

Crocodile Specialist Group Steering Committee Meeting
Universidad Nacional del Litoral, Santa Fe, Argentina
(5 May 2018)

Australia and Oceania

Three species of crocodylian are endemic to the Australia & Oceania region; *Crocodylus porosus*, *C. novaeguineae* (Papua New Guinea only) and *C. johnstoni* (Australia only).

Australia: Since the previous Steering Committee meeting (May 2016), the Queensland Government has initiated an extensive monitoring program to quantify the status of its *C. porosus* population and trends over time. The proposed program was reviewed by the CSG in 2017. In February 2018 the CSG reviewed a pilot egg harvest program proposed for Pomppuraaw, on indigenous lands in Far North Queensland.

In Western Australia, the Department of Parks and Wildlife continues to monitor the *C. porosus* population in the King River annually, and a spotlight survey of the Ord River is being considered in late 2018. The one farm relies on captive breeding for stock, and so monitoring effort has been reduced accordingly. The *C. porosus* population in Western Australia is considered to have increased by more than 300% over the last 30 years.

The Northern Territory's management program for *C. porosus* will be due for revision in the next 12 months. It is unlikely that the key elements of the program (egg ranching, wild harvest, problem crocodiles, public education) will change. There continues to be interest in trophy hunting to be included within the program - to date the Federal Minister has refused to approve this element.

Papua New Guinea: Due to a chronic shortage of funds, the Conservation and Environment Protection Authority (CEPA) has not been able to conduct any biennial nest counts survey for *C. novaeguineae* or *C. porosus* since October 2015. With the ongoing economic crisis still affecting the PNG Government, Mainland Holdings Limited (MHL) took the initiative to sponsor the *C. porosus* survey in March 2018. The survey is will involve staff from CEPA and an expert consultant, Godfrid Solmu. The importance of regular nest monitoring surveys to CITES reporting for both species is recognised.

The annual wild *C. porosus* egg harvest in the Middle Sepik River, organized by MHL in collaboration with the Sepik Wetlands Management Initiative (SWMI), continues to be well received by local resource owners. In February 2016, 8434 fertile eggs (194 nests) were harvested, followed by 13,841 fertile eggs (271 nests) in February 2017. Data for 2018 were not available at the time of writing of this report.

In 2017, SWMI was nominated for a RAMSAR Wetlands Conservation Award.

MHL is the only commercial crocodile farm operating in PNG. Due to the ever-stricter grading standards applied by buyers/tanneries, it has become very important for MHL to properly control the numbers of animals held. During 2017, MHL unfortunately had to take drastic steps to assure the long-term economic viability of its operations by limiting the numbers of live (ranch) *C. porosus* purchased from local hunters, as well as establishing quotas for numbers of wild *C. porosus* eggs harvested in the Middle Sepik River (see above).

These new grading standards are also badly affecting the trade of wild crocodile skins from PNG. Many of the wild crocodile skins harvested by local hunters living in the remote wetlands are now being downgraded or simply rejected by local traders and exporters. The low prices paid for

downgraded wild skins will likely discourage some rural communities (particularly in the areas where skins are badly affected by *Paratrichosoma* sp. and sago marks) from continuing to support the crocodile conservation programs (and biodiversity as a whole) based of their sustainable use.

Timor-Leste: The population status of *C. porosus* in Timor Leste remains unknown, but it is considered to have increased significantly since the country achieved independence in 2002. The Timorese Government has set up warning signs at spots known to be crocodile habitat, and is regularly visiting affected communities to raise public awareness. At least 5-10 fatal attacks are reported to occur each year, but underreporting is believed to be high. A considerable number of *C. porosus* are held in captivity in the capital, Dili. Government has constructed a crocodile enclosure in Hera, near Dili, to enable the removal of problem crocodiles. Crocodiles are culturally very important to local people, and is a significant factor dictating options for management.

Community-based monitoring was conducted in various communities in Lautém and Viqueque to assess crocodile habitats and attacks by integrating the knowledge of local stakeholders. Local authorities raised the concern that crocodile dispersing from Australia could be responsible for the increase in crocodile attacks. Future research and management focuses on testing the dispersal hypothesis and on the implementation of sophisticated regimes to remove problem crocodiles from areas where crocodile habitat and human activity frequently overlaps, as well as on developing an ecotourism strategy, including crocodile watching.

Solomon Islands: HCC continues to be a major issue, prompting calls in the media to lift the ban of exporting crocodile skins. The Environment and Conservation Division in the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, Disaster Management and Meteorology recently secured funding from the Asian Development Bank to address issues associated with crocodiles. The project aims to: provide guidance to Government to address concern of increasing crocodile population; initiate and contribute to planning process of carrying out crocodile assessment and survey to ascertain current population, distribution, and threats of crocodile population, including impacts to humans and communities; provide technical and policy guidance and recommendations to Government to address concerns of the increasing crocodile population (Josef Hurutarau, pers. comm.). A draft report for the sustainable management of *C. porosus* is an important output of the project, which should be completed by the end of September 2018.

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