

LIVING WITH SALTIES

The growing population of saltwater crocodiles in northern Australia is creating challenges for the local human population. At the same time, people are adapting to coexist with the 'salties'. But the debate surrounding the best ways to do this is often heated and sharply divided.

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A 1.7m croc being trapped in Darwin Harbour



Ian Hunt pointing out 'no-zones' for crocs in Darwin

“There are more crocodiles up here than people nowadays,” says taxi driver Ben as we drive towards the NT Parks and Wildlife site for captured saltwater crocodiles on the outskirts of Darwin.

And while Ben doesn't want “all the crocodiles in the Northern Territory to be killed,” he also says, “You can't swim around Darwin. They'll eat you, no doubt. They're beautiful animals, but they need to be controlled.”

CATCHING CROCODILES IN DARWIN

At the government's collection site, NT wildlife ranger Ian Hunt is busy securing a 1.7m 'saltie' (the local parlance for saltwater crocodiles) with silver tape over its snout and hind legs. The croc, caught in a trap in Darwin Harbour earlier in the morning, is one of around 300 captured in the harbour each year. Although it's a “perfect spot” for male crocodiles seeking territory, Ian explains, the harbour is strictly a 'no-zone' for the species. It means this fellow will be transported to a nearby crocodile farm, where he will either become part of a tourist attraction or will enter the lucrative crocodile-skin and meat industry.

COMEBACK OF THE SALTIES

From an environmental perspective, the increase in crocodile numbers is a success story. Once hunted to near extinction in the 1970s—when the population dwindled to around 3,000—saltwater crocodiles have rebounded. Their numbers in northern Australia now range between 100,000 and 200,000, spread across the Northern Territory, Queensland, and Western Australia.

But with success comes conflict.

As prime territories fill up, salties are venturing further south, with sightings reported as far south as Brisbane. Most, however,

still live in the NT. Remote bushland is their natural domain, where the species rules as the top predator. In urban areas like Darwin, though, the dynamic changes. There, oversized crocs push into 'forbidden' zones, sparking run-ins with residents.

The 'no-zones' imposed by NT Parks and Wildlife are a safety measure that seem to be paying off. “We haven't had any fatal accidents here yet,” says Ian, explaining that's due to the constant removal of crocs from the area.

It's challenging to estimate how many crocodiles once inhabited Australia, according to Ian. “There weren't any surveys of crocodile numbers 100 years ago,” he says, and it leaves no choice but to rely on anecdotal evidence. And while we know that pressure from hunting in the 1950s and 1960s significantly reduced croc numbers, prior to that, much of the Northern Territory was still rarely visited by wildlife scientists, making it nearly impossible to conduct accurate surveys.

“Would it be fair to say that today's crocodile population is the largest in modern history?” I ask Ian. “It seems reasonable,” he replies.

HEATED DISCUSSIONS

Whether culling should increase in northern Australia is now the topic of fierce debate, especially given the species has been protected for over fifty years. Many protected crocodiles now exceed five metres in length, posing a growing threat to humans.

Ian argues that crocodiles are simply reclaiming their historical habitats, not expanding into new areas, and he believes they should be left undisturbed in the wild. While deadly accidents involving crocodiles grab headlines, fatalities remain steady at just one-to-two deaths per year.

Asked if Australia has a 'crocodile problem', Ian's response is



There are estimated to be roughly 100,000 to 200,000 salties in Australia

emphatic: “No.” But he adds that we have ‘problem’ crocodiles that must be dealt with.

According to him, it’s a matter of luck that more accidents don’t occur; many people ignore the presence of potential five-metre man-eaters nearby. Surprisingly, it’s often local residents, not tourists, who are at the highest risk. Despite the danger, Ian emphasises that humans aren’t crocs’ preferred prey—it’s usually ‘man’s best friend’ that attracts their attention. “Crocodiles love dogs and will always go after them, even when they’re not interested in humans.”

NEW ‘CROCWISE’ CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED

Ultimately, it should be common sense to avoid swimming in waterways or venturing close to rivers or waterholes where saltwater crocodiles may be present. Fishing should be done in a crocodile-safe manner, as it often attracts the skilled predators.

But since common sense is not necessarily that common, the NT Government has launched a campaign called ‘Crocwise’. The initiative aims to educate school students and others who spend time in the outdoors. It emphasises personal responsibility when moving through croc habitats, with the government stating on its website that “any body of water in the Top End may contain large and potentially dangerous crocodiles.”

As part of the NT Government’s new crocodile-management plan, no new permits will be granted for Territorians to own a pet croc, and fines or evictions will be enforced for visitors to national parks, such as Kakadu, who ignore the risks around crocodiles. Even the Queensland Government is taking action, with hefty fines of up to almost \$6,500 for new offences, including unintentionally feeding a crocodile by discarding food or straying too close to one. These new regulations, which came into effect on 1 September 2024, are aimed at reducing human-crocodile interactions.

