



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Letter to the Editor

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CAP Urges Halt to Year-Round Crocodile Hunting Permits in Sabah

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) is concerned over the news regarding the issuance of hunting permits for year-round crocodile hunting in Sabah.

Sabah's population of wild crocodiles have recovered in the state since they were legally protected in 1982. However, a new set of problems has arisen: an increase in human-crocodile conflict. The challenge now is how to sustain what the state has succeeded to protect. With human habitation along rivers and the coastline, the situation becomes much more complex.

During a two-year survey from 2017 to 2019, the Sabah Wildlife Department (JHL) identified 2,886 crocodiles in ten different rivers, indicating a healthy crocodile population. Surveys are conducted every 20 years to assess the crocodile population. However, a survey interval of five years would be more beneficial than the current 20-year period, which is considered overly lengthy.

The increase in crocodile sightings and recent attacks have sparked a debate as to whether humans can continue to coexist with these apex predators or should we cull the crocodile population.

According to the most recent data from JHL, 77 operations were conducted between January 4 and May 29 of this year, with 109 crocodiles shot or captured. During the same time period, crocodile attacks claimed three lives and injured three others.

The local community perceives crocodiles as a serious threat to both lives and livelihoods. Consequently, many believe that elimination is the only solution due to the deaths that have occurred. However, Sabah's open hunting licenses to mitigate crocodile-human conflict may not be effective. Culling alone cannot guarantee protection from potential crocodile encounters, especially since rivers serve as the primary means of transportation for the community. As a result, conflicts are likely to persist as crocodiles move from estuaries to inland freshwater habitats and coastal areas in search of new territories.

Crocodiles are facing several threats, the most serious of which being habitat destruction or change. The degradation of ecosystems caused by activities such as deforestation, conversion for agricultural uses, and pollution, along with the depletion of food sources owing to increasing human population and other anthropogenic factors, are threatening crocodile populations. Even modest changes in habitat conditions can be disastrous for crocodiles, which require broad and diverse environments due to their massive size.

Currently, the uncertainty in crocodile hunting raises doubts about the number of crocodiles authorized per kill, as well as the criteria used to define the type of crocodile approved for the take. Furthermore, concerns exist regarding the potential exploitation or improper utilization of hunting permits, allowing hunters to engage in the pursuit of endangered and threatened fauna within forested areas.

The department's decision to permit crocodile hunting has drawn criticism from animal rights lawyers. In a February 2024 media report, these lawyers condemned the decision for resorting to lethal measures instead of catching and relocating crocodiles that pose a threat to human lives.

A comprehensive approach should encompass a variety of techniques, including the establishment of protected areas and wildlife sanctuaries where crocodiles can live without interference from humans; habitat modifications near human settlements to discourage crocodiles from hiding or nesting; routine surveys and monitoring of crocodile populations to gather information about their size and health; observation of the movements of individual crocodiles that frequent areas close to human communities; the deployment of law enforcement to regulate human activity near crocodile habitats; the establishment of Rapid Response Teams to respond quickly to reports of unruly crocodiles; and the transfer of crocodiles from conflict hotspots to remote areas or crocodile reserves.

Other options include providing alternative livelihoods to communities whose fishing practices put them in danger of crocodile attacks and compensating communities that suffer losses from crocodile attacks on property or livestock.

The management programme should not be a one-size-fits-all solution. Engaging with and sharing positive cultural beliefs and practices regarding crocodiles, as well as learning from indigenous knowledge on co-existing with them, is always valuable. Community involvement is crucial, including community monitoring schemes, training in observing and handling crocodiles, educational talks, and interactive activities. Such activities are conducted by the Mabuwaya Foundation in the Philippines.

Last but not least understanding the locations of crocodiles in the water and acknowledging that it is their territory is crucial. CAP urges the Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment, Datuk Christina Liew and the Sabah Wildlife Department to cease the year-round crocodile hunting permit and prioritise research on controlling the crocodile population and managing the human-crocodile conflict effectively. The focus should be on promoting education rather than eradication.

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