

What does the Parks and Wildlife Commission do to keep people safe from crocodiles?

Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory

TABLED DOCUMENTS

Committee: ES member
Paper No: 10.4 Date: 18/6/14
Submission No: P.1.1
Signed: [Signature]

Key Points

- The Commission does a lot to help keep people safe from saltwater crocodiles, but it should be remembered that over much of the Top End there is always a risk that a crocodile might in our waterways and coastal areas.
- The Commission maintains a 50km Darwin Crocodile Management Zone. This includes the Darwin Harbour, Darwin rural area and east to the western side of the Adelaide River.
- In this zone there is “no tolerance” for saltwater crocodiles. This means that the ‘Croc Team’ actively pursue all sightings, undertake regular spotlight surveillance and baits and checks weekly 26 permanent traps and a further 34 traps depending on the season and sightings. This makes up to a total of 60 traps in the Darwin Crocodile Management Zone.
- This is not an ‘exclusion zone’ and it cannot be assumed that this zone is always safe from crocodiles. There is no technology currently available to detect crocodiles coming into the zone, nor is there a barrier to keep crocodiles out of the zone. However, the Croc Team do remove every crocodile that is sighted within this zone.
- There are areas in some parks that are managed to exclude saltwater crocodiles. These “exclusion zones” mean that there is a high degree of confidence that crocodiles are prevented from entering the zone so that the level of risk is low enough

to allow swimming, but these areas tend to be seasonal. An example of this is Wangi Falls in Litchfield National Park.

- The Commission also maintains a 50km “no tolerance” zone in the Katherine River from 20kms downstream of the Katherine low level bridge, up and into Nitmiluk National Park.
- Ten traps have been reinstalled in the Katherine River now that the river levels are stable.
- Following a fatality in 1986, a crocodile management program was implemented in Borroloola to remove all crocodiles from a management zone from 2km above to 8km downstream of the town of Borroloola. Since that time rangers stationed at Borroloola have maintained the crocodile management zone through a trapping and spotlighting program. On average seven saltwater crocodile are removed from the Borroloola area on an annual basis.
- Where regular trapping programs are not in place, mobile traps may also be used to capture problem crocodiles in remote locations.
- Currently the number of Crocodiles captured is trending downwards. The likely reason is two poor Wet seasons in a row and not as many crocodiles moving around.
- 301 saltwater crocodiles were captured in 2011-12, 272 in 2012-13 and 254 up to the 2 June for 2013-14.
- Management plans for specific parks and reserves include a risk assessment based on the public use of the area, the numbers of crocodiles present in the area and the proximity of the location to known populations of crocodiles.
- There are individual Saltwater Crocodile Management Plans in place for Top End parks and reserves.

- Management actions are site specific and may include the provision of warning signs, surveillance, trapping and removal of crocodiles.
- Unfortunately, despite all this effort there have been three confirmed attacks so far in 2014. Two of these have been fatal and my deepest sympathies go to their families and friends.
- These three attacks all occurred in Kakadu National Park, two associated with swimming and one associated with fishing from a boat.
- Kakadu National Park is not managed by the Northern Territory, and therefore not subject one of the Commissions Crocodile Management Plans.
- I understand that Kakadu National Park is reviewing its Commissions Crocodile Management Plan and of course the Commission will provide any advice or assistance it can.
- Protection of saltwater crocodiles started in 1971. Prior to this, poor records of crocodile attacks were kept.
- Since protection of crocodiles in 1971, the Parks and Wildlife Commission has kept records of all reported saltwater crocodile attacks.
- From these record I can tell you:
 - there have been 66 confirmed attacks with 20 being fatal and a further 46 resulting in injury;
 - the number of crocodile attacks each year are increasing due to the growing human and crocodile populations in the Northern Territory;
 - the most common size of saltwater crocodiles attacking people is between 3 and 3.5 metres.
 - The attack is nearly always fatal when the crocodile is over 4 metres; and

