

Debate about croc numbers reignited in Australia

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Rex, a 700-kilo saltwater crocodile, is confined at Wildlife Sydney Zoo, but wild populations are rising, reigniting the debate about controlling them

Saltwater crocodile numbers have exploded in northern Australia since being declared a protected species, and a spate of recent attacks has reignited debate about controlling them.

The giant predators, which can grow up to seven metres (23 feet) long

and weigh more than a tonne, haunt waterways in the country's north with government estimates putting the national population at approximately 100,000.

They only kill an average of two people each year, but several high-profile attacks, including a woman snatched in May while having a late-night swim off a beach in Queensland state, have seen calls for culls.

Earlier this year outspoken Australian politician Bob Katter urged crocodile-hunting safaris to help manage their numbers in the wild.

"Nature has a balance and the balance is completely out of whack. We can put nature back in balance if we have shooting safaris," he said.

Since becoming a protected species in the 1970s after the populations were devastated by harvesting, croc numbers have grown and with it their popularity as a tourist must-see.

Some businesses have come under fire for dangling meat to entice them to jump in front of sightseers on boat trips, but the operators deny any proven link between baiting crocs with meat and human attacks.

"There's some percentage of them that have learnt the sound of our boat and they're the ones who come swimming out for the food," said Shalee O'Brien, manager of Spectacular Jumping Crocodile Cruise on the Adelaide River in the Northern Territory.

As the country debates the best way forward, one thing is certain: To stay safe in crocodile country always take note of the warning signs.

"No saltwater croc is friendly," warned indigenous tour guide Reuben Jones. "They're basically all going to kill you."

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