The Crocwise campaign also targets tourists visiting this part of Australia. Since seeing salties is at the top of the bucket list for many visitors, it’s crucial to inform them of the potential risks.

EGOCENTRIC PEOPLE

Danielle Mulhall is a guide at Crocodylus Park, a crocodile farm and wildlife park that raises salties and showcases specimens of various sizes—from hatchlings to some individuals over five metres long. She describes the species at the top of the food chain as “a beautiful animal”, while emphasising that it’s a dangerous creature deserving respect.

SALTWATER CROCODILE FACTS:

The saltwater crocodile was once widely distributed across the Indo-Pacific region, but it has disappeared from many countries, including China, Vietnam, and Thailand. Australia now has the largest population, although the species is also prevalent in Indonesia, where it causes numerous fatalities each year among locals who fish and travel through crocodile habitats.

The ‘salties’ is the largest of all crocodile species, capable of growing over six metres long, weighing more than a tonne, and living for over 100 years.

In the Northern Territory, annual culling efforts have increased to 1,200 crocodiles, and up to 90,000 crocodile eggs can be collected from the wild each year. While there is no limit on capturing ‘problem’ crocodiles in urban areas, critics warn that such measures may create a false sense of security by leading people to assume certain areas are crocodile-free. However, since saltwater crocodiles can travel vast distances, they quickly reestablish territories.



IMAGES - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

Ian Hunt shows one of the croc traps used by the NT Government

Raw chicken on a line is a safe bet

Be mindful of where you are

Danielle Mulhall works as a guide at Crocodylus Park



“We educate our visitors,” she says. But the ongoing debate about the abundance of crocodiles in northern Australia strikes Danielle as fundamentally “egocentric”. “Some people claim they can’t swim anymore,” she says. “They take it personally, but in the end, it’s about nature making a comeback. The population is stabilising again.”

UNNATURAL BEHAVIOUR?

At Crocodylus Park, Danielle attaches raw chickens to a wire and dangles them over a human-made waterhole inhabited by several crocodiles. Within moments, two crocodiles approach the bait. Soon they leap vertically out of the water using the force of their tails, impressively jumping several metres into the air.

However, wildlife parks and river-cruise operators that feed crocodiles in this manner have faced criticism for allegedly encouraging unnatural behaviour in the reptiles. (*Ed: Some people have also claimed that this causes crocs to associate humans with food.*) The operators counter that this jumping is entirely natural. ‘Wookie’, a guide for the local tour operator Spectacular Jumping Crocodile Cruise on the Adelaide River, an hour outside Darwin, asserts that it’s “a natural behaviour for all crocodile species.” They leap out of the water, he says, to catch prey like birds and snakes perched on tree branches above.

As Wookie steers his riverboat down the Adelaide River—a wide, murky waterway surrounded by dense mangrove forests—he shares insights into the lives of the reptiles. The crocodiles’ favourite prey is wild boar, and chunks of feral pig dangle from a line over the water to attract them. It isn’t long before WokEye—a massive 4-6m, 700kg saltie—approaches the boat, recognising his meal is near.

WokEye is just one of approximately 1,000 salties that inhabit this river, according to Wookie. The population density means crocodiles frequently clash with each other over territory,

resulting in lost limbs and tails. Many die in these fights, adding to the high natural-mortality rate of the species—only about one per cent of hatchlings survive to adulthood.

A CONTROVERSIAL MEASURE

As saltwater crocodiles reclaim lost habitats, the debate over how to manage their numbers has intensified. Controversially, the newly elected NT Government is considering trophy hunting as a population-control measure. Given the already high natural-mortality rate of crocs, Wookie strongly opposes the idea. Widespread hunting, he says, especially trophy hunting, is unnecessary and “morally wrong.”

The NT Government has indicated such proposals would likely only proceed with the support of Aboriginal communities. “We encourage Traditional Owners to develop enterprises to deliver economic benefits through highlighting the cultural value of saltwater crocodiles,” says Robby McLeod, a wildlife-program manager for crocodiles working for the NT Government.

But no such proposals have been submitted so far, he admits (*Ed: At least at the time of writing*). “Any proposals would require the consent of landowners; would be evaluated on a case-by-case basis; and would have to be consistent with Territory and Commonwealth legislation and management programs.”

Back on the Adelaide River, Wookie approaches yet another saltie resting on the riverbank further down. Yes, the species has recovered in this area, but he cautions that this area doesn’t guarantee the same progress across its entire range.

“We need more time to understand how the species has recovered,” he says. “It will take several more decades.” **W**

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