

CONSERVATION, COMMERCIALISATION AND CONFLICT

I was telephoned from Darwin in August 2012 by a friend to tell me about a scary event he had experienced a few days earlier over on Western Australia's Kimberley coast. He and his wife were a quarter of the way along their 51 day 4100 km voyage in a 20-foot aluminium open boat following the spectacular and remote coastline from Darwin to Derby. They were camped 50–60 m inland from the high water mark on a sandy beach in Parry Harbour, south of Cape Bougainville. At 2 a.m. he clambered out of the tent with a small flashlight (as one does) and found himself staring into the eyes of a 'huge' croc just 2 m (6 feet) away. He yelled and the crocodile did an immediate U-turn and took off at full speed towards the water. Tension in his bladder had probably saved his life. In the torchlight, there was another big croc at the low tide waters edge and a straight line of footprints led about 90 m from the water, directly into the south-east breeze and directly toward their tent. He and his wife were very unnerved and remained vigilant, sitting by the fire for the rest of the night. In the morning, they examined the tracks more closely (Fig. 14.1) and, with the tide higher, saw the two crocs patrolling around their boat. They estimated the size at 14 feet (4.3 m). They got away eventually in the afternoon, continued their journey and, once back in Darwin, phoned me in Brisbane. Even in the re-telling, some weeks later, my friend sounded anxious. Were they, he wanted to know, being stalked? No doubt they'd had a very lucky escape:

the animal had probably picked up their scent and followed it to the tent. A person had been dragged out of a tent in North Queensland in 2004. But I was not surprised that the croc had bolted: they are generally wary of humans. In hindsight, of course, my friends feel they should have set camp further from the water. But what distance is safe?

This 'crocodile-human interaction' had a happy ending. But many do not and, worldwide, a few hundred people die every year from 'croc attack' (Sideleau and Britton 2014). Of the 27 or so species of crocodylian, fewer than half have caused fatalities and only two are regarded as routine 'man eaters', yet this reputation colours most people's perception of them all. But crocodylians are also wonderful, fascinating, soul stirring and, in some eyes, beautiful, so they prompt, demand even, a desire to be conserved and protected. They are also valuable as a drawcard for tourists, for their skins and for their meat. Their danger and their commercial value have each contributed to their decline in today's world, augmented by ever-increasing loss of habitat with the expansion of agriculture and the human population explosion.

So, crocodylians are simultaneously a pest, a resource, and worthy of our admiration and care. This chapter discusses how we humans try to deal with their threat, lament and resist their diminution yet exploit them commercially and, often, try to use their commercial value as a force for their conservation.

*The Orinoco crocodile, *Crocodylus intermedius*, is the rarest of the New World crocodylians and is listed on the IUCN Red List as Critically Endangered. (Photo DSK taken at Zoo Miami)*