

NT government unveils new saltwater crocodile management plan, stops short of mass culls



By Matt Garrick

Crocodile Attacks

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Tabled by: MR SHANE KNUTH MEMBER FOR HILL
At: OLD PARLIAMENT, CR3
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CROC CULL DEBATE

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The NT community is divided over whether there should be a culling of crocodiles, after thousands moved into areas where there were previously none. (Matt Garrick)

In short: After heated debate about crocodile culling, the NT government has announced a substantial increase to its annual croc removal quota.

The figure of 1,200 crocodiles per year stops well short of a widespread cull of the species.

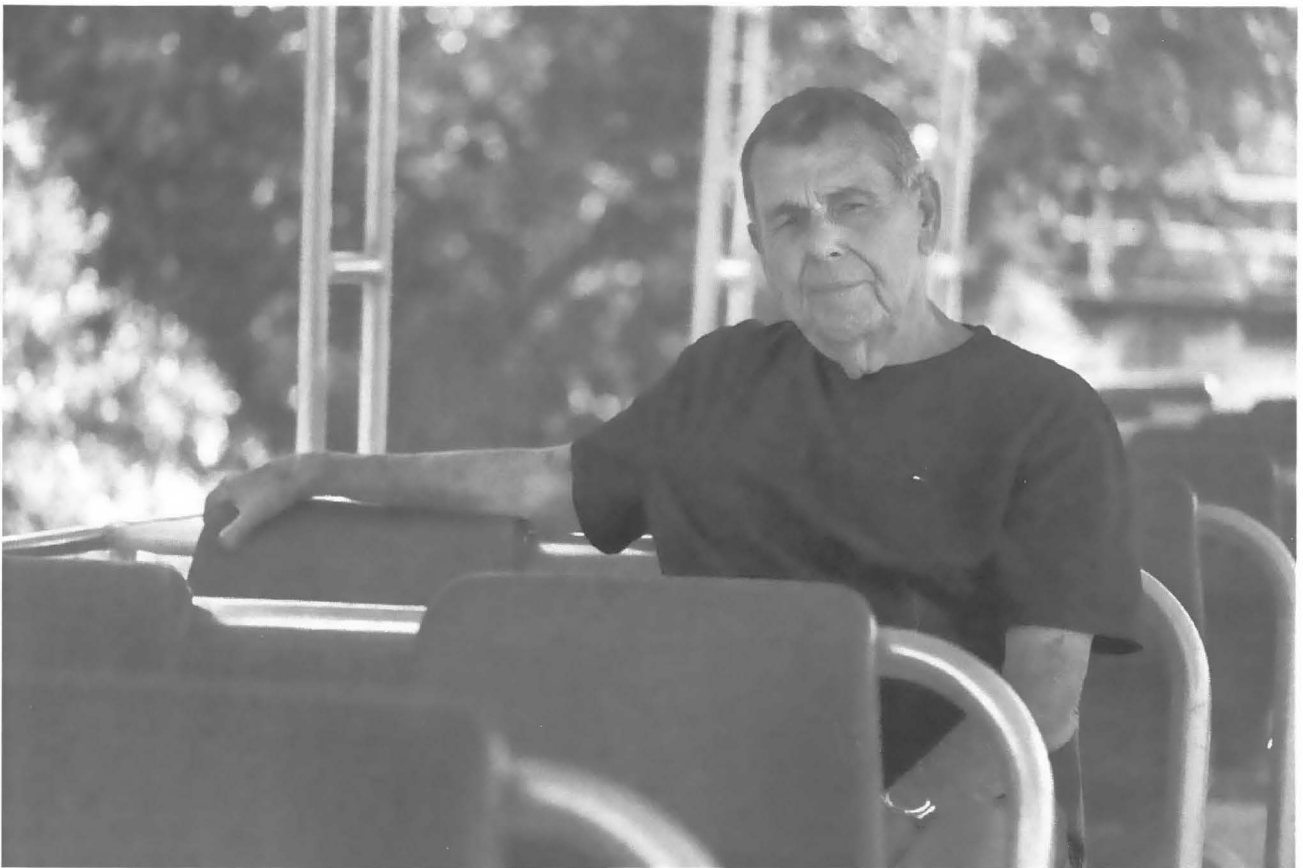
What's next? The NT's new crocodile management plan also seeks an "increased focus" on working with remote Aboriginal groups to better involve them in the lucrative croc industry.

On the murky waters of the Adelaide River, saltwater crocodile cruise operator Tony Blums has watched the rise of the iconic but deadly species over the past four decades.

WARNING: This story contains the name of an Aboriginal man who has died, used as per the wishes of his family.

"At the present time, we now have a situation where every 50 to 100 metres, we've got a crocodile pretty much over two metres in length," Mr Blums said.

His observation isn't outlandish.



