

Man-Eaters!

*When crocodiles began biting people,
Australians began shooting back; now a bold new
strategy may clear the bloodied waters*

By Eric Hoffman
Photographs by Melinda Berge





NINE YEARS ago, cattleman Hilton Graham stepped from his boat onto the shore of a freshwater swamp in Australia's Northern Territory. Suddenly, the water behind him exploded. A huge crocodile shot from the swamp and slammed its enormous jaws around Graham's waist. Rows of spike-like teeth stabbed into his body.

Graham gasped for help to his companion, Peta Lynne Mann. The 13-year-old grabbed Graham's hand and dug her heels into the slippery bank. But the powerful reptile dragged both Graham and Mann into the swamp's murky water.

Doing her best to hang on, Mann was able to tug Graham free when the crocodile momentarily loosened its grip. The two made it to shore, fending off a second attack before Graham lapsed into unconsciousness. Despite severe internal injuries, a crushed arm and golfball-sized holes in his back and legs, Graham lived. Peta Mann received an award for heroism from England's Queen Elizabeth.

When that harrowing attack occurred in 1979, most Australians re-

A jawful of menace (left) is enough to keep most people away from Australia's saltwater crocodiles. But warning signs have been posted in the Northern Territory (above), making clear the message that crocodile country can be hazardous to human health.



With a saltie by the tail, workers at a Northern Territory croc ranch (right) move quickly to transfer the two-year-old troublemaker to a new pond. For crocodile expert Grahame Webb, holding his son (below), a young saltie in the hand is kid's stuff.

garded it as a terrifying but still isolated incident. After all, this was modern Australia. The saltwater crocodiles, or "salties," that had frightened pioneers in the country's northern tropics were in retreat in the latter part of the twentieth century. In fact, the huge seagoing reptiles (salties have hauled out on Pacific and Indian Ocean islands more than a thousand miles from home) were said to be seriously endangered, and wildlife managers were working hard to save them.

But by 1980, there were four more croc attacks, two of them resulting in human deaths. And over the span of 1986-87, salties ate six people and attacked numerous others. Suddenly Australian conservationists were asking "How do you

manage a one-ton man-eater?" The answer turned out to be, "Carefully."

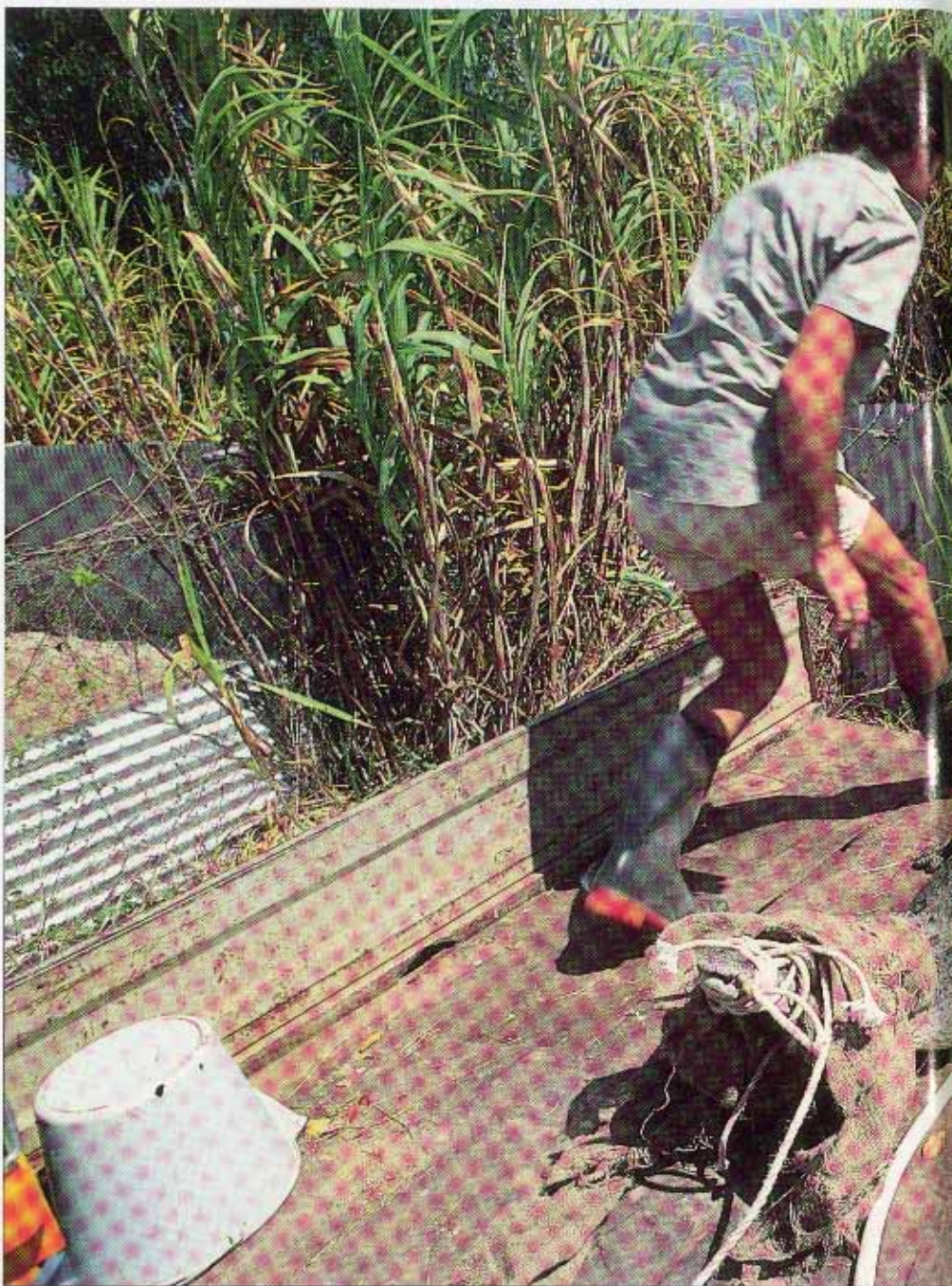
With killer crocs on the roam, many Australians began to feel that activities such as sunbathing, swimming and boating were no longer safe. There were demands for protection from salties. For wildlife managers, the showdown presented the sort of hard choices posed elsewhere in the world by man-eating tigers or dangerous grizzlies: it seemed to pit the salvation of a declining species against the legitimate fears of beleaguered citizens.

