

Australian Aboriginal Attitudes to Crocodile Management

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EVER since I can remember and certainly well before the White man came, my people had a belief in crocodiles: something that they will always have in the future.

If we look specifically at Arnhem Land, there are about nineteen clans directly affected by crocodiles. The relationship between people and crocodiles within those clans is a strong one. Crocodiles have ceremonial significance and this is a concept of utmost importance to me, and to the Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory and elsewhere in Australia, as a whole.

Within the clans that hold crocodiles sacred in the Northern Territory, there is a special relationship between crocodiles and people. They play a major role in ceremonies, for example those that occur when boys are taken for initiation, to be accepted into manhood by their elders. A boy's upbringing and the way he is to take part in all major ceremonies until his death, will virtually revolve around this animal. He will learn about crocodiles from his elders, especially through ceremonies: their ways, their behaviour, their hunting habits. Above all, a young boy has to learn to have respect for his elders and have utmost respect for crocodiles, the animal which has placed him upon this earth — that is a

belief that we have. Crocodiles have given him a purpose to live here and a boy must live under strict orders and strict conditions as applied to him by his elders.

Within the northern parts of the Northern Territory, the Northern Land Council (NLC) and the Tiwi Land Council are the two bodies that represent Aboriginal landowners. It is their responsibility to consult with local landowners about such issues. I can remember very clearly when we received a letter from Dr Goff Letts, the former Chairman of the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory, seeking the views of the NLC in respect to the proposed change for saltwater crocodiles from Appendix I to Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The NLC's view then was that it had no jurisdiction whatsoever to speak for the individual clan owners who had special ceremonial significance to crocodiles. Recognising those clan rights, the NLC advised that it would be better if the Conservation Commission discussed those matters directly with the clans concerned.

As far as the general view of Aboriginal people to the conservation and management of crocodiles is concerned, it is my belief that the majority in the Northern Territory are willing to participate in soundly based ventures that will be successful for tourism or commercial gain in its own right. I stress once again, however, that this is my personal view of the situation. Since protection the populations of crocodiles have grown, and people living on settlements and outstations are starting to cry out for help from the Conservation Commission to remove those animals living close to communities, and which have become dangerous. The participation of Aboriginal people in a management programme could move a long way towards cutting down the high unemployment rate that we have in our communities. It could also give my people the opportunity to run an economically viable project, although technical assistance may be needed, at least initially.



Fig. 1. 'A young boy has to learn to have respect for his elders and have utmost respect for crocodiles, the animal which has placed him upon the earth'

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In addition to participating in a management programme, it should be recognized that Aboriginal people are more than willing to set aside specific areas of land for the purposes which may be of benefit to the Northern Territory as a whole. The Land Councils have been preaching that message ever since they have been established, and the terms and conditions of the *Lands Act* 1976 provide a means through which it can be achieved amicably.

However, with crocodiles in particular, there is a need to address the direction in which management will go. A need to assess the situation that may exist in ten or fifteen years time. Are we going to end up visiting our crocodiles in Parks and Zoos? This is something that would surely affect our ceremonies and be a tragedy from our point of view. Let us hope that this doesn't happen, and that by working together we can achieve a programme that satisfies all people who live in this region with the crocodiles.

DISCUSSION

(An abbreviated version of the discussion of this paper at the conference is presented below.)

Grahame Webb: Aboriginal people around Maningrida used to tell me that when they collected salt-water crocodile eggs to eat, they used to kill the female at the nest, take the eggs, then next year kill another female and take the eggs at the same place and so on. Could you throw any light on this?

Wesley Lanbupuy: To the best of my knowledge that is the case. If something happened to a specific nesting female another one comes back to the same place to lay eggs next year.

Goff Letts: During the period crocodiles were intensively hunted, between 1945 and 1971, Aboriginal people were often involved in that hunting. Were these people outside the clans who hold crocodiles sacred?

Wesley Lanbupuy: A lot of people did hunt crocodiles commercially, usually working with White people. People from those clans may have been involved because otherwise a conflict would have arisen — people from outside a tribal area may have come in, causing tribal conflicts.

Harry Messel: I would just like to make a statement. Your people have been involved with all the crocodile research undertaken in the Northern Territory which has generated a good deal of goodwill. They have played a very important and helpful role in bringing about this conference, which should not be forgotten.