Original Jumping Crocodile Cruise owner Tony Blums sees culling as an "unwinnable war". (ABC News: Tristan Hooft)

Since saltwater crocs were protected from mass culls and hunting in the Northern Territory in 1971, the species has boomed from 3,000 to an estimated population of 100,000.

Now, in a bid to rein in the threat of saltwater crocodiles to human safety, the ABC can reveal hundreds more are set to be removed from Top End waterways every year.

The Northern Territory government will allow 1,200 crocs to be removed annually, a figure being unveiled in its newly finalised 10-year crocodile management plan.

The new quota is a substantial increase from the previous figure of 300, but stops short of a widespread cull of the species, a possibility put out to public debate earlier this year.

The decision comes less than a year after a 67-year-old tourist was bitten by a two metre saltwater crocodile at Wangi Falls – a popular tourist destination south of Darwin.

NT Environment Minister Kate Worden said the latest move "was about public safety".

"We want to be able to go to our national parks and know that there's waterholes that we can safely swim in," Ms Worden said.

"So that's what we will be doing, increasing that live harvest, taking out the juveniles, taking out some older crocodiles as well, to make sure that those public spaces are really safe."



Kate Warden says the culling increase will help keep people safe. (ABC News: Tristan Hooft)

The government is also making changes so more crocodile eggs can be taken from the wild.

"We've talked to scientists, we've talked to people in the industry," Ms Worden said.

"We've got scientific evidence to back up those decisions."

Plan to fuel remote crocodile economy

The new 10-year management plan also seeks an "increased focus" on working with traditional owners to help fuel the crocodile economy on Aboriginal land and sea country.

One of those who has long been calling for more involvement of Aboriginal landowners in crocodile management is Jida Gulpilil, son of the trailblazing Yolŋu actor David Gulpilil, who starred in landmark Australian films including *Crocodile Dundee*.

"People do want to live and prosper on their own homelands," Mr Gulpilil said.

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

Mr Gulpilil wants his business in north-east Arnhem Land, Gupulul Marayuwu Aboriginal Corporation, to be at the forefront of the new developments, including by allowing a quota of "high-end clients" into Arnhem Land to hunt for saltwater crocodiles.

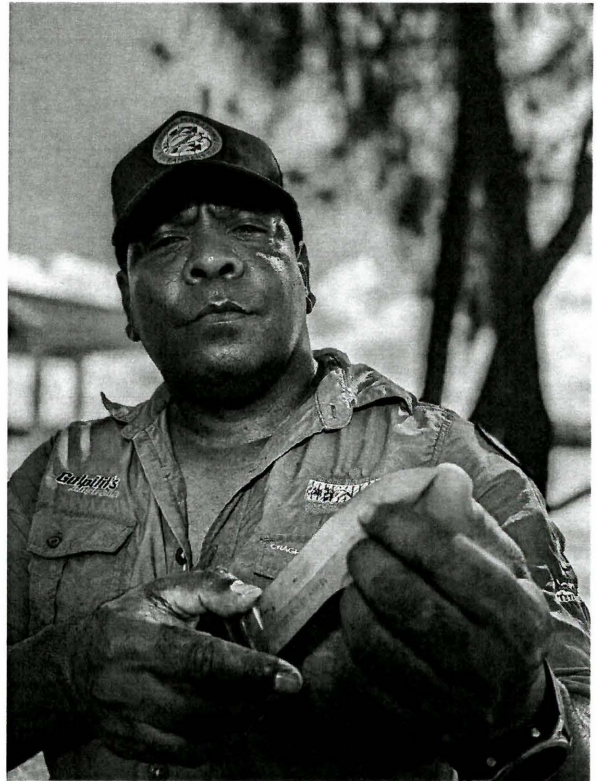
"We are seeking the support and approval towards the sustainable use of saltwater crocodile live harvest commercially," he said.

"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."

Mr Gulpilil said it would be a vastly different model to so-called "safari hunting" but would allow permitted clients to take a trophy such as a skull or a skin of a crocodile pegged for removal.

"This is not Africa, this is Australia, we don't do safari," he said.

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



Jida Gulpilil supports hunting saltwater crocodiles in Arnhem Land. (ABC News: Marton Dobras)



The population of saltwater crocodiles in the Top End has boomed since protection in 1971. (ABC News: *Tristan Hooft*)

Ms Worden said the NT government is "open to those ideas."

"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," she said.

The crocodile industry is worth an estimated \$25 million in the NT annually.

Experts 'shocked' over culling debate

Crocodile attack specialist Brandon Sideleau said while he doesn't "have any big problems" with the NT government's new live crocodile harvest quota, he had some reservations.

"I do have a problem if they're going to be removing exceptionally large animals, unless they're in an area that poses a serious danger to people," Mr Sideleau said.

