



HEALTH, ENVIRONMENT AND AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE

Members present:

Ms KE Richards MP—Acting Chair
Mr SSJ Andrew MP (virtual)
Mr CD Crawford MP (virtual)
Ms JM Bush MP (virtual)
Mr R Molhoek MP (virtual)
Mr ST O'Connor MP (virtual)

Staff present:

Dr A Cavill—Committee Secretary
Ms R Duncan—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC BRIEFING—INQUIRY INTO THE CROCODILE CONTROL AND CONSERVATION BILL 2024

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Friday, 21 June 2024

Brisbane

FRIDAY, 21 JUNE 2024

The committee met at 10.31 am.

ACTING CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open this public briefing for the inquiry into the Crocodile Control and Conservation Bill 2024. I am Kim Richards, the member for Redlands and acting chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders whose lands, winds and waters we all share.

Other committee members joining me today via videoconference are Mr Rob Molhoek, the member for Southport and deputy chair; Mr Sam O'Connor, the member for Bonney; Mr Stephen Andrew, the member for Mirani; the Hon. Craig Crawford, the member for Barron River; and Ms Jonty Bush, the member for Cooper, who is substituting for the member for Stretton.

The purpose of today's briefing is to assist the committee with its examination of the Crocodile Control and Conservation Bill 2024. The bill was introduced in the parliament on 22 May 2024 by Mr Shane Knuth MP, the member for Hill, and referred to this committee for detailed consideration and report. This briefing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath, but intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. The proceedings are being recorded and broadcast live on the parliament's website. I remind committee members that Mr Knuth is here to provide factual or technical information and information about policy background to the bill. Debate should be left to the floor of the House.

KNUTH, Mr Shane, Member for Hill, Parliament of Queensland (via videoconference)

TASSELL, Mr Brad, Senior Policy Adviser, Office of Shane Knuth MP (via videoconference)

ACTING CHAIR: I invite you to make an opening statement and then the committee will have some questions for you.

Mr Knuth: This is the Crocodile Control and Conservation Bill. I introduced it because it is necessary because North Queenslanders have had a—can I use the word 'gutful', Madam Acting Chair?

ACTING CHAIR: It is slightly unparliamentary, member for Hill; I think you know that.

Mr Knuth: I withdraw. North Queenslanders are losing more and more of our populated waterways to an increasing crocodile population. We are sick and tired of the threat of attacks, recent deaths and near-death encounters when we are just trying to enjoy our outdoor lifestyle. We never had to worry about the threat of crocodiles in our recreational waterways and beaches until at least the last 15 years. According to data from the Queensland Department of Environment, Science and Innovation, there were 1,216 estuary saltwater crocodile sightings reported in 2023 compared to just 176 sightings in 2010. There was an uproar when we heard there were 176 sightings back in 2010.

There is no denying that the crocodile population has exploded. They are encroaching more and more into populated waterways, creating an unacceptable risk to human life. Communities across North Queensland consistently report significant increases in crocodile numbers. At the present time many people do not report crocodile sightings because they know it is just a complete waste of time. Waterways which were previously regularly accessible are now infested with crocodiles. Many rowing and skiing clubs have closed their doors because crocodiles drove their members away. Tourism businesses are feeling the effects of increased crocodile numbers, which in turn increases the risk of operating their business. I am saddened that, while our tourism industry is trying to promote our beautiful beaches and waterways, when tourists arrive all they see are croc signs, beach closures and warnings that basically say, 'If you swim here you're potentially going to be ripped to pieces.'

For far too long we have had to endure a Brisbane-centric attitude towards crocodiles and the threat they pose to North Queenslanders. In the north of our state we wonder what the reaction would be if a few man-eating crocodiles were dropped in the Brisbane River. It is an insult to every North

Queenslander when we hear the same old line from Brisbane politicians and bureaucrats stating that we have to be croc wise. It does not matter how croc wise you are when you are threatened by crocs while you are trying to launch your boat at a boat ramp, paddle your kayak or canoe, or swim in a beach, lake or river that your parents swam in all their lives without fear. The solution to the problem so far—putting up warning signs or closing a beach or swimming hole—is unacceptable.

This bill achieves the policy objectives outlined by creating a Queensland Crocodile Authority, or QCA. With almost 80 per cent of the crocodile population located in Far North Queensland, it makes sense to decentralise the management of crocodiles from Brisbane to Far North Queensland. The bill would ensure that the Queensland Crocodile Authority is based in Cairns and that all staff are sourced regionally. The bill also creates an advisory committee to provide recommendations to the Queensland Crocodile Authority. It is important to ensure that Queensland has the best possible advice on managing its crocodile population while protecting Queenslanders and creating a crocodile industry that will financially benefit traditional owners.

