

The latest crocodile attack is tragic—but the Northern Territory doesn't have a croc problem, says researcher

July 8 2024, by Brandon Michael Sideleau



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Late last week, the remains of a missing [12-year-old girl were found](#) after she was taken by a saltwater crocodile in the Northern Territory.

The incident occurred in a waterway known as Mango Creek near the community of Nganmariyanga/Palumpa in the remote and sparsely populated West Daly region, about 350 kilometers southwest of Darwin.

Understandably, the tragedy elicited a strong reaction from the public—including [debate about crocodile numbers](#) in the wild.

I am based in the Northern Territory and have worked extensively in the field of human–crocodile conflict management, including establishing [CrocAttack](#), a global open-source database of crocodilian attacks. Amid the emotion surrounding this latest incident, it's important to remember fatal crocodile attacks are extraordinarily rare in Australia—and there is no evidence to suggest their numbers are too high.

Croc numbers don't equate to attacks

Saltwater crocodiles in NT number [about 100,000](#) (excluding those just hatched). [Research shows](#) about five crocodiles, on average, for every kilometer of waterway in the territory.

Fatal crocodile attacks in the NT [peaked in 2014](#) when four people died. Prior to the latest incident, the last fatal attack in the NT [occurred in 2018](#) when an Indigenous ranger was killed while fishing with her family.

The [fatality rate](#) is far lower than elsewhere in the saltwater crocodile's range. In Indonesia, for example, at least [85 people were killed last year alone](#). What's more, crocodile incidents in Indonesian Papua are believed to go largely unreported, so the number of actual deaths is likely much higher.

Despite this, there appear to be vastly fewer crocodiles in Indonesia. Most surveys reveal densities of significantly less than one individual per kilometer in waterways.

Why crocodile attacks in the NT are rare

There are several theories on why saltwater crocodile attacks are comparatively rare in Australia.

First, Australians generally have access to fresh water in their homes. Unlike people in, say, Indonesia, they do not need to travel to waterways to bathe, carry out domestic chores and collect drinking water. That means they are less likely to encounter crocodiles.

Second, Australians have access to fishing equipment which does not require them to submerge themselves in waterways [to fish](#), and safer fishing vessels which, unlike in Indonesia, are not [prone to capsizing](#).

The Northern Territory is also more sparsely populated and developed than other areas where saltwater crocodiles live. That means less habitat destruction, more natural prey for crocodiles, and fewer people in crocodile habitat.

Importantly, the Northern Territory also has an extensive crocodile safety education program in the form of the [CrocWise campaign](#), as well as a robust [management plan](#).

Crocs don't need culling

The NT crocodile management plan was [recently amended](#) to increase the territory's crocodile removal quota from 300 to 1,200 a year, stopping short of a widespread cull.

However, each time a croc attack is recorded in Australia, it provokes [debate about](#) whether tougher management of croc numbers is required.

Following the latest crocodile attack, NT Chief Minister Eva Lawler told the ABC: "We can't have the crocodile population outnumber the human population in the Northern Territory [...] We do need to keep our crocodile numbers under control."

Claims that crocodile populations need "controlling" make little sense. [Research shows apex predators](#) such as crocodiles do not overpopulate. Crocodile numbers in the Northern Territory have never been, and will never be, out of control.

This is particularly true for the [saltwater crocodile](#), for which less than 1% of hatchlings [survive to adulthood](#). It is also a [fiercely territorial species](#), and conflict between males often results in death.

A 2015 Australian study [found](#) removing all crocodiles from a location was not a practical option, given the species' mobility and dispersal across a range of habitats. It said culling programs would not ensure the absence of crocodiles in a targeted area and swimming activities would remain unsafe to the public.

Other Australian research has [found](#) crocodile numbers would have to fall by 90% to prevent one annual attack.

Preventing crocodile attacks in the Northern Territory requires more community education, more signs warning of the crocodile danger, and tougher fines for people willfully engaging in unsafe behavior.

New tools are also being developed. This includes detecting crocodiles with [multi-beam sonar](#) in areas where the attack risk is high, and [attaching magnets](#) to crocodiles while moving them to disrupt their

natural homing instinct. These methods require further studies.

Ultimately, through [public education](#) and management, it is possible for humans to live alongside crocodiles with minimal conflict.

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