




Speech By
Hon. Mark Furner

MEMBER FOR FERNY GROVE

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SAFER WATERWAYS BILL

 **Hon. ML FURNER** (Ferny Grove—ALP) (Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries) (5.40 pm): I rise to oppose this bill and the reasons will become quite obvious later on in my contribution. The Katter party has introduced this private member's bill, and I understand that there are some legitimate concerns out there from some individuals, some community groups and commercial entities who interact with crocodiles on a regular basis. I have had similar concerns raised with me in my capacity as Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries as I have travelled the many kilometres around our beautiful state. In fact, two canefarmers provided evidence to the committee and these statements are contained in the report. Vince Vitale, a canefarmer from Herbert River, summed up his opposition to the bill stating—

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.

He summed it up well. Another canefarmer from the Herbert River, Raymond Venables, agreed, advising that he was happy with the current management program and that the current bill is an 'abomination' and 'should not even be considered'.

The issues raised in this bill have been through a comprehensive analysis. I acknowledge the committee and the hard work that they do in terms of not only this bill but other bills before this House. They made one recommendation, and that is not to pass the bill. I commend the government members—in particular, the committee chair, the member for Stretton—and also the non-government members on the committee for their examination of the evidence in detail and in respect of the report.

In particular, I acknowledge the great efforts the committee made in travelling around Queensland to have hearings on this bill. I know that many members in this room will speak to this particular issue from their own experiences either directly or through family and friends. Like many members, I have family in Far North Queensland and have had for many years. In fact, I will be up there in a couple of weeks spending time with them. Many of my agricultural stakeholders, at all stages of the primary industry supply chain, are in that region also.

The government has taken positive steps in crocodile management. In fact, in 2016-17 the government allocated \$5.8 million over three years to improve crocodile management in Queensland. This funding is being used to deliver 12 wildlife officer positions and a three-year crocodile monitoring program. The three-year crocodile monitoring program is assessing estuarine crocodile population and distribution trends in waterways from Gladstone to the Northern Territory border—the first such survey in Queensland in over a decade. Wildlife officers from the Department of Environment and Science have systematically surveyed more than 2,400 kilometres of waterways since the crocodile population monitoring program began in April 2017. We are also focusing and delivering on education. The Queensland government's Crocwise program provides information on the risks of living in crocodile habitat and the measures they can take to minimise those risks.

Let us turn to the evidence on the possible effects of the bill. It is important that we listen to the experts on this. My greatest concern with this bill is that it promotes unsafe and concerning ideas about what constitutes 'safe conduct' around crocodiles and potential crocodile habitats. I have seen these conditions myself. Queensland is fortunate to have some of the world's leading crocodile experts and conservationists based right here at Australia Zoo and in North Queensland. I have been very fortunate—over 11 years—to have a long association with the Irwin family and their mission to promote, protect and preserve our magnificent Australian animals. I know that the member for Glass House has also been in the same position as I have. He is privileged to have that association and to have them in his electorate. I look forward to listening to his contribution in the chamber tonight on this bill should he arrive.

Later, in my role in that other place in Canberra, I came to appreciate the good work that the Irwins and their foundations were doing to promote and influence conservation policies at a national and international level. For those members who are unfamiliar with it, the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve is a wetland conservation property and a tribute to the 'Crocodile Hunter', Steve Irwin. The property sprawls across 135,000 hectares of the Cape York Peninsula and is home to a set of important spring-fed wetlands. These wetlands provide a critical water source to threatened habitat, provide a permanent flow of water to the Wenlock River and are home to rare and vulnerable plants and wildlife. I have had the absolute privilege of being up there on several occasions. I have jumped a 10.5 feet long crocodile myself with Terri and Bindi, so I do understand the challenges involved with managing crocodiles. I have enjoyed a long association with that family.

The Wenlock River has the strongest population of crocodiles in Queensland and, with crocodiles being listed as a threatened species, this area is an ideal site for research. When it comes to research, I do not think that there is anyone better in this world and in this country than Professor Craig Franklin from the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Queensland. Each year he joins the Australia Zoo croc team in this location. He does the research, captures the data and sends it back so that people can have a complete analysis of what crocodiles mean to our environment, the ecosystem they live in and the effects as a whole. I want to quote from Terri Irwin's submission. She opened her submission by saying that this bill—

... is a misnomer in name and intent. Rather than making waterways safer for people in Queensland, this Bill will increase the risk of more crocodile attacks on people.

While on the subject of safety, I note that the objective of this bill is to 'eliminate from our waterways all crocodiles that pose a threat to human life' and that this removal 'may involve killing'. I believe that one of the greatest threats in our society these days is the misuse of firearms. The last thing we want to see is irresponsible and reckless culling. In the last government, in a desire by One Nation and the member for Gympie for a relaxed approach to firearms control, we saw the member for Gympie join with One Nation and cross the floor in support of firearms. A wild and uncontrolled approach to firearms control and culling associated with this bill is not the management solution that the people of Queensland want or expect. I encourage members to follow the evidence and science and vote against this bill.