Put in perspective, of course, the odds of being eaten by a saltwater crocodile are still remote. But popular tabloids fanned the flames of fear with headlines like "CROC TOOK MY DAD." Even defenders of salties conceded that the beasts are the world's largest, most territorial, most aggressive crocodiles: as much as 21 feet of bad temper encased in armor. No wonder that after the death of one woman, a former minister of environment in the state of Queensland felt compelled to call for a "crocodile-free constituency."

But these days the news with regard to Australia's salties is that the situation has begun to resolve itself. The reason: a bold plan that stresses pragmatism over unrestricted preservation. Put in place in the country's Northern Territory where many saltie attacks have occurred, the plan establishes long-overdue public education efforts aimed at swimmers and fishermen. And it encourages crocodile ranching as a way to get property owners excited about protecting populations of the valuable reptiles. Overall, the plan suggests that offer-

ing salties a bit less protection may be the best way to help the beasts.

Two factors created Australia's saltie situation. One is the undeniable increase in the number of crocodiles. Hunted for the commercial hide trade from 1946 until 1972, saltwater crocodiles had been seriously depleted. The species ended up on Appendix I (reserved for the world's most threatened wildlife) of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). However, after Australia's government outlawed export of saltie hides,



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Hitting below the waterline: two silver-dollar-sized holes in the side of an aluminum boat (below) show where a saltie made its mark. Able to sink small craft, the seagoing crocs have also attacked fishermen and swimmers across Australia's Top End.

the rise, chance meetings between man and man-eater became more common. Over the past few years, 300 saltwater crocodiles have been captured in the Northern Territory's Darwin Harbor, where they posed a threat to sunbathers and swimmers. On a section of the Finnis River, near the capital city of Darwin, an old male croc known as "Sweetheart" made a habit of biting the propeller shafts of the small boats passing by.

In recent years, a deckhand from a trawler in the Staaten River, in Queensland, was killed by a 15-foot saltie when she attempted to swim back to her vessel from a stalled dinghy; a fisherman who waded into the water at Kakadu National Park was decapitated by a large croc, while his son and a busload of tourists looked on; American tourist Ginger Faye Meadows was killed by a croc after diving into the waters of the remote Kimberly Coast in Western Australia; on the Daintree River in northern Queensland, Beryl Wruck vanished in a swirl of water and mud while wading at a picnic.

To avenge Wruck's death, thought to be caused by a crocodile, local citizens spent weeks shooting every large saltie they could find. Even though the species is protected in Queensland, no arrests were made. Instead, Queensland's government launched a saltie-removal program of its own. The program recognizes three crocodile zones, from which either (a) all salties are removed, or (b) any saltie longer than 6 feet is removed or (c) proven "problem crocs" are removed.

"It is really a fairly pragmatic attempt to come to grips with their problem," Northern Territory scientist Grahame Webb says of the Queensland program. But not all Australians applauded the plan. Milo Dunphy, vice president of the



the crocs bounced back in great number.

Biologist Grahame Webb, one of the world's leading saltie authorities and a consultant to the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory, estimates that 55,000 saltwater crocodiles now inhabit the Territory. With that many crocs plying northern waters, an increase in croc-human confrontations was assured. Especially when one adds the second factor contributing to the saltie problem—a leap in human population within croc habitat.

