

Kill crocodiles for fun and profit

Jennifer Marohasy

The Northern Territory is hot, and there are few places where people can safely swim—because of the salties.

It's hard to believe there were once fewer than 5,000 saltwater crocodiles in the Northern Territory. The population was decimated in the late 1940s and the 1950s by hunters. A ban was placed on hunting and the exportation of skins in the early 1970s. Crocodile numbers have bounced back and are now estimated at 70,000.

Ecologist Dr Grahame Webb was involved with the programme to rebuild crocodile numbers. To do so, the following three principles were promoted:

- Public education;
- A programme to contain problem crocodiles, including trying to keep them out of Darwin harbour; and
- Ensuring crocodiles had a commercial value—so that landholders would see them as an economic asset rather than a pest.

The programme could be successful given that numbers are high and about 20,000 eggs and 600 crocodiles are harvested from the wild each year under a permit system. Eggs sell for about \$40 each, while crocodiles sell for about \$500.

Many locals, however, resent the crocodiles. They wish, instead, that they could swim at the beach again.

Talk to a local and they complain, but talk to a tourist, especially one from Europe, and they consider it all very exciting. That a German was eaten alive at Kakadu two years ago, and an American model in the Kimberley

a few years before that, only adds to the intrigue and keeps the Northern Territory on the young backpackers' list of dangerously exciting outback destinations.

The Northern Territory Government would like to make more money from tourism and specifically from its

in the Australian environment, Michael Archer, Dean of the Faculty of Science at the University of New South Wales, and journalist Bob Beale write that:

If the natural world is to have a future, we need to understand that the love of animals based on use and dependence has always led to

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out-of-control crocodile population.

There are big game hunters in Europe and the United States who would pay \$10,000 to shoot a single crocodile. But these rich tourists are only interested in spending the money if they can take the souvenir—the crocodile head and skin—back with them. The Northern Territory Government asked the Federal Government for approval to export 25 skins from safari-hunted crocodiles each year.

Federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell has rejected the request. He has said that:

We want people to come to the Northern Territory to look at our magnificent wild environment and it sends a perverse signal out to people of the world to say, come here and blow up our wildlife, let's go shoot it up and take the skins back to trophy cabinets in California.

Clearly the Minister doesn't like the idea of safari hunting. I must admit it has no appeal for me either. But the reality is that many animal lovers—yes, animal lovers—are also keen safari hunters.

In their book, *Going Native: Living*

a commitment to conserve.

Indigenous peoples who remain hunter-gatherers have a love and respect for animals, plants and ecosystems that most of us simply do not understand because they, unlike us, are still an indivisible part of the environments upon which they depend.

As a modern city-based environmentalist, the Minister is probably also offended by the idea that safari hunters enjoy killing animals. I guess a case could be made that the 600 crocodiles culled each year be shot by vegans—they would be sure to take a solemn approach to the job. And given that the Minister is intent on taking the fun and money out of safari hunting, perhaps he will consider banning recreational fishing. The fishers clearly enjoy the wait and the kill.

If Territorians are to suffer salties in every billabong, gorge, river and even at the beach, let them make some money and have some fun along the way. Until the invention of agriculture some 10,000 years ago, hunting and fishing was our life. It is our heritage.

Jennifer Marohasy is Director, Environment Unit at the Institute of Public Affairs.

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