




Speech By
Charis Mullen

MEMBER FOR JORDAN

Record of Proceedings, 26 March 2019

SAFER WATERWAYS BILL

 **Mrs MULLEN** (Jordan—ALP) (6.19 pm): I rise to make a contribution on the Safer Waterways Bill 2018 introduced by the member for Hill. The aim of this legislation as per the explanatory notes is to place greater value on human life than on that of crocodiles and to responsibly reduce the risk of crocodile attack as much as possible. I would like to explore this aim of a responsible approach, because I fear this bill is not about a responsible approach to the issue of crocodile management in Queensland but one based on fearmongering, hysteria and political expediency.

The explanatory notes speak of significant consultation on this bill. However, there were numerous stakeholders who advised the parliamentary committee that they were not consulted on this bill. David White, the owner of Solar Whisper Wildlife Cruises, indicated in his submission—

There was a travelling road show that spoke hysterical stories to the public, if this was the bills consultation process then that was erroneous.

Australia Zoo stated—

... the Bill's authors have purported to have consulted widely but have made no contact with Queensland researchers who have carried out the world's longest continuous study of crocodylian behaviour—Australia Zoo and the University of Queensland.

Through the inquiry process, the parliamentary committee did engage with crocodile experts, the crocodile farms, the tourism industry, local government, traditional owners, farmers, conservation groups, recreational groups and the general public. We held five very well attended public hearings in Brisbane, Cairns, Port Douglas, Townsville and Mackay. We also visited two crocodile farms and consulted with experts in both the Queensland and Northern Territory government departments on crocodile management plans and policy to get a thorough understanding of what is happening from a national regulatory and economic perspective.

I appreciate that some of the stakeholders and the individuals we met over the course of our inquiry did support the culling of crocodiles and I do not make light of their concerns. It was important to hear from tourism operators in Far North Queensland who did have divergent views on the impact that crocodiles were having from an economic perspective. There were those who believed that the enjoyment of beaches and marine environments is critical to continued tourism growth and that a single significant incident involving a crocodile could have ramifications for the tourism industry. There were other tourism operators who believe that crocodiles are an asset to Queensland and any consideration of killing these animals is not only bad for business but could tarnish our state's reputation overseas which can also be devastating for the industry. It was no surprise that conservation groups did not support the bill and their views can be summed up in the submission of the Environment Council of Central Queensland, who stated—

It is irresponsible and impractical to consider that the way to keep people safe is to kill anything that might pose a danger to them. A better way to achieve safety is to provide ongoing education to tourists and to people living near crocodiles.

I would like to turn now to a couple of aspects of the bill. The member for Hill advised that the bill achieves the policy objectives by creating a Queensland Crocodile Authority. There were a number of questions raised by the committee regarding this proposal such as how this authority would be funded and resourced—would it be a new allocation of funding or be met from the current budget of the department of environment? When asked about this, the member for Hill commented—

You do not have an understanding, but I do. We are not going to question where the money is going to come from, because the most important thing is protecting lives, protecting children.

Whilst I, of course, would agree that protecting lives is a priority, as a member of the Legislative Assembly, I would think that knowing where the money is going to come from to create a new authority through legislation you have drafted is probably something you should know.

Clause 27(2)(j) would only entitle wholly owned Australian entities to farm crocodiles, and we were told this would have a significant impact on the viability of the crocodile farming industry. This is without going into the detail of how the culling and hunting provisions proposed in the bill are likely to breach international, national and state obligations—and would therefore negatively impact on the ability of Queensland crocodile farms to export crocodile products.

There is more that I could say around education, the harvesting of eggs and the statistics that show that in Queensland you are more likely to be killed by bees and cattle than crocodiles. Instead, I would like to finish on this note. During the public hearing in Townsville, we had the opportunity to hear from two local canefarmers—Mr Vitale and Mr Venables. I have to say, sadly, that my preconceived view was that they would argue for a culling of crocodiles. Instead, we heard the following from Mr Vitale—

As far as I am concerned, there is not a problem with crocodiles: there is a problem with people. Politicians, newspapers and other people like that cause crocodiles more trouble than anyone else. If politicians did not look for votes all the time they would not be bragging and bashing our ears about crocodiles.

I received an email from Mr Venables shortly after the parliamentary committee recommended that the Safer Waterways Bill not be passed. Mr Venables wrote—

Dear Charis, You may or may not remember me but I was present at the Townsville meeting into the Safer Waterways Bill and am one of the two cane farmers who spoke out for protecting the crocodiles and rejection of the bill. I had just had 2 crocodiles killed behind my farm. Anyway I must say how delighted I was when this bill was rejected and would like to congratulate you for your part in the decision.

As the member for Hill stated, perhaps some do not have a true understanding of what is happening with crocodile management, but perhaps those two canefarmers from Townsville have some idea. I urge the House to reject this bill.