

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

Monday 20th March, 2023

Reference: Traditional Owners Response to Wujal Wujal Crocodile Incident 22/02/23

Dear Minister,

My name is Kathleen Walker and I reside on Country in Wujal Wujal. In writing this letter, I am representing the voice of Traditional Owners across our local clans Kuku Yalanji, Kuku Nyungul and Kuku Julunji that wish to speak for Country.

Crocodile Incident on Country

On the 22nd February 2023, an incident took place at Ayton boat ramp and required the Department of Environment and Science to respond. A member of the public, named Alistair MacPhee, entered the water to go for a swim with his dog despite warnings from members of our local community and prominent government warning signs about the dangers of Saltwater crocodiles (Bilngkumu). This man recorded the incident on his video camera, and it is now circulating online. This has only worked to tarnish the reputation of our otherwise safe community.

As a result of this man's actions, two of our totem animals have been killed against our wishes. And we are very concerned that there has been no action taken to penalise Alistair MacPhee. Because our environment has been permanently changed as a result. We believe this incident was provoked and avoidable. We are also concerned about the unnecessary death of the dog who was led to her death with no penalties attached to this aspect either. The CrocWise messaging on your signage clearly states, 'do not lead your pet to the water'.

This is an Aboriginal community, this is our land, and we have respect for the powerful nature of the crocodile. We live with dangerous animals like crocodiles and snakes. But we have respect for their predatory, natural, instincts. It is not the signage about crocodile safety, we have traditional knowledge, and it has never been problematic on this scale. Our people don't take the risk and swim in the water. This incident has highlighted the need to enforce crocodile safety messaging for tourists in our area. Without enforcing this, you may as well take down the signage. It isn't effective.

Since this time, I have been a representative spokesperson, along with my sister Francis Walker, to echo the point of view of Traditional Owners. We have done this in the name of safety and education. Our people also like going fishing, and our way of life is also centred around the river, but now the dynamic of our environment has changed. When our dominant crocodile is removed from the river, there will now be competition from other crocodiles competing for that territory. We have an on-going custodianship of the environment and sophisticated connection and

relationship to it. Our message is about saving lives and protecting our wildlife.

I would like to take the time to highlight the specific concerns shared by our wider community and Traditional Owners about how this situation has been inadequately handled.

The Importance of Bilngkumu (Crocodile) Totem

Our people have a culture that relates to the environment in a holistic way that also includes connections to powerful and significant totems. It is a continuous spiritual connection that has endured for millennia. Totems link our Bama (Aboriginal people) to the universe. It links us to air, land, water and geographic features. Traditional Owners hold this responsibility in our lifetime to do the right thing by our totems and pass that on to the next generation. This creates a balance of use and protection. The Bilngkumu is the spirit of our ancestors.

When you understand that everything is interconnected, then you can understand that the country talks to us. The country is our guide, our boss, our rangers. We are the responsible custodians of this lore. The euthanasia of the two crocodiles because of the incident at Ayton boat ramp has deeply saddened our people. It was completely unnecessary and avoidable.

Cultural Consultation

In a recent wildlife research paper around the current Crocodile Management Plan, it is clearly outlined that:

"...cultural beliefs are taken into consideration when making decisions. For example, if a problem crocodile is captured that is larger than 4m, it is recognised as an 'icon' crocodile and the department is required to formally consult with the traditional owners and enter into an agreement on the fate of the animal."

Despite this agreement, our Traditional Owners were not consulted on the fate of both crocodiles shot by the Department of Environment and Science because of the Ayton boat ramp incident. One of which was noted to be 4.2m by the wildlife authorities.

We respectfully dispute the below responses that Mr Michael Joyce, Manager Northern Wildlife Operations (DES), has since issued to members of the public advising that the crocodile was euthanised in consultation with First Nations People.

"The operation was conducted in consultation with the local community, including local representatives of the Queensland Police Service, local government and First Nations People."

Without the proper consultation process, when making wildlife management decisions on Country, you can risk overlooking and diminishing holistic indigenous connections to the environment. The Traditional Owners should have been properly consulted and this matter as required to be escalated to us. Transparency is necessary. Both to our people and to the public.

Whilst we have had the body of the 4.2m crocodile now returned for burial on Country, we are still lacking information on the whereabouts of the subsequent crocodile for burial.

Desired Outcomes

1. Legislation Amendments

Our group of Traditional Owners, named above, have now received representation from the Environmental Defenders Office to recommend legislation amendments with regards to crocodile management. We support these recommendations in the name of creating greater protection for our totem animal, the Saltwater crocodile, when human error is involved. We would like to see a no-tolerance approach to members of the public who take the risk in crocodile territory and for greater mitigation measures to be legislated.

2. Jabalbina Rangers

Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation are the facilitators of our Indigenous Ranger program which encompasses an area of approximately 126, 900 hectares of our Country. At this point in time, the Jabalbina Rangers do not have jurisdiction of the rivers which includes the management of crocodiles. This work is primarily outsourced to the Department of Environment and Science who do not hold the same cultural understanding of our Country or traditional knowledge. We would like to see the Jabalbina Rangers receive greater involvement and capacity building in terrestrial areas with an independent role to manage crocodiles on Country. Our community expectation is that our rangers are directly involved in this work to facilitate crocodile management, education, and awareness across the wider community whilst upholding our traditional knowledge and cultural aspects.

Via our Jabalbina Rangers, we would specifically like to be more informed on the fate of our totem crocodiles removed from Country as per the current Crocodile Management Plan:

1. How effective is community safety when removing crocodiles, specifically dominant males, in the rivers?

Through our traditional knowledge of crocodiles, and their behaviour, we are aware that this will create an imbalance in the environment and a less safe environment with juvenile crocodiles moving in to claim the territory. Can you please provide us with a balanced understanding of your decision-making process to inform whether we continue to report crocodiles through the QWildlife app. What is the reasoning behind crocodile removals if it doesn't ensure public safety?

2. What is the current capacity of approved crocodile farms or zoological facilities for icon crocodiles?

Are they currently full as per the media reporting, and if so, what is the fate of icon crocodiles in this instance?

3. What is the quality of life for relocated crocodiles on farms when removed from the wild?

We would like a more comprehensive understanding of the life of a farmed crocodile and the fate of these animals, keeping in mind they are our totem, and ancestor.

This will help to inform our knowledge of the wildlife management decisions and understanding of the current crocodile management plan.

3. Working Together and Transparency

We would like to see the Department of Environment and Science formally apologise to our Traditional Owners for the handling of this matter. We invite the representatives from the department here to Wujal Wujal to speak via our Jabalbina Rangers, to seek further education on cultural consultation. We welcome you here to our Country for further discussions on managing crocodiles more effectively with our people. We would like to work together for a better outcome for crocodiles and our people.

Working Collaboratively

Our objective in writing this letter is to inform the relevant policy makers of the widespread impact across the community on matters involving our land, culture, and wildlife. There is much to learn from this incident, which has deeply saddened our people.

While there is a law written and upheld by the wildlife authorities, there is Aboriginal lore to uphold and represent in our culture. We only hope that we can open the door for further discussions to work together more harmoniously. Both sides need to co-exist. If you look after the country, the country will look after you.

Respectfully,

Kathleen Walker
Yuku Yalanji Traditional Owner
Phone: 0475 837 489
10 Keim Street
Wujal Wujal
QLD 4895