

## Tall Tales

Crocodile attacks are front page news and the telephone in our Kimberley regional office at Kununurra rang non-stop after the fatal attack on a young American tourist at King Cascades, Prince Regent River. Some of the calls were from State, regional, national and international news organisations, others from concerned locals reporting sightings of large crocodiles and a few from tourists planning a Kimberley holiday, and asking for details of 'safe' areas and for safety procedures near waterways. A few days later the crocodile jokes and rumours began.

The Kununurra Diversion Dam — with deep pools, floating weed mats and swamps along its 40 odd kilometre course — is a haven for Johnston (freshwater) crocodiles. Some of these 'freshies' grow up to, and sometimes more than, ten feet (notice how people, no matter how used to the metric system, always refer to crocodiles in feet and inches), and are often the cause of reported estuarine crocodile sightings in the watersport area by the diversion dam wall.

These reports are followed up for verification, but lose some credibility before pen is put to paper. One complainant, when interviewed, could not estimate the length of the crocodile he saw, but guaranteed that its eyes were two feet apart.

This indeed was a large animal: hurried checks with ex-crocodile shooters and research staff confirmed our worst fear — at least a 70 to 80 footer.

Dogs are a favourite food of crocodiles and it is necessary to keep dogs (and people) away from the water in estuarine crocodile habitats. When a dog goes missing in the Kimberleys, it has to be a croc for sure. One bowser attendant in Kununurra nonchalantly told customers to 'tie up your dogs as a rogue crocodile in the dam had taken at least 36 dogs in the last couple of weeks'. Checks with the shire and local police did not substantiate the claims, and the local dog catcher was busier than ever.

A Wyndham man living near the Wyndham Port received radio and newspaper coverage when his dog was severely mauled by a croc; a local vet later confirmed that another dog was the culprit, and that story was no longer news.



Saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) — the one to avoid. You shouldn't disturb freshwater crocodiles, either, but they are unlikely to eat you.

Before the King Cascades attack, wildlife officer, Mike Osborn was dispatched to Broome to locate and capture a reported estuarine crocodile in Willie Creek north of Broome, a popular swimming and fishing spot.

Within three days, the Broome Tourist Bureau was receiving media calls asking what was being done to stop crocodiles rummaging through rubbish bins in town, and a Broome resident contacted ABC radio telling people that crocodiles will actually leave the water and run people down on land.

Rumours and exaggeration will always surround crocodiles, their habits and interaction with humans. They carry a mystique all their own. These saurians are an integral part of Kimberley life, however, and it is good to see an improvement in people's ability to 'live with crocodiles'. □

**Val Storey and Mike Osborne, Kununurra**

### WHALE UPDATE

*Bunbury high school students in the habit of staring out the classroom window were recently treated to an unusual sight. Southern right and humpback whales were swimming in the shallows. I bet even the teachers couldn't resist having a look. The article on page 24 tells the full story of the return of these whales to our coastline. The start of a school project?*

*The first two weeks in August provided a lot of good news for whale lovers. First the Channel 7 news helicopter spotted a humpback whale off Cottesloe Beach. Not to be outdone, the Channel 9 news helicopter spotted a southern right whale and her calf in*

*Cockburn Sound a few days later. A humpback was seen in the Marmion Marine Park, and another southern right whale was noted close to Binningup Beach, near Bunbury.*

*To top it all off, one of Perth's two resident pods of dolphins have been 'showing off' their new offspring to sundry pleasure craft and fisherfolk. The latest sighting was of about eight dolphins with three or four calves, off Hilary's in the Marmion Marine Park. Yet another Channel 9 news reporter had the thrill of surfing with a group of bottlenose dolphins at Castle Rocks near the west end of Rottnest Island. Since the Augusta whale rescue in 1986, the local media have taken cetaceans to heart!*

# LANDSCOPE

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## COVER PHOTO:

Stark silhouettes evoke the spirit of our remote  
regions. This photograph was taken near  
Qualtrading by Hans Versluis.

## EDITORIAL

Public participation in land management sounds like a great idea: the community has a chance to study and comment upon the government's proposals. The scientists and managers can keep their fingers on the pulse of public demand. But sometimes good ideas are hard to put into practice.

Last April the Department of Conservation and Land Management released draft management plans for the south-west forest regions, and a draft timber strategy for W.A. The release of the plans was accompanied by a series of workshops and public meetings, and extensive media releases. Four hundred and thirty-five letters offering briefings and speakers were sent out. Ninety groups responded. Public comment on any aspect of the plans and the strategy was invited.

4070 responses were received. This included 3505 proformas (from 30 organisations) and 565 substantial submissions, some up to 200 pages in length. Many submissions endorsed the plans in their entirety; some rejected them out of hand; others suggested hundreds of minor changes.

How can so many, and such varied, views possibly be integrated simply and sensibly into a final plan? What weighting should be given to the views of different groups or individuals? Who decides what is 'right' when pure value judgements are to be made and values are in conflict? How should one resolve an issue when the views of a large section of the public are quite different from those of a small group of scientists working closely on the problem? These questions represent the sharp end of public participation. It's a relatively new game for W.A.'s land managers, and one in which the rules are still unwritten and ill-defined.

What is certain is that the Department's policy and planning staff have a big job ahead of them, and a job which must be done to the highest possible professional standard. It is important that the final plans for our south-west forests reflect the tremendous thought, effort and interest shown by the community; and it is essential that there are efficient mechanisms for public involvement in conservation and land management, because these processes will be the norm, not the exception in years ahead.

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