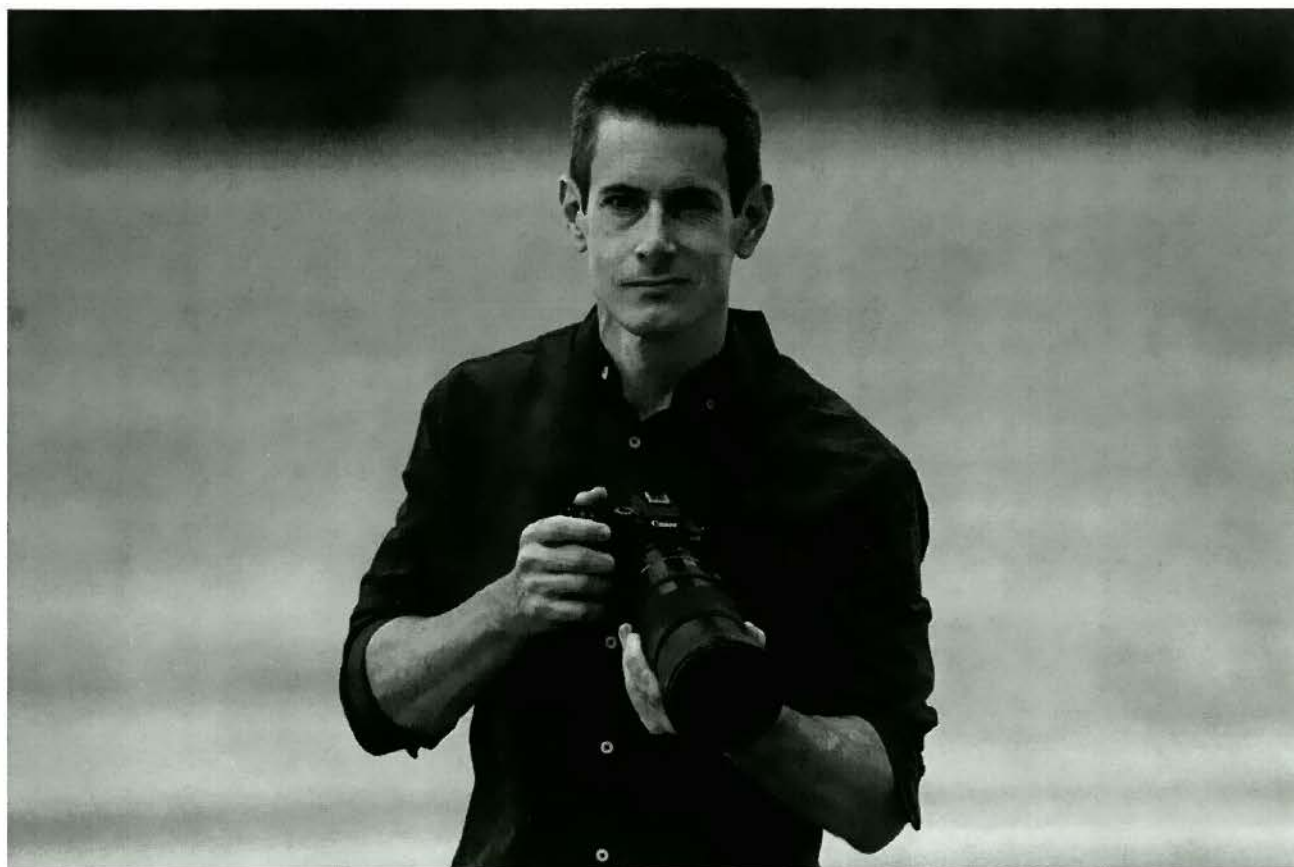
"A lot of these crocodiles are iconic, they're very important to tourists ... and they're also very ecologically important, they keep the other

crocodiles in check."

Mr Sideleau was critical of the NT government's decision last year to reignite a public debate about culling the species, which he called "disappointing and irresponsible".

"We haven't had a fatal attack since 2018 – that's the longest we've gone without a fatal attack since the 1990s," Mr Sideleau said.

"That's significant, it means the [former] management plan really works, and I was very shocked."



Crocodile attack specialist Brandon Sideleau was 'shocked' by the NT's recent culling debate. (ABC News: Tristan Hooft)

NT crocodile management pioneer Grahame Webb said he also believed the culling debate was triggered for overtly political reasons.

"In this case we had one tourist bitten by a crocodile, and suddenly it became a political issue, with some of the politicians saying 'oh, there's too many crocodiles, we've gotta cull all the crocodiles'," Mr Webb said.

Ms Worden denied the recent culling debate was fuelled by politics.

"We have seen a big increase of crocodiles, saltwater crocodiles who are an apex predator and a risk to human safety," she said.

"You speak to anybody here ... it's becoming an issue for people.

"So it's timely that as a government, we look at that, and see what's possible to make sure that we can decrease that risk."

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