- the group most at risk are young local males swimming in the crocodile habitat.
- The records also show that:
 - 38 attacks, of which 13 were fatal, were on Indigenous lands with Indigenous people being effected by 46% of the attacks;
 - 11 attacks, of which 4 were fatal, were in Kakadu National Park;
 - 8 attacks where 2 were fatal, were in Northern Territory managed parks and reserves excluding Kakadu National Park; and
 - 9 attacks, where 1 was fatal occurred on other land tenure such as other Crown land or private land.
- After a crocodile attack, there are often calls for saltwater crocodiles to be culled. This is an emotive issue and the community is divided on what should be done.
- The Department of Land Resource Management estimates there are between 80 000 and 100 000 saltwater crocodiles throughout the Top End of the Northern Territory.
- The only way to be completely safe in waterways in the Top End is to cull or remove all saltwater crocodiles.
- Selective culling has been considered, however, a real risk is that culling can lead to a false sense of security, and a reduced vigilance in saltwater crocodile habitat.
- One of the most important programs the Commission runs is the *Be Crocwise* program.
- The program was introduced in 2009 in response to the Coronial Enquiry following the death of 11 year old school girl, Briony Goodsell.
- The *Be Crocwise* campaign conveys the message that if a waterway is not designated as safe for swimming, it should be

assumed that it may be inhabited by saltwater crocodiles and it is not safe for swimming.

- The *Be Crocwise* program is again funded with \$75 000 for 2014-15.
- The program strives to raise and maintain community awareness about the real dangers of crocodiles and change people's behaviour when in, or around the waterways in the Top End.
- The program aims to deliver five key messages: Crocs are Common; Crocs Move Around; Crocs Are Deadly; and No Sign No Swim; *Be Crocwise*.
- Of the 135 schools in the Top End (including Darwin, Darwin rural, Palmerston, Darwin remote, Arnhem and Katherine regions), Parks and Wildlife staff have presented the *Be Crocwise* message to all schools except five. All but nine have had multiple *Be Crocwise* visits and activities.
- Frequent and continual *Be Crocwise* messaging via the Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife facebook page has become an important part of the program.
- In 2012-13, school engagement strategies were expanded to include:
 - a Colouring-in Design Sheet Competition;
 - an on-line *Be Crocwise* Teaching and Learning Resource Kit; and
 - a *Be Crocwise* Song Competition.
- Twelve schools entered the song competition with the majority being from regional and remote schools.

- The winning song has now been incorporated into a radio add and will be aired from the week of the 16 June 2014 on a variety of stations.
- Earlier this year I launched a *Be Crocwise* CD that includes all entries. This CD has been distributed to Top End schools, selected radio stations and competition sponsors.
- This is an example of the innovative ways the *Be Crocwise* message is getting out into the community.
- *Be Crocwise* presentations are also delivered at community events so the messages are received by a larger proportion of the Top-end community.
- Examples include
 - *Be Crocwise* talks to the US Marines on rotation;
 - presentations to private contractors that work in or near NT waterways;
 - a *Be Crocwise* stand at the Freds Pass Show;
 - a *Be Crocwise* stand at the 4WD Expo;
 - presentations in the Smith Street Mall, Darwin; and
 - *Be Crocwise* stands will soon begin at various Darwin Markets.
- The *Be Crocwise* program and materials have been shared with Kakadu National Park, Western Australia, Timor Leste; Solomon Islands, and a poster session was held at the recent IUCN – Crocodile Specialist Group, 23rd Working Meeting in Louisiana, USA.
- Particular interest came from representatives of India and Costa Rica where similar issues are being experienced with saltwater crocodiles.

- The Commission works hard to help keep people as safe as possible from saltwater crocodiles.
- It will continue to remove any crocodile it hears of in the Darwin Management Zone.
- It will continue to remove problem crocodiles from the more remote areas on an as needs basis.
- It will continue manage exclusion zones within parks and reserves in accordance with the well established procedures outlined in Crocodile Management Plans, and
- It will continue to look for new and innovative ways to spread the Be Crocwise message to the whole community.
- I urge all Territorian to *Be Crocwise*.