Under the bill, the Queensland Crocodile Authority will be solely responsible for all aspects of crocodile management in Queensland, including a complete review of the current management zones under the Queensland Crocodile Management Plan and implementing a zero tolerance zone to remove all crocodiles reported in areas deemed as populated waterways by killing them or moving them to an appropriate crocodile farm or sanctuary. It is ridiculous that current practice dictates crocodiles will be observed for any dangerous behaviour before removal. Any crocodile in any waterway used by humans is a direct danger to human life and should be removed immediately.

The bill will also provide for the development of flexible policies on crocodile management through consultation with different individual Indigenous communities to deliver a specific designed management program considering cultural sensitivities; increase current allowable egg harvesting limits which would be reviewed annually; oversee egg harvesting permits with incentives specific to Indigenous communities to set up egg harvesting enterprises; allow private landowners to contact the QCA to have crocodiles removed from their property; and conduct controlled annual crocodile removal programs along Queensland's populated east coast to constrain population growth and reduce crocodile numbers in populated regions.

Other views were expressed that the policy objective of keeping humans safe from crocodiles could be achieved by relocating any problem crocodiles to other locations. However, a joint Department of Environment, Science and Innovation and CSIRO study recently found that Queensland crocodiles like to stay close to their homes, with most remaining within 50 kilometres of where they hatched. In fact, most crocodile parents and offspring in Queensland are found within 10 kilometres of each other. While crocodiles are capable of moving anywhere along Queensland's coastline, the study also showed that most of the 20,000- to 30,000-strong population are in the Far North.

Consultation with experts also suggested that crocodiles may become more dangerous once they have been relocated; therefore, crocodiles should only be relocated to crocodile farms, sanctuaries or properly managed reserves. Consultation also revealed that, because there are so many crocodiles that require removal to keep people safe, it is very unlikely there would be a desire from existing crocodile farms or sanctuaries to house all of these crocodiles. Based on extensive consultation and recent studies, it is clear that a combination of killing and relocation to farms or sanctuaries is the best way to achieve the policy objectives.

The Crocodile Control and Conservation Bill 2024 would ensure that all crocodiles are immediately removed by an authorised person if located in a populated waterway. I note that, in deciding to declare a populated waterway, the Queensland Crocodile Authority must have regard to the public's recreation or commercial use and enjoyment of the waterway. This removal may involve killing or relocating the crocodile to an authorised crocodile farm or crocodile sanctuary. It would also involve the removal of crocodiles immediately from urban or public areas commonly used by humans for recreation. In unpopulated waterways, landowners who have waterways running through their properties will also be able to apply to the Queensland Crocodile Authority to request the immediate removal of crocodiles by rangers or approved qualified persons. If managed responsibly, crocodiles have the potential to be a great asset for Queensland rather than just a danger to people.

As well as protecting human lives, the Crocodile Control and Conservation Bill 2024 aims to create a significant and sustainable crocodile industry in Queensland. Currently only 5,000 eggs are allowed to be harvested in Queensland under a 10-year pilot program which ceases in 2028 compared to 90,000 annually in the Northern Territory. Evidence suggests that egg harvesting can help sustain crocodile populations rather than diminish them and will create a huge economic opportunity which is currently untapped in Queensland.

Indigenous landowners will likely see the value of crocodile eggs and the income they can generate. If there are crocodile eggs on their land they can choose to leave the eggs, harvest the eggs and sell them, or have someone else pay to come on the land and harvest them. Significantly, the Crocodile Control and Conservation Bill 2024 will also give power to Indigenous landowners to apply to manage crocodiles on their land. Indigenous landowners have a connection with, and understanding of, the land and should be empowered to manage that land as they see fit. Indigenous landowners will be empowered with regard to all aspects of crocodile management. If a crocodile is on their land they may choose to have it relocated to a farm or crocodile sanctuary; let it remain on the property; choose for it to be euthanised by shooting, harpooning or using traditional methods; or accept payment from a quota of high-end clients who wish to live harvest the crocodiles.

This bill provides real opportunities for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by providing jobs and economic development from the fast growing crocodile industry, which is estimated to be worth more than \$100 million a year in the Northern Territory. Recently we heard calls from Indigenous landowners in the Northern Territory to be at the forefront of new developments in crocodile management, including allowing a quota of high-end clients into Arnhem Land to hunt saltwater crocodiles. I will quote from an article, which I will table.

