

FOREWORD

Few animals are as charismatic as crocodylians, and as poorly understood by the general public. Everybody knows what a crocodile looks like, that they grow to awe-inspiring dimensions, and that they sometimes eat people. But once the conversation around the table goes beyond the danger of becoming a croc's dinner, all you are likely to hear is a succession of myths. Crocodiles, you are told, are just a special type of giant lizard; they are living fossils, unchanged since the Age of Dinosaurs. Cold-blooded, dim-witted, lazy, lying in wait for unwary African explorers. Simple and primitive.

This magnificent book explains why those statements are wrong, and why the truth about crocodylians is very different, and far more interesting. External appearances to the contrary, a crocodile is far more closely related to a bird than it is to a lizard. Look inside the scaly body, and you find a sophisticated, flexible physiology, exquisitely attuned to the challenges of life in the water, and at the water's edge. Recent research has transformed our understanding of crocodylian biology, and enabled us to view these leviathans with new eyes. Molecular studies have revealed new species, and clarified the evolutionary relationships among them. The unique internal organs of these

spectacular reptiles have long been a source of debate, but physiologists finally are unravelling the mysteries of their roles. Studies on structure and function are showing us what a croc is capable of – such as how hard it can bite, and how long it can stay underwater. Dedicated field studies, and observations of captive crocodylians, are revealing an unsuspected complexity in the private lives of crocs, in their mating systems and devoted parental care. And the relationship between humans and crocodiles has been changed by new, bold and remarkably successful approaches to crocodylian conservation.

The book captures the excitement of those new findings, within the broader context of what it means to be a crocodylian. Gordon Grigg has conducted pioneering research on crocodiles and alligators, and has been a major contributor to the explosion of new understanding about these enigmatic creatures. David Kirshner combines his expertise in crocodylian biology, with an artist's ability to capture the essence of the animal. The collaboration between these two men has produced an extraordinary volume that celebrates some of the most misunderstood species on our planet. Grigg's text captures the excitement of fieldwork, and of scientific discovery; of questions asked and answered, and of new questions that still