

Australian rangers trap big crocodile near tourist gorge

July 10 2018, by Rod McGuirk



In this Monday, July 9, 2018, photo provided by the Northern Territory Department of Tourism and Culture, a large crocodile is captured in a trap near Katherine, Australia. Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife said in a statement on Tuesday, July 10, 2018, it had trapped the 600-kilogram (1,300-pound) reptile only 30 kilometers (19 miles) downstream from Katherine Gorge, a major tourist attraction outside the Northern Territory town of Katherine. (NT Department of Tourism and Culture via AP)

Wildlife rangers said Tuesday that they had trapped a 4.7-meter (15-foot) saltwater crocodile, the largest they had ever caught in the northern Australian Katherine River and in an upstream region popular with tourists that is thought relatively safe from the killer predators.

Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife said it had trapped the 600-kilogram (1,300-pound) reptile on Monday more than 300 kilometers (185 miles) from the ocean and only 30 kilometers (19 miles) downstream from Katherine Gorge, a major tourist attraction outside the Northern Territory town of Katherine.

Tourists swim, canoe and take cruises in the gorge among freshwater crocodiles, a different species that are small, timid and rarely harm humans. Mid-year is the peak tourist season.

Ranger John Burke said authorities had been hunting the large crocodile in the area for a decade.

"We've called it a lot of things over the years because it's been so hard to catch," Burke said.

"On record, this is the biggest saltwater crocodile removed from the Katherine management zone," he added, referring to the part of the river where saltwater crocs, a protected species, are trapped because they're too close to human populations.

Northern Territory-based crocodile expert Grahame Webb said saltwater crocs, also known as estuarine crocodiles, were heading farther upstream into fresh water river systems as their population has boomed since they were protected by federal law in 1971.



In this Monday, July 9, 2018, photo provided by the Northern Territory Department of Tourism and Culture, a large crocodile is bound on a trailer after it was captured near Katherine, Australia. Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife said in a statement on Tuesday, July 10, 2018, it had trapped the 600-kilogram (1,300-pound) reptile only 30 kilometers (19 miles) downstream from Katherine Gorge, a major tourist attraction outside the Northern Territory town of Katherine. (NT Department of Tourism and Culture via AP)

While large crocs are territorial, Webb suspected the trapped croc had moved to and from the area where it was caught during the past 10 years.

Satellite tracking had shown one croc tagged in a Northern Territory waterhole had swum 900 kilometers (560 miles), for unknown reasons, before returning to the same place.

"That sort of croc, in my opinion, is the most dangerous to people," Webb said. "In areas where they're at best low densities, someone won't have seen one for a long, long time and they think they're safe and they're not necessarily safe."

Webb said the capture so close to tourists demonstrated that the government protection program worked.

"It's worrying, but it's good that they've got an active program and they've got active traps," Webb said.

The croc has been trucked to a crocodile farm outside Kathrine where it's likely to become a tourist attraction. Crocodiles are farmed for their meat and hides, but large and battle-scarred crocs are usually unsuitable for the handbag market.

Since crocodiles became a protected species, crocodile numbers in the Northern Territory have exploded from 3,000 to an estimated 80,000 to 100,000.

Because saltwater crocodiles can live up 70 years and grow throughout their lives, reaching up to 7 meters (23 feet), the proportion of large crocodiles is also rising.

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