

ATTENTION:

The Honourable Meaghan Scanlon,
Minister for the Environment and the
Great Barrier Reef and Minister for
Science and Youth Affairs; and

29 March, 2023

Support for Legislation Amendment
“Reckless Use of Crocodile Habitat”

Dear Minister,

I am a retired zoologist who has researched both species of Australia’s crocodiles on and off since 1971, first from an academic position at The University of Sydney and subsequently (1989-2007) as a Professor at the University of Queensland where I am an Emeritus Professor. About a quarter of more than 200 research publications I have authored/co-authored are on crocodiles. This has entailed a considerable amount of field work in river systems in the Northern Territory and on Cape York, much involving substantial travel by boat. I have therefore gained considerable familiarity with saltwater crocodiles and how to behave safely in their habitat and in retirement I wrote a large reference book on Crocodylians (see below). Also I have served several times on government committees reviewing crocodile management, most recently in 2021 as a committee member on the Queensland Chief Scientist’s Independent Evaluation of the Queensland Estuarine Crocodile Management Program.

As far as my attitude to wildlife is concerned, I am strongly conservation oriented, but am not a ‘bleeding heart’. Indeed, during more than 25 years of conducting aerial surveys for red and grey kangaroos, mostly in South Australia but in Queensland early on, I became a strong and very public advocate for the control of their numbers by harvesting, if done humanely. That’s another story, but my ‘wildlife philosophy’ is relevant to the topic at hand. It’s almost never good to kill wildlife, or any animal for that matter, unless there is a good purpose, and deaths should be stress and pain free.

I am writing because my opinion was sought in relation to a proposal being developed by the Environmental Defenders Office for a change in the Nature Conservation Act to address ‘reckless behaviour’ around crocodiles. EDO’s action was initiated in response to a particular event during February 2023 on the Bloomfield River in North Queensland. A member of the public apparently went into the river, ignoring warning signage and against warnings by local people, and filming himself meanwhile. He was bitten but his dog was taken (most probably the dog was the crocodile’s main target). Essentially, he was not being ‘Crocwise’, an umbrella term for guidelines from DES about behaving safely in crocodile habitat. As a consequence, DES staff shot two crocodiles nearby, consistent with requirements specified in Qld’s Crocodile Management Plan, and this was very distressing to the local indigenous community. The foolishness of this person’s action also cost a lot of money and time by DES staff, as well as the tragic and unnecessary death of two large crocodiles.

I was already aware that some people do see crocodiles as providing an opportunity to get a ‘hero’ video to post to social media, and there have been additional examples of what could be called ‘reckless behaviour’ in NQ since the Bloomfield River incident. Hence, I am willing to give my opinion.

I can see considerable merit in the case being launched by EDO to make some legislative changes that, if implemented, could provide a mechanism that would allow prosecution and punishment for such behaviour. I have seen an early draft showing some of the proposed amendments to the Act and I have been assured that the term 'reckless' is well defined in law. The amendments aim to allow penalties for 'recklessly entering crocodile habitat' or intentionally (I presume) 'disturbing a crocodile in crocodile habitat'. These actions will not apply to people undertaking the many other aquatic activities likely in crocodile habitat and being Crocwise while undertaking them.

My reasons for supporting what is proposed by EDO are as follows:

*Well publicised penalties could discourage reckless behaviour or intentionally disturbing crocs in croc habitat.

*The amendments will harmonise well with existing penalties that apply to misbehaviour around dingoes on Fraser Island and whales.

*It's common sense. Even small crocodiles give a nasty bite, and large ones can kill. It makes sense to give them a wide berth and not provoke them.

*The amendments should result in fewer incidents like the Bloomfield River one, which led to the unnecessary death of two large crocodiles and caused considerable distress to the local people.

*There is ever increasing anecdotal information about crocodiles having well-structured social interactions in which large males have a significant presence. Their removal, therefore, is likely to be destabilising. More solid information about their social structure is emerging, for example a paper from a UQ PhD study was published just this week titled "Long-term tracking reveals a dynamic crocodylian social system", open access at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2023.02.015>.

*Finally, but very importantly, crocodiles are commonly of totemic significance to indigenous people.

In short, I am strongly in support of the proposed amendments to the legislation as discussed.

Thank you for your consideration,

Kind Regards,

Gordon Grigg

Gordon Grigg PhD DSc FRSN FRZSNSW

Emeritus Professor of Zoology

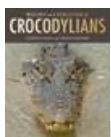
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Biology and Evolution of Crocodylians by Gordon Grigg & David Kirshner, 2015.

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