

# Fear & loathing

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## **IT knows I'm there but doesn't budge. Four point four metres of primeval bulk stuck to the grass.**

A dominant tooth juts skyward, out of a gnarly, vicelike jaw that once ate the heads off cattle on Cape York.

Eyes absurdly small for its size stay jacked open, yellowy-black windows I'm incapable of reading. Does it know my fear?

I'm not the mess I would be if there weren't cyclone fencing between me and this saltwater crocodile they call Paul, but the more you stare at these creatures, the more their power reveals itself. Thick legs protrude from Paul's armoured body, ending in razor-sharp claws. Raised lumps, called scutes, run down its back to a tail capable of propelling it from the water in a lightning strike.

Fear and power are the crocodile's currency. Together with its unique biology they have enabled it to survive since long before we walked upright. But its evolution has nothing on us. We've taken to the waterways, conquered the forests, made homes in places once too harsh to live in. We came with guns and blasted *crocodylus porosus* close to extinction until 1974, when a loose tally of 5000 remained in North Queensland and they became protected.

For 30 years, there's been an uneasy truce. Those that survived remained mostly on the Cape and wary of humans. "Rogue" crocs, like Paul, that caused havoc on the Annan River were put to stud in parks such as Paul's home, Hartley's Crocodile Adventures, near Palm Cove.

The late Steve Irwin burst on the scene, telling us to love them while pointing out "if they're within range, you're dead", and we clamoured to see them, safely, behind enclosures. Others were raised on farms, bound to become a handbag slung across a social X-ray's arm in Paris. On rare occasions the crocs bit back, killing or maiming humans who entered their limited domain.

It's not so simple anymore. Current estimates put Queensland crocodile numbers at 30,000 – and humans and crocs are getting reacquainted in the wild. Since the turn of the

century, stretches of the popular northern beaches of Cairns, and The Strand at Townsville, have been closed for days after croc sightings. Some have basked on the sand, others have popped up inside stinger nets. Children have been attacked. A generation of Northerners who have swum with confidence in their azure seas are getting jumpy. The consummate survivor is back in its only predator's sights.

**DRUNK, HOT AND COMPLACENT, FOUR LOCALS** stumble down to a jetty at the bottom of the Daintree Butterfly Farm and do a stupid thing. They go for a dip, just to cool off after dancing up a storm at a Christmas party. It's about 11pm on December 21, 1985, and although they know there are crocs in the Barratt Creek tributary of the Daintree River, no-one has been attacked. They'll only be a few minutes.

Beryl Wruck, the local storekeeper, strips to her underwear and climbs into knee-deep water that drops away to about two metres. Her friends splash about. The slightly built 43-year-old crouches down to get wet – and a crocodile strikes. She flies up in the air, arms waving, is tossed to the side and gone. Not a scream, no blood. The brackish water settles as quickly as it was disturbed.

These images slither around my brain as Bruce Belcher pulls up his flat-bottomed boat near Fat Albert, a male croc the river tour operator says is about 5m, a similar size to Wruck's killer. Only 1.5m of the head and body aimed at the muddy shore are visible, the rest submerged. It'll lie there for hours, masquerading as a log, until a feral pig wanders by. It's spellbinding to watch the hunter at work: this is what tourists come to see.

Back in '85, tourism was just getting a foothold in the Daintree, and the cattlemen and old-timers who'd done battle with the creatures long before Scandinavians arrived with backpacks saw little worth in having a man-eater in their midst. Belcher, who knew Wruck, witnessed the emotion-charged response to the popular woman's death: hunt them down and find the killer.

The echo of gunshots was heard on the river for weeks as some let fire indiscriminately, shooting even small crocs. Maybe as many as 70 were slaughtered until one with human remains was found. The hunting was illegal but sanctioned by the then National Party government: environment minister Martin Tenni famously told how he hoped his Barron River electorate would one day be crocodile-free.

Belcher says many in the north still don't see the point of protecting something that can kill humans, albeit rarely – Wruck's death was the first in the Queensland wild for a decade, with four others since in even more remote parts. As he wends his way through the rainforest-fringed water towards a juvenile croc, Belcher tells how a tourist had relayed scuttlebutt that the river had no fish because it was overrun with crocodiles. He thought it was a joke and picked up his UHF receiver to tell another tour operator. A woman intercepted their chat: "Kill all the f..king bastards," she said.

