



Encyclopedia of Life

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Saltwater Crocodiles Podcast and Scientist Interview

Crocodylus porosus

The city of Darwin in Australia's Northern Territory lies in the heart of crocodile country. In the 1950s, saltwater crocodiles were shot, skinned, and turned into shoes and handbags. After hunting was banned in the 1970s, crocodile numbers climbed. Now there's a croc for every man, woman, and child in Darwin. Can the human citizens learn to live alongside their toothy neighbors?

Transcript

Ari: From the Encyclopedia of Life, this is One Species at a Time. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

In Australia, the northern city of Darwin is home to the saltwater crocodile, or *Crocodylus porosus*. It can grow up to 20 feet long, and it's one of the deadliest predators on the planet. Getting humans and these giant reptiles to coexist isn't easy, and yet – it's happening.

To understand how, you have to know some history. Back around 1950, Darwin was a small town in the heart of crocodile country. And the animals? They had no protection.

Webb: Nobody cared about crocodiles, obviously. They were just vermin – they were pests.

Ari: Grahame Webb is a zoologist and he says that killing crocodiles actually provided people with income. The animals were turned into things like handbags and shoes.

Webb: Between 1946 and about 1958, something like 80,000 skins went out. And then the hunting just kept on going.

Ari: The crocodile population plummeted. By the 1970s, the animals were in danger of extinction in Australia. So the government banned hunting, to conserve the animals as an economic resource for future harvest – not because of some newfound love of crocodiles. And the public didn't object.

Webb: It was a bit like saying, "Do you want to protect the unicorns or something?"

Ari: ...because there were so few crocodiles around.

But today, things are very different. Jennifer Cunningham is a ranger with the government wildlife agency. She says the protection efforts worked so well that there are now just as many crocodiles in and around Darwin as there are people – 100,000 of each.

Cunningham: We are living with crocodiles more than ever before. The rural area of Darwin has spread right into crocodile territory.

Ari: And that can be dangerous. Just how dangerous became clear in 2009. An 11-year-old girl named Briony Goodsell was swimming in a rural part of Darwin – in a spot her family had told her was safe – when she was killed by a crocodile. Other people had died before, but the death of this little girl – so close to the population center in this part of Australia – hit residents hard.

Cunningham pages through the official report investigating Goodsell's death.

Cunningham: It says: "We must face the reality that dangerous, man-eating animals live amongst us – not just in the Outback but in populated areas of Darwin."

Ari: And so the government launched a new effort to help people live safely with crocodiles. It's called "Be Crocwise," and Cunningham helps lead it.

She works to educate those at greatest risk – fishermen, indigenous communities... and children.

Ari: On a recent Friday, Cunningham visited Humpty Doo Primary School in rural Darwin. She stood before a room filled with third and fourth graders.

Cunningham: What I'm here for today is to talk to you about crocodiles and crocodile safety.

Ari: This school is where 11-year-old Briony Goodsell was a student. But Cunningham gives the same talk to schools across the region.

Cunningham: What I'd like to know is whether you guys know anything about crocodiles?

Student 1: Crocodiles are very dangerous so you might want to stay away from the water's edge when your parents tell you to be safe.

Student 2: Some can live in people's backyards.

Student 3: They're dangerous, and they eat people.

Cunningham: They do. And that is why I'm here today.

Ari: Cunningham offers the kids practical safety messages, and explains that the animals are protected by law.

Cunningham: It's illegal to tease a crocodile. It's true. It's illegal to catch a crocodile and kill it.

Ari: And yet, not all saltwater crocodiles are protected. In fact, the government reserves the right to kill a crocodile it deems a menace.

That's the job of wildlife ranger Tommy Nichols. Throughout Darwin's harbor, he and his team have baited a couple dozen crocodile traps with large chunks of wild boar.

He approaches one of the traps on his boat.

Nichols: Yes, there is a small croc in there.

Ari: The trapped crocodile is about 6 feet long. Nichols and his team remove the animal from the trap, zip tie and tape its mouth shut, and prepare to haul it off to a local croc farm, where the animals are killed for their meat and skin. <use sounds of croc being handled in background>

This crocodile may not have threatened anyone, but Nichols explains that the government policy is to remove all crocodiles from Darwin's residential areas and its harbor.

Nichols: Everything in these areas, we take out, no tolerance. So it's to stop interaction between the public and crocodiles.

Ari: Now, no one wants to stop all human interactions with crocodiles. The animals are a huge draw for tourists. The economy of northern Australia actually benefits from having a healthy crocodile population. And for that to continue, says zoologist Grahame Webb, the public needs to feel safe.

Webb: The worst thing that can happen for crocodile conservation is more attacks. If you think you just can have crocodiles out there eating people and everyone's gonna put up with it, well, I got news for you, they're not gonna do it.

Ari: And so, the government's program to protect people from saltwater crocodiles? Webb says it's really an effort to protect crocodiles from people... to ensure that public opinion doesn't turn against crocodiles again. By reducing the likelihood of an attack and by teaching kids – who will one day be voting adults – to appreciate these animals, the government hopes to guarantee a future for these creatures.

Meet the Scientist

Meet Dr. Grahame Webb, the scientist featured in the Saltwater Crocodiles podcast:



Where do you work?

I work at Wildlife Management International Pty Limited, and Research Institute for the Environment and Livelihoods, Charles Darwin University, NT Australia.

What do you study?

Wildlife conservation, management, research and sustainable use, particularly crocodiles.

What are three titles you would give yourself?

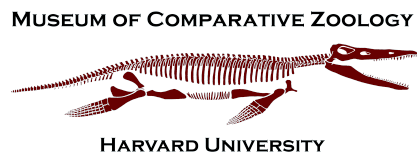
Zoologist, Wildlife Manager, Company Director.

What do you like to do when you are not working?

Writing, fishing, consulting.

What do you like most about science?

Unravelling complex multivariate problems in ways that allow accurate prediction.



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