which make it difficult for them to fully appreciate the realities of "living with crocodiles" in northern Australia.

At one extreme is the mythos of the man-eating monster lurking in northern waters waiting for a succulent southern body to devour; it can be portrayed vividly by a media catering to the bloody appetite of southern audiences. At the other is the image of an animal completely maligned by this predatory image. Yet awareness of the fact that crocodiles *can* be dangerous is an important real aspect of crocodile conservation. There are media reports of abundant saltwater crocodiles in the north and others that claim extinction is just around the corner. In one recent media interview the "imminent extinction" lobby criticised a proposed management programme to remove crocodiles from a populated area with the argument that it "could never be done — you could never get the last one" — surely an inbuilt contradiction that simply adds further confusion to southern audiences.

The crocodile public awareness and education programme run by the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory attempts to "tell it as it is". The programme is entitled "Living with Crocodiles" and has a number of discrete facets:

1. *Ranger-public contact.* Wildlife Rangers are educated in the facts about crocodiles. They know the animals are to be feared and respected, and they extend this information to park visitors and to the general public. This is the cutting edge of the "Living with Crocodiles" programme. Rangers give talks to voluntary organizations and school children, which involve such things as "see and touch" with live crocodiles and other exhibits taken along by them, and the answering of many, many questions.



Fig. 1. Brochures and "stickers" depicting the "no swimming" advisory sign are part of the education programme.

2. *Educational Slide Kit.* In conjunction with the Northern Territory Education Department, a slide kit and information booklet was prepared and issued to all schools in the Northern Territory and quite a few elsewhere.
3. *Brochures* (Fig. 1). A small but comprehensive brochure was prepared, which was pitched at all levels and which could be given away free. The brochure illustrates the relationship of the crocodile to its ecosystem, its importance as a major predator, and lists activities which should be avoided when in areas containing crocodiles.



Fig. 2. Posters which depict the "Living with Crocodiles" theme have proved popular with the public.

4. *Posters* (Fig. 2). Designed by professionals in communication employed by the Conservation Commission, posters carry a specific central message to the public: "You've got a neighbour that you mightn't necessarily like, but you've got to learn to live with him, just as he has to learn to live with you."
5. *Warning signs*. Signs which advise against swimming are erected at all areas where the public and crocodiles may interact; fishing areas, recreation areas containing crocodiles, bridges over rivers known to contain saltwater crocodiles, etc. This same sign can be purchased by tourists, and has been printed as a give-away "sticker" (Fig. 1) for school children.
6. *"Problem" Crocodiles*. A group of Conservation Commission Rangers remove problem animals, and this is often associated with press coverage. It is interesting that in the U.S. these are referred to as "nuisance" rather than "problem" animals, a subtle change in terminology that reduces the impact of "why" some crocodiles are removed from the wild.
7. *Television commercial*. A 30-second television commercial was produced which promotes crocodiles as long-term residents of the "Top End" of the Northern Territory and central characters in its tourist industry — but they can be dangerous and so caution is needed in some areas.
8. *Documentaries* (Fig. 3). Assistance is given to people making documentaries which feature crocodiles in the Northern Territory. This is not simply to avoid the bad press associated with a cameraman getting eaten, but rather to establish the correct image of crocodiles through advice from Rangers.
9. *Research*. Crocodile research and the publication of research results at the technical and scientific levels is another important aspect of the public



Fig. 3. Documentaries which feature crocodiles in the Northern Territory are an important means of portraying the realities of "Living with Crocodiles" in the Northern Territory.

education programme. These data are available to members of the public seeking detailed information on crocodiles, and some publications are specifically translated into "public language" so that they have a broader audience.

10. *Crocodiles as a Resource*. The value of crocodiles as a resource in the Northern Territory can for some people be a powerful incentive to support their conservation. The Conservation Commission promotes this resource value, be it in terms of cash returns from crocodile farming ventures, heritage, environmental balance, or the spiritual value crocodiles have to the Aboriginal and Islander peoples of Australia.

Never let it be said that the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory knows *all* the answers to the ongoing problem of environmental awareness in the public eye — especially in the rather "tricky" situation that exists with the protection and recovery of saltwater crocodiles. However, the Commission and its people have made a more than creditable start, and their expertise and experience to date may well help others faced with similar problems now, or in the future.