"I'd say 50 per cent of the people up here don't want them around," Belcher says. "She was quite distressed that we were so ignorant of this huge population of crocodiles in the river – but we knocked the guts out of them, they're at a low density as quoted by Mark Read." Up in these parts, Dr Read's is the name on everyone's lips. He is the crocodile arbiter, the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service officer charged with managing the emerging conflict between human and croc. Similar to Irwin without as much hype, Read worked with the self-proclaimed Crocodile Hunter and calls him "awe-inspiring". Part of Read's drive is "to provide an alternative perspective for the management of a species that can't talk for itself".

If relations are delicate in the Daintree/Cape Tribulation area where living with crocodiles has been a constant, consider the battle south of the Daintree. Read and Environment Minister Lindy Nelson-Carr are facing an extraordinarily difficult problem: convincing urbanised North Queenslanders they can share their beaches with crocodiles.

Nelson-Carr has dismissed culling crocs as a "shockingly negative approach", but the call to control numbers is growing louder with many seizing on the fact the croc is no longer on the endangered list, though it is vulnerable. Petitions are circulating since a state draft management plan was released in March, ruling out removing all crocodiles in popular areas in favour of taking those deemed a problem.

Bob Katter, a ministerial colleague of Tenni's in the '80s and now a federal Independent, has been stoking the fire, decrying governments for robbing people of their freedom by deferring to an animal. A longtime advocate of culling, federal Liberal Senator Ian Macdonald recently challenged Premier Peter Beattie to swim at a North Queensland beach after crocs forced a surf carnival's closure.

Locals like Joseph Mackedie are right behind the calls for a cull. At 81, his days of swimming are over but he fears a child could be taken. His letter to *The Cairns Post*, the type Read says are printed regularly, said: "Who would the parents go after, the croc or the slow-motion Queensland Parks and Wildlife rangers? Why are they so slow to do something about these crocs? They should be shot." Or as Mackedie tells me later in his Cairns garage: "In the old days, spotted a croc, out come a gun, *ptt-choo*, that was that. Common sense."

**IT'S IN THE AIR: THAT STICKY, OPPRESSIVE FEELING** of mid-afternoon in Cairns that says a thunderstorm is on its way. The water off the city's premier resort beach of Palm Cove is seductive: flat, calm and sparkling. Tourists absorb rays on deckchairs – but no-one is in the water. The irukandji marine stingers have come in on the northerly.

Cairns councillor Paul Gregory stares out over the empty water and hands me some statistics collated during last year's summer by the local lifeguard service for the eight northern beaches and that of nearby Green Island. There are marine stinger figures, but

highlighted in yellow are the number of days beaches were closed because of crocodiles: December 2005, 7.5 days; January '06, 8 days; February '06, 19 days.

It boggles my mind. I lived and reported in Cairns in 1989-1990 at Trinity Beach, swam regularly, and never heard a warning about crocodiles on the beaches. Marine stingers such as irukandji were a growing concern in summer, but to do stories on crocs you had to head to the Daintree or further north. The death of Beryl Wruck could still get people worked up over a beer at the pub.

Gregory, 54, says that's nothing: he remembers running around the mangrove creek at the end of Palm Cove as a little tacker, dragging a bait net behind him. "Never even thought about crocs. There's more around, no doubt about it. They've been breeding up since the '70s, there's got to be."

First to wake the metropolis to the growing population of crocodiles was Ron Bakx, a local who went swimming off the beachside suburb of Yorkeys Knob in November 1997. Like Wruck, he was in the water at night. The silly dip turned into a battle for survival as he fended off a 3.5m crocodile, escaping with wounds to his head, arm, shoulder and back.

That's when the Queensland Government brought in a Trial Intensive Management Area for Crocodiles (TIMAC), which sought to remove every crocodile south of the Daintree to crocodile farms. (Relocation further north has been abandoned, with evidence crocs have a homing instinct.) The Cairns City Council signed an MOU (memorandum of understanding) with the government, agreeing to close beaches for three days from when a crocodile had been seen and enlisting the QPWS to remove them. Gregory's list is a result of that agreement.

Now there's been a rethink of beach closures. The advice of Mark Read is that crocodiles are more active in summer, using beaches as thoroughfares from mangrove creek to creek as they search for a mate or new territory. Read insists crocs have always done this off Cairns and as far south as the Tropic of Capricorn, just in fewer numbers since the hunting days. The crocs have been wary and people simply haven't seen them. They're timid animals and can be encouraged to move on, he says.