Romulus Whitaker: Is there any special programme at the moment that will actually benefit Aboriginal people entering crocodile farming?

Wesley Lanbupuy: Not that I'm aware of personally, but some discussions have taken place.

Goff Letts: There have been enquiries from central Arnhem Land and from people on the Goyder River about farming-ranching operations. During the trial harvest of freshwater crocodiles, the people from Yarralin participated in the harvest.

Grahame Webb: To continue on this point, it should be realized that there are many practical difficulties involved, and a joint working group has been set up between the Land Councils and the Conservation Commission to discuss them. Ten and twenty years ago someone would decide that what was needed on an Aboriginal settlement was say a fishing factory — one would be set up, but because of logistic problems, it would normally fail. No-one wants to see crocodile farming introduced into Arnhem Land with promises of a roaring success when the technological problems are still significant. Perhaps a staging of involvement will be the best way, and this is currently being discussed. Start off with say egg collection, then move to incubation, then to raising on a small scale, then to larger scale raising etc.

Harry Butler: Would you be able to speak a little on the use of crocodiles as food today. How widely are eggs eaten? How often are crocodiles killed for food using firearms and nets? What sort of effect is that likely to have on the populations?

Wesley Lanbupuy: Aboriginal people still take crocodiles for ceremonial purposes and for food. It is a staple diet that people on outstations in particular will turn to. That is not to say that some of this use cannot change with time, to be consistent with broader management aims, but it will need to be a slow, gradual change in line with what Grahame said before. One must remember that even five or ten years ago a paper by an Aboriginal, on Aboriginal attitudes, would not have been included in a conference like this — this in itself is a milestone in changing attitudes.

Dermot Smythe: Would you be able to say anything about Aboriginal attitudes generally to the philosophy of farming crocodiles and keeping them in captivity and using their skins for export? Have you heard any criticism from Aboriginal people about this?

Wesley Lanbupuy: People's views are going to change given time. However, at the moment, certain people, like the current chairman of the NLC, Galarrwuy Yunipuyngu, whose totem is the crocodile, hold them very dear to their hearts. To encourage he or his clan to build a crocodile farm would be viewed very offensively. It is their religion, their totem. However, other groups of people might wish to pursue such a course, and conflicts between

tribal interests may well arise. The Conservation Commission will need to exercise caution in the way they approach the whole problem.

Grabame Webb: Aboriginal people with a crocodile totem — does this mean that they cannot kill any crocodile or eat any crocodile parts? Or does it mean they can, but such activities need to be carried out very much with a sense of reverence. Is it cut and dried — or a complex compromise?

Wesley Lanbupuy: The person to answer that is Gularrway. I participate in ceremonies, but he is a crocodile totem man.

Galarrwuy Yunipuyngu: It is a cut and dried type of thing. Strict permission can be given for people to implement their tribal responsibilities which may allow them to kill and eat crocodiles or collect their eggs. But I myself, or my people, my tribe, are not allowed to do that by order of the law and custom of our people. There is a special relationship that we ourselves carry. My nephew or somebody related to him could be authorized to kill a crocodile, but it would need to be done away from us. Otherwise it would be hurtful, harmful to us as people. Remembering that the animal is part of us and part of our tribe. It would take away the respect and significance if it occurred in front of us.

David Lindner: In Kakadu National Park, where I work for the Gagudju Association, crocodile products are very much still utilized as food. But there is a sort of guilt associated with killing crocodiles (but not to collecting eggs) that owes itself to the long period of crocodile protection which covered Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. At the moment the dramatic recovery of numbers in the floodplain billabongs sustains all the eating requirements. However, crocodiles are still sometimes killed in areas which are badly damaged by buffalo and in which the numbers of crocodiles are well below what probably occurred in such areas originally. The taking of a large number of eggs has obviously not affected the recovery of crocodiles in the Alligator Rivers region specifically. Nor have modern firearms had a significant effect on numbers killed. A crocodile dragged out from a burrow under a paperbark may now be shot rather than axed, but the people only eat so many.

Grabame Webb: When you say a large number of eggs, how many nests would you estimate are taken each year? Ten? Twenty?

David Lindner: It would be less than twenty and perhaps less than ten. About six to ten.