ACTING CHAIR: Is leave granted? It is.

Mr Knuth: The article states—

'People do want to live and prosper on their own homelands,' ...

'And what better way to be able to do that than as part of their land management and conservation efforts?'

...

'We are seeking the support and approval towards the sustainable use of saltwater crocodile live harvest commercially,' ...

'You have the potential to bring in high-paying clients to live harvest saltwater crocodiles around our community areas ... the opportunities there will be very rewarding.'

...

'We are reframing it to be more of a sustainable management system, as part of our land management and conservation efforts.'

The Northern Territory environment minister, Kate Worden, said that the Northern Territory government is 'open to those ideas', further stating—

Whether it's trophy hunting or it's starting a small enterprise in a remote community, what we do want is to get Aboriginal people across the Northern Territory working.

What a refreshing attitude and one the state government department should take notice of.

I want to stress that the KAP's policy has never been about wiping out the crocodile population; it is about restoring the balance between managing the crocodile population and protecting human life. Most importantly, the bill places greater value on human life by responsibly reducing the risk of crocodile attacks as much as possible. It aims to eliminate from our waterways any crocodile that poses a threat to human life while continuing to protect crocodiles from becoming extinct as a species. Ultimately, the people who live in North Queensland are best placed to manage crocodiles.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much, member for Hill, for your opening statement. With regard to the document that you tabled, given that this is via videoconference, could you send that through via email? That would be appreciated.

Mr Knuth: Yes, I will do that. It is dated 24 April 2024 from the ABC. I might read out more later but not of that length.

ACTING CHAIR: If you can send that through to the secretariat, that would be terrific. Deputy Chair, over to you for the first question.

Mr MOLHOEK: My first question is: why is the crocodile population a problem now if it was not a problem 20 or 30 years ago?

Mr Knuth: Going back 20 or 30 years, they were believed to be a problem at that time. A lot of crocs were shot. That reduced the numbers significantly in the 1970s. When we were growing up, as kids we could swim in any waterhole or swimming hole throughout North Queensland. We never even thought about crocodiles. We never even saw a croc sign. Families would go to places like Lake Placid to swim, but it has got to the point that if you swim there now you are potentially going to die. If you swam across the Tully River at present, you will die. There are no ifs or buts about it. People used to go spearfishing in the Tully River. People used to go skiing on the Johnstone River at Innisfail. Now if they ski on that river they will die. That is the situation we have at present. It is not an illusion.

The poor tourism industry are trying to promote our pristine waterways. When tourists arrive they see all of these croc signs and they do not know. They are unsure. They are told, 'If you come here, you have these pristine waters.' Then they are told, 'If you do swim there, you will die.' We need to get back to the situation we had in the eighties and nineties. Even in the year 2000, if a tourist operator was asked by a tourist, 'Can I swim in that water?' the tourist operator would say, 'Yes, you can swim in the water but it is a risk. Keep your eye out for crocodiles.' Now the tourist operator tells tourists, 'You will die.' They are the circumstances we are under at present. That is the difference from the 1970s to now.

Mr MOLHOEK: There are other hazards though, aren't there, to swimming in northern Queensland such as marine stingers? I lived in Darwin for three years and we never went swimming at the beach because there was always the risk of marine stingers. How much of it is the hazard of living in a tropical climate and how much of it is lack of control?

Mr Knuth: I have been stung by many Portuguese jellyfish. I know a lot of people who have been stung by stingers. That is always a concern. Crocodiles not only lurk in the waters but also jump out of the water to try to grab you out of a boat. That happened in Cardwell two months ago. Marine stringers are nothing in comparison.

I was talking to the president of the East Palmerston progress association. If you understand the geography of the area, the North Johnstone River travels up the Mount Bartle Frere range or around the East Palmerston area. Five years ago, he and his kids used to swim in the creeks that run into the North Johnstone River. Those crocodiles travel up the river. He said to me the other day, 'Shane, we can no longer swim in those beautiful crystal clear, freshwater creeks. We have seen three- or four-metre crocodiles. I cannot have my seven- and eight-year-old daughters swimming there anymore.' That is a recreational activity that has been taken from us. I could name numerous freshwater swimming holes that crocodiles have now taken over where we have lost the opportunity for kids to get out there and swim, snorkel and go spearfishing like we used to do. We cannot do that anymore, Rob. That is the situation we have.