In the 1940s, only 20,000 people lived

in Australia's "Top End." Today there is a human population of 140,000, and some 280,000 tourists visit the Northern Territory every year. Furthermore, most outdoor recreation there occurs at freshwater swamps and along rivers, beaches and billabongs (standing areas of freshwater), all of which are prime saltie habitat. Neighboring Queensland, meanwhile, has a population of 2.5 million people, and increasing numbers of those humans are moving into coastal crocodile habitat.

With human and saltie populations on

Australian Conservation Foundation, called the removal program "disgusting and embarrassing to the nation . . . red-neck politics at its worst."

But crocodile expert Laurie Taplin, a scientist with the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, says critics are overreacting: "In the first five months of the program, only 23 wild crocodiles have been removed to farms. I don't see wholesale removal becoming a reality."

While debate continues in Queensland, a different approach has been taken in the Northern Territory. Saltie management there is based on Webb's research.

In pursuit of saltie knowledge, Webb has captured some 5,000 crocodiles.

River. "You might say the bloody croc got the drop on us," says Webb. Saltie and scientists spied each other at the same instant. Before Webb and his colleagues could scramble down the tree and back to land, the reptile had stationed itself in the water directly beneath their perch.

"We were like the Three Stooges," says Webb. "We weren't safe where we were and descending was a worse alternative." Eventually, the croc swam off, but not before launching itself up from the water toward the clinging trio. The reptile's jaws closed on a tree limb inches beneath them.

The wise course for most people in saltie country is to avoid the beasts. Thus Webb's Northern Territory management plan has brought Conservation Commission rangers to schools to deliver croc-warning talks. Television and radio spots reach a wider audience, and warnings are posted near crocodile waters.

A controversial part of Webb's management plan calls for commercial use of salties. Permits have been granted for three crocodile ranches, and hides have been exported to Japan as of November 1987. The ranches have been stocked with problem crocs (adults captured

in recreation areas) as well as with eggs taken from wild nests that have experienced frequent losses from flooding. The ranches already hold about 7,500 saltwater crocodiles; should the need arise, the ranches are expected to supply salties for restocking in the wild.

Grahame Webb sees ranching as a way to win friends for an unloved beast. "Ranching creates proponents for crocs in a sector of society that commonly would be disinterested or possibly hostile towards the species," he says. But before Webb could get permission for croc ranches, the Australian government had to petition to have the species' Appendix I CITES listing downgraded, a move that antagonized people already interested in the welfare of saltwater crocodiles.

Webb says Australia's salties never belonged on Appendix I in the first place; he questioned the validity of early population studies. According to Webb, "The two figures most commonly cited were one mil-

lion crocodiles as a pristine [pre-European] population and only 15,000 as today's viable population. But the numbers were wrong."

Reinterpreting original population models and interviewing former crocodile hunters and exporters, Webb and his team of saltie experts reconstructed the total number of crocodiles. "We concluded that roughly 250,000 crocs had comprised the pre-European population and that there were at least 55,000 salties in the Northern Territory today," says Webb.

That radically different picture of saltie demography ruffled feathers in Australia's scientific community. Researchers who had done earlier population work and proponents of strict preservation for salties responded angrily, suggesting that the Conservation Commission was overeager to allow exploitation of crocs.

But Webb's reconstructed population figures have been accepted as valid by the Crocodile Specialist Group of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. Salties were officially downgraded to Appendix II of CITES, which allows limited trade in products made from threatened species.

Some scientists and Australian conservationists still worry that an emphasis on croc ranching will erode protection for wild salties in the Northern Territory. But Webb counters that the obvious commercial value of salties will help wild populations. After all, he says, a 6-foot saltie skin is worth about \$250 (U.S.). "Instead of an unwanted menace, property owners will see salties as the goose that lays the golden egg," he says. Webb hopes landowners with valuable croc populations will now think twice about draining swamps for grazing, and instead conserve wetlands as saltie-nesting habitat.

Not that spike-toothed salties will ever supplant koalas as symbols of Australia. But in the Northern Territory, at least, Webb sees evidence of a new public attitude toward saltwater crocodiles.

"When Beryl Wruck was killed in Queensland," he says, "the 'shoot everything' mentality prevailed. But when two blokes were recently eaten in the Northern Territory, the only ones responding were the authorities. Northern Territorians realize that anyone swimming in a croc-infested river ought to know better." ■

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Up a risky river: a fishing party (above) passes a sunning saltie in Kakadu National Park. A hungrier croc (opposite) snatches a steak dangled from a tour boat. Some experts question the wisdom of training crocs to expect meals around tourist vessels.

Armed with only an oar, he has waded to hundreds of saltie nests. But the researcher says his tactics are no reflection of machismo. "Crocs do attract some scientists who wear leopard underwear and carry a rubber knife in their teeth," says Webb, "but that's not my style." Wading is the only way to get to many nests, and he needs to visit nests to collect data.

Webb does recall the time "I damn near donated my body to saltie conservation." He and two companions, hoping to spot a large crocodile whose radio-tracking equipment needed checking, had climbed a tree that leaned over the Tomkinson

