



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang
Consumers Association of Penang
檳城消費人協會 பிளாங்கு பயனீட்டாளர் சங்கம்

10 Jalan Masjid Negeri, 11600 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
Tel: 604-8299511 Fax: 604-8298109
email: consumerofpenang@gmail.com

Websites:
(in English, BM, Chinese,
& Tamil)
www.consumer.org.my

Letter to the Editor

22 February 2023

Education is vital to understand crocodile attacks

The Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) expresses sadness at the loss of human lives as a result of recent crocodile attacks. It is also sad that the media depicts crocodiles as rogues preying on humans. However, crocodiles cannot be entirely blamed as they are the apex predators surviving on their natural instincts to hunt their prey in their habitat.

While crocodiles are dangerous they do not normally hunt humans. Like any sensible wild animal, they are wary of human beings and generally only bite if disturbed or taken by surprise. But as opportunistic predators, they will grab whatever is near for food.

Crocodiles are at risk because isolated but publicised crocodile attacks usually result in outcries for large-scale crocodile slaughter. Such calls for hunting crocodiles cause concern to wildlife biologists and conservationists who fear that public fear of crocodiles could result in vigilante vendettas against these reptiles.

The movie Jaws is one example of how fear inspired a near-obsessive hunting of sharks when there was only 64 reported cases of unprovoked shark attacks, with 5 deaths, worldwide in 2019. According to a study, there were 164 cases of crocodile attacks between 2000 and 2020, an average of 8 cases per year¹.

Parties who seek to profit from crocodile hides are likely to play up the issue of human-crocodile conflict to justify the expansion of their trade but this legal commerce in crocodile skins only serves to incentivise poaching. Concern for human safety does not necessitate extermination or even the confinement of crocodiles to remote areas or crocodile farms.

As of December 2022, twenty-six crocodiles had been shot dead due to human concerns about crocodile-human conflicts, according to the Sabah Wildlife Director. Crocodiles are sometimes killed when wildlife enforcement officers seek to find the remains of missing children or adults believed to have been eaten by these reptiles. Sometimes they are shot simply to maintain cordial relations with local communities who come to fear crocodiles living in their area after a person comes up missing. Such random killings may temporarily appease citizens, but they do not protect people.

While crocodile killings may be justified in cases where it seems pretty clear that a particular crocodile had killed a human or livestock, this is rarely the case. Instead, crocodiles are frequently killed for no better reason than to temporarily mitigate human fears. Unfortunately, these unregulated cullings have become the norm due to an absence of concrete guidelines or protocols for handling these types of cases.

As in most cases of human-wildlife conflict, what must be addressed is human behaviour. Conflicts with crocodiles occur largely because crocodiles and human beings compete for the same food source and, with human population growth, these vital food sources diminished. The clearance of riparian habitats for agricultural development has also resulted in the loss of crocodile prey species.

Human population growth causes competition for habitat between crocodiles and humans. Killing crocodiles will not change these problems as unregulated human expansion into an ever-decreasing crocodile habitat is the root cause of increased human-crocodile conflicts.

Coexistence can be achieved through policies that change human behaviours. It is through education to prevent encounters, with egg removal to control crocodile numbers as needed, by monitoring crocodiles, and by implementing more responsible development plans so as to protect ecosystems and maintain a distance between humans and vital crocodile habitats.

For short-term measures, warning signs ought to be posted to keep people away from crocodiles, and community education should start immediately. Fliers can be distributed to target communities, and school programmes can be planned to provide information to local riverside communities. With education and a resultant change in human behaviour, the future generation will have the chance to marvel at our local crocodiles which are considered living fossils.

Mohideen Abdul Kader
President
Consumers Association of Penang (CAP)

¹Human-Crocodile Conflicts in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo: An analysis of crocodile attacks from 2000 until 2020. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358152489_Human-Crocodile_Conflicts_in_Sarawak_Malaysian_Borneo_An_analysis_of_crocodile_attacks_from_2000_until_2020#:~:text=The%20attacks%20occurred%20more%20during%20the%20daylight%20%2859.4%25%29%2C,with%20the%20highest%20one%20recorded%20in%20March%20%2816.8%25%29.