This bill is to claim back our waterways. I want to say this, and this is one of the frustrating things: there were news reports of women kayakers in Cairns who were stalked by a 14-foot croc. They go out together and enjoy kayaking. That is their exercise. The next minute they have this man-eating crocodile that is trying to track them down and pull them off the kayak. They race to shore. That probably enabled the authorities to have a look because it was showing a little bit of aggression. When we are kayaking or swimming and the crocodiles are in our waterways, if they do not show aggression then just leave them there. We have had a 14-foot croc hanging around the Kurrimine Beach boat ramp, stalking people launching their boat. One of the things that frustrates me is who gets the blame? The fishers because someone said they saw someone fillet a fish and throw it in the water, so it is their fault. They should get in there and remove that crocodile as fast as they possibly can because people's lives are more important than that crocodile.

Mr ANDREW: Member for Hill, I feel your pain. I removed two 4½-metre crocodiles from out of this area just recently. What are your thoughts about livestock? You did not mention too much about livestock. We are losing a lot of livestock on the Fitzroy River. Are you finding that happening up there as well? That is something that could be added to this.

Mr Knuth: Member for Mirani, I am glad you asked that question. In my opening address I mentioned that I would bring that up for discussion. That is the situation we have at present. There is a canefarmer in my electorate and, if I mentioned his name, a lot of you would know him. I went out to his place and he said, 'Shane, I can take you for a drive around the cane farms and I will show you three crocodiles in the bore drains.' We went around and there were three crocodiles in his bore drains. This is not dams or anything like that. Landowners have all these waterways going through their properties—they have bores and dams—and they are full of crocs. There is nothing they can do about it. If they report it to the authorities—bad luck—there is nothing they can do about it. This bill gives a landowner who has crocs on his property the ability to contact the Queensland Crocodile Authority to have that crocodile removed. Even if it is not showing aggression or it has not taken his dog or cows, that ability would be available under this bill. It is probably not going to solve all of those problems, but it is going to make a big difference.

Mr CRAWFORD: Thanks, Shane. There is different zoning up here. Obviously the Cairns Esplanade is treated differently from the cape. Does this bill propose to change any current zoning for where a croc is removed, or is this proposing that all crocodiles be removed? Just work me through that, Shane.

Mr Knuth: One of the most important aspects of this is the Queensland Crocodile Authority. They are to manage all aspects of crocodile management throughout the state. They will be responsible. I will read out some of the functions in the bill. The director of the Queensland Crocodile Authority has the following functions—

- (a) to take measures to minimise injuries and deaths caused by crocodiles in the State;
- (b) to authorise persons, in any part of the State, to operate—
 - (i) a crocodile farm; or
 - (ii) a crocodile sanctuary;
- (c) to decide the number of crocodile eggs that may be harvested each year in any part of the State;
- (d) to authorise persons to harvest crocodile eggs in any part of the State;
- (e) to decide the number of crocodiles that may be culled each year in any part of the State;
- (f) to authorise persons to carry out the culling of crocodiles in any part of the State;
- (g) to authorise persons to, for the prompt management of crocodiles, kill or relocate crocodiles in any part of the State;

The bill also allows Indigenous communities to have a person come on their property to kill the crocodile or they will kill it. With regard to zoning, that will be significantly under the control of the Crocodile Authority. In other words, the Crocodile Authority will designate areas which they deem to be a populated waterway. That must have regard to public safety and the public's recreational or commercial use and enjoyment of the waterway.

This is not about zones. This is about the authority adding to the zones, improving the zones and deeming what is a populated waterway. That covers it. In the end the Crocodile Authority will be responsible of declaring those zones. That is a very good question. Eighty per cent of the crocodiles are in the Far North. This is why we believe it is so important to have representation here in North Queensland. You are looking at up to 30,000 crocodiles or even more. The Crocodile Authority will make those determinations.

Mr CRAWFORD: Shane, with respect to somewhere like the Daintree River, which I know you know well, there is a combination of tourism. There are boats that take people on crocodile sighting trips and that sort of thing, and 30 or 40 kilometres south we have Port Douglas with its beaches. How would this policy manage the Daintree River, where we are trying to protect human lives but also allow tourists to see a crocodile? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Mr Knuth: We are talking about populated waterways and the protection of tourists. This is about identifying populated waterways throughout our state and what is deemed a popular waterway. This is why we will hand it over to the Queensland Crocodile Authority to make that determination. If you are in the Cairns area and you are out there in your kayak and there is a croc, that croc has to be removed. In Indigenous communities, they have the opportunity to have social and economic development in those areas which can improve the economic value to those Indigenous communities. The Queensland Crocodile Authority will be able to say, 'That is going to be a populated area; that is not,' but they also have advisers who will give advice to that authority. They are non-paid. There are different groups involved in the tourism industry. There are Indigenous communities. Recreational users will be involved in that advisory committee. We have a big state. It is a big area. Populated waterways need to be defined. I understand that there are issues that relate to where people want crocodiles removed. They want a sustainable industry, particularly the croc cruises. However, that is what this authority is all about—to define those areas but also to get advice.