Such advice dovetailed with the rising anger of beachside businesses feeling the pinch as closures kept tourists away. Pressure was put on the Cairns Mayor, Kevin Byrne. Councillors are now considering a new MOU. That agreement allows lifeguards to "buzz" crocodiles with the outboard motors of dinghies and monitor them until they have left the beach. Most beaches should reopen within four hours. Big, aggressive or loitering crocs will be removed to croc farms and QPWS staff will be allowed to fire rat shot to move them on. If all else fails, they will be killed. It mirrors the draft management plan for all Queensland's crocodiles that is out now for debate, with written submissions closing next Friday.

We get into Gregory's car to check out spots where crocs have been sighted. He says the big battle is selling these changes to the locals. Tourists might be more wary of visiting the north but will generally adapt, but some locals, well . . . "Machismo, yeah, that's the problem," he says as I pussyfoot around it, talking of North Queenslanders' "proud personalities". "Bugger ya, done this all my life, swum here, took the cattle down here, used to shoot 'em 40 years ago, why can't we do it now?' That's what we're up against."

Rain buckets down as we drive past the turnoff to Trinity Beach and Bluewater, a marina and canal estate that the government, through Read, told the developers would provide an artificial habitat for crocodiles. That development and others have been warned not to expect the QPWS to remove every croc that shows its head.

About 6km from the city we pass the airport, where taxi driver Dale "Scaly" Graham encountered a new speed bump in 2001: a 2.7m crocodile had wandered onto Airport Drive in the night. The 75kg female was run over and killed. Within five minutes we're at Centenary Lakes, a popular picnic spot near the Botanic Gardens where crocodiles keep popping up. Then it's a short hop into town to The Esplanade, which has boasted a series of sightings near Cairns Base Hospital.

As we drive on the main road out of town to Chinaman Creek, just 5km south of the city, Gregory says he can sympathise with Nelson-Carr's dilemma over the culling question. He does not support a cull now, but believes the time will come: "Damned if you do, damned if you don't, that's her problem." He pulls up short of the bridge over Chinaman Creek where he saw a crocodile while driving by in 1998, just days after Elizabeth Pausa, 15, was pulled by relatives from the jaws of a croc that had her by the leg. It was night-time and she'd been paddling at a popular fishing spot near the bridge. Scores of crocs have been removed since.

There are still some there, though. That becomes clear the next night as a set of red eyes stare into our spotlight while Read steers his boat towards the bridge. Only about 1.5m, the crocodile stays tucked up in the mangroves, bobbing on the boat's wake. Mosquitoes descend. On the other side of the creek, a set of muddy plastic chairs dig into the bank. People still come down here at night for a fish and a beer.

It speaks volumes for the challenge ahead of Read. Despite six years of being exposed to the CrocWise campaign, some refuse to adapt – ignoring advice to camp at least 50m from the water's edge, cleaning fish at boat ramps, standing in water while fishing. People swear locals put towels over croc warning signs to go for a dip. A bit of legislative muscle has been added in the draft plan, with fines of up to \$7500 for ignoring warning signs, but Read admits some people take "unnecessary risks on a regular basis".

He is adamant, though, that the revised approach to dealing with crocs is the responsible way forward. All questions about the safety of "buzzing" are batted back, with Read insisting protocols will be in place for every scenario. He won't be drawn on culling but says it's nonsensical to think crocodiles can be held back to an imaginary point in the

ocean. It's not possible to croc-proof the populated coast, and any such policy would create a false sense of security.

Our tour of Trinity Inlet, Cairns's sprawling tidal estuary, takes a little over two hours in which we see three crocs. None massive, although the last one Read says could probably take an arm off. As we head back to the wharf, he touches my shoulder and reinforces the government message: "What you should take away from this is that it's not full of crocs." He can't give figures on how many of Queensland's 30,000 crocodiles live south of the Daintree, but says the numbers have increased – "no challenge of that". As for their movements around Cairns and further south, "couldn't tell you". Expensive tracking is required to answer those questions.

Read is restrained when I muse that the day could come when someone is killed by a crocodile on a beach and those calling for a cull head out with guns. "That's a concern, but I believe it's a mindset of 1985," he says, invoking the fallout after Wruck's death that same year. He doesn't dwell on the point. Far better to push the message that problem crocs will be removed, or shot, and that human life is paramount: "We are resolute about that."