Mr MOLHOEK: In the case that a community wanted to develop a croc farm or some sort of croc industry adjoining their community—say, Kowanyama or Napranum or somewhere like that—would the Crocodile Authority and the community be subject to a review by local council in terms of compliance with planning laws? Would there be a need to look at things like an impact assessment that would be reviewed?

Mr Knuth: It depends on what you would call it—whether it is Indigenous land or land that is owned by the state or the council. The functions of the director of the Crocodile Authority are to take measures to minimise injuries and deaths caused by crocodiles in the state. That is the No. 1 priority. The next function is to authorise persons in any part of the state to operate a crocodile farm or a crocodile sanctuary. The next one is to decide the number of crocodile eggs that may be harvested each year, and the list goes on with regard to the involvement of that Crocodile Authority. There will be some crossovers. That is the whole idea of having a Crocodile Authority. That is where some of the other authorities can engage with the Crocodile Authority, with the advisers advising the Crocodile Authority.

Mr MOLHOEK: That authority would not have the supreme power or a power to override other planning laws or zoning laws, would they? It would have to be by negotiation.

Mr Knuth: In the management of crocodiles, there will be some sort of planning laws. Particularly with the Indigenous communities, they are separated from the general council structure. There will be some. That is the great thing about having the Crocodile Authority. They will be responsible for working with those crossovers, if need be.

Mr MOLHOEK: Have there been any costings done on what it would cost annually to operate such an authority? How many employees would be required? Where would they be located? Have you looked at what it would cost over 10 years?

Mr Knuth: I remember 1 William Street being built. This bill means that people who work there will not be managing crocodiles. They are currently managing crocodiles from 1 William Street. Under this bill that will not happen. This authority will be based in North Queensland. As you will have noted, members of the advisory committee will not be paid. In terms of the cost factor, it is probably going to cost less because we are at the grassroots—we are right where the activity is happening. The Crocodile Authority will have that general knowledge. They will be hearing from people every day of the week. They will be hearing from tourist operators. They will be hearing from the general public about swimming areas. They will be hearing what is on the radio. There are numerous complaints and reports and they will be hearing what people are talking about. They are right there. That is going to save money. They will have the capacity to do their job and function properly.

Mr MOLHOEK: Maybe this is a question on notice and maybe it is of the department. It would be interesting to know what the state currently spends on crocodile management and the cost of that administration.

ACTING CHAIR: My understanding was that crocs were already managed from Cairns, but I could be wrong. I am happy to have that information provided on notice, if that is okay with you, member for Hill.

Mr MOLHOEK: It might have to be a question of the committee to the department. Perhaps we could ask for a briefing on that.

Mr Knuth: It would be good to take that on notice. They will be there on the ground dealing with the issues and hearing about the issues. Basically it is going to cost less because it will not be run from William Street. It will be there in Cairns where it is all happening.

Mr MOLHOEK: We can ask those questions.

ACTING CHAIR: We can indeed. Thank you very much. That concludes our questions and the time for these proceedings. Thank you for the information you have provided today. It is very valuable. Thank you to Hansard and thank you to the secretariat for their help today. A transcript of today's briefing will be available in due course. I note the question taken on notice. Member for Hill, if you can provide some assistance by responding—

Mr Knuth: What question on notice was that, Madam Acting Chair?

ACTING CHAIR: The member for Southport's question.

Mr Knuth: That question would have to be put as a question on notice. We would have to put that question on notice to get that information.

Mr MOLHOEK: I think what the member for Hill is trying to say is that that question on notice needs to be put to the department.

Mr Knuth: That is correct.

ACTING CHAIR: Deputy Chair, if you want to send that question through to the secretariat and we will follow up from this end. That being the case, there are no questions taken on notice.

Mr Knuth: I think the minister responsible will not be able to respond to that within four weeks. I would say that they might take until the end of the year before they are able to get that information because it is that huge.

ACTING CHAIR: We will see how we go, member for Hill. Leave it with us. Member for Hill, if you could ensure that you email through to the secretariat the document that you tabled, that would be terrific. I declare this public briefing closed. Thank you very much, everyone, for your time.

The committee adjourned at 11.08 am.