**KEITH COOK HAS NO IDEA WHERE ALLAN WOULD** be among his 15,000 charges sliding about the Cairns Crocodile Farm. A 2m croc, Allan was given its name by locals from the Cape Tribulation area where the reptile was living until December last year. Then a Belgian tourist whom the locals also named – Stupid Stefaan – tried to lure the croc closer for a photo by stepping into the water and bouncing a stick. Stefaan Vanthournout, 24, was bitten on the knee and Allan was sent to a life of anonymity on the farm. It caused uproar among tourist operators and the pro-crocodile lobby, with some locals still angry a foolish person could force a croc's removal. Others thought it was about time. It was Read who found the crocodile was becoming habituated to humans and unpredictable, and decided it was safer to send it to a farm.

Accepting a problem crocodile like Allan is the only way Cook and his business partner, Alecia King, can increase the genetic pool of their farm stock. They run the state's biggest croc farm, with interests also in the Northern Territory, producing \$8 million worth of skins and meat annually. It's a long way from this hot, sweaty corner of North Queensland to Hermés Paris, but that's where the crocodile skins end up, converted to handbags for glitterati like Madonna.

But the politics of crocodile management is more fraught than Madonna's fashion choices, and Cook and King – who believe Northerners should learn to live with crocodiles – have their beef with Read as well. They, and the state's five other croc farmers, want to collect crocodile eggs from the wild – called ranching – but the government won't let them.

Cook hates the idea of seeming bitter, but he believes the close relationship between Read, the Environmental Protection Agency and Steve Irwin and his Australia Zoo has coloured the official view of ranching. Deemed sustainable in the Northern Territory and

Western Australia, ranching allows farmers to take a quota of wild harvests (25,000 eggs in the NT) and pay landowners a bounty. Cook says it gives Aboriginal communities and cattlemen, who have a testy relationship with crocodiles, an incentive to keep them around. It's also a de facto cull – roughly one per cent of croc eggs survive to adulthood in the wild.

However, zoo-owner Irwin was philosophically opposed to farming of wildlife, vowing to fight against those he called "Hitlers of wildlife". By December 2002, he'd signed an MOU with the EPA to conduct crocodile research and that, says Cook, is when steps towards ranching started hitting a brick wall. "His philosophy was one of 'you just don't touch 'em, you love 'em, and if you do touch 'em it's me who does the touching'. And that just spread through (the department of) Parks and Wildlife."

For his part, Read says he wants scientific proof ranching is sustainable in Queensland. Cook and King say they've spent \$50,000 answering that, but that the boundaries kept moving. The matter is now in the hands of the Department of Primary Industries.

"People want to consume crocodile products, we've got crocodile farms and it is possible to harvest sustainably, so where's the issue?" says Cook. He doesn't like making crocs perform for tourists, which is why he stopped that years ago, but he accepts there is a demand for it. "You may not want a crocodile handbag, but the fact you're stopping other people because you don't like it is just hypocrisy."

**CRIKEY, STEVE IRWIN WOULD BE CRANKY WITH** me. On the table sits a small selection of delicacies: bite-sized bits of croc on a stick with a dash of teriyaki sauce and a couple of sausages made from reptilian man-eater. It's feeding time at Dundee's, a Cairns restaurant named after that other world-famous croc hunter, and Australian wildlife is on the menu.

Slim Dusty warbles in the background as I bite into the firm, slightly chewy and subtly flavoured meat that needs the sauce to give it a lift. For a second I wonder if there's some hallucinogenic quality to the meat, certain I've just seen a 2m croc out of the corner of my eye. Someone's squeal alerts me to the joke: the waiters are shoving a stuffed crocodile under diners' armpits for fun.

The busloads of Asian visitors are enjoying the show, giggling and taking photographs, but there's barely a local in sight. Tourist trap, they'd say. But tourists can jet home with stuffed bellies and stuffed crocodiles, blissfully unbothered by the travels of the great survivor, the saltwater crocodile.

Queenslanders, though, and Northerners in particular, will be forced to focus on how to live with the crocodile. We've significantly changed our thinking since the indiscriminate hunting of 50 years ago, basked in the reflected glory of Irwin and his antics, told ourselves we understand the crocodile. We've watched the shows, bought the T-shirt. It's

been fun to love them at a distance. Now the saltwater crocodile is coming closer and in ever greater numbers, maybe to a beach near you. The question is: how will we respond?