

**NORTHERN LAND COUNCIL SUBMISSION TO THE HON.
DAVID KEMP, FEDERAL MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT**

Re: Draft Management Plan for *Crocodylus porosus* in the Northern Territory

5 February 2004

Introduction

With regard to your draft declaration in response to the Northern Territory Government's *A draft management plan for Crocodylus porosus in the Northern Territory*, it is clear that while you are generally supportive of the plan you are considering not permitting safari hunting of crocodiles.

Given your Government's stated interest in boosting economic development on Aboriginal land to reduce welfare dependence, it appears contradictory to reject a proposal that could deliver new employment and income opportunities to remote communities.

We therefore have concerns over your draft declaration and suggest a possible way forward.

Background

Aboriginal people are being urged by Governments to reduce welfare dependence. The Northern Land Council (NLC) assists Aboriginal people in the top half of the Northern Territory with, among other things, land management and economic development.

The NLC has no set or detailed policies for the commercial utilisation of wildlife on Aboriginal land in its region. This is consistent with the role of the Land Council prescribed in the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. The NLC has a responsibility to strongly represent views of Aboriginal landowners, and thus the viewpoints it reflects are as diverse as opinion amongst Aboriginal landowners within its constituency. The NLC has no commercial interest, in its own right, in wildlife utilisation projects.

The NLC would however argue that there is a strong tradition of Aboriginal involvement in commercial utilisation of wildlife. In the Northern Territory, this participation was most significant along the coast and in trade with our northern neighbours. The NLC strongly supports the right of Aboriginal landowners and their aggregated corporations to continue or revitalise involvement in commercial utilisation of wildlife. The NLC believes that such groups should approach their participation with a strong emphasis on development of management strategies to ensure both resource and habitat sustainability.

Thus the NLC generally supports commercial wildlife utilisation initiatives with the proviso that they need to be locally driven and endorsed at the level of the particular Aboriginal landowning group involved. We recognise that Aboriginal landowners will sometimes have differing views on the commercial use of particular species.

When Aboriginal groups display an interest in getting involved in commercial utilisation of wildlife the NLC facilitates the process through its Caring for Country Unit and its associated Caring for Country Strategy.

The benefits of commercial wildlife utilisation

Aboriginal groups are looking for novel ways of building a sustainable economic base. The implementation of commercial utilisation of wildlife initiatives constitute an alternative way for people to make money out of their country, rather than the more 'mainstream' uses on offer such as pastoralism or horticulture that can profoundly affect the maintenance of biodiversity by virtue of their practices.

Commercial utilisation of wildlife sits well with the multiple land-use philosophy of Aboriginal people. It can be a part of building a regional economy and have the added benefit of getting people out onto country, looking after country and using and strengthening their traditional knowledge and skills base.

Regulation of commercial wildlife utilisation

In our recent submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into impacts of native vegetation and biodiversity regulations we stated that artificial constraints on the commercial use of wild native plants and animals will effectively close off most options for economic activity on Aboriginal land.

We attempted to show that existing legislation is poorly matched to conservation challenges in northern Australia because it provides no incentives and even unnecessarily inhibits the human presence on land that demands active management. Federal legislation and policy is often directed at preventing access to resources for reasons that appear unrelated to sustainability. Although international agreements are used to justify tight constraints in wildlife use, many provisions misuse or actually subvert their intent.

We called for a comprehensive review of biodiversity and resource management regulations, but in the interim we said much could be done by changing bureaucratic processes to focus on issues of sustainability and equity rather than arbitrary conservation fads.

The Productivity Commission has recently reported and amongst their recommendations they state that:

Governments should seek to remove impediments to, and facilitate, increased private provision of environmental services. Actions could include research into and facilitation of sustainable commercial uses of native vegetation and biodiversity (Draft Recommendation 6).

Aboriginal people's involvement in the crocodile industry

Aboriginal people were centrally involved in the crocodile hunting industry which persisted in the Top End until 1971. A large proportion of those Aboriginal hunters were also strongly involved in local systems of Aboriginal law and ceremony and thus their participation may be reasonably construed as demonstrating a degree of

compatibility between at least some forms of commercial utilisation and Aboriginal cultural precepts.

Since the re-introduction of commercial use of *C. porosus* in 1984 Aboriginal people have played an important role in the industry. Early on this was largely a 'passive' role through receipt of modest payments for eggs collected on their lands by outside parties. Most eggs collected from the wild come from the vast Aboriginal land holdings.

Increasingly, however, we see Aboriginal individuals and corporations, in a number of centres, becoming more active in the revitalisation of the industry. Groups have sought to 'value add' and have been collecting and incubating eggs to on sell hatchlings to crocodile farms. The Djelk Community Rangers of the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation based in Maningrida are a good example of this.

Since 1997 Aboriginal groups have been involved in limited wild harvesting of adult crocodiles for direct skin and meat production.

A Draft Management Plan for *Crocodylus porosus* in the Northern Territory

The Northern Territory is the only jurisdiction in the Australia that has a 'conservation through sustainable use' strategy under which sits the *Draft Management Plan for C. porosus in the Northern Territory*.

The crocodile conservation and management program in the Northern Territory, which is based on sustainable utilisation, has been demonstrably successful. The Land Council does not oppose the creation of appropriate mechanisms to provide for monitoring and regulation of take in commercial operations.

Your draft declaration of an approved Wildlife Trade Management Plan

You have recently issued a draft declaration of an approved Wildlife Trade Management Plan under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 in relation to the Northern Territory's Draft Management Plan for *C. porosus*. Generally you are supportive of the plan.

However we were disappointed to see that you have not permitted the recreational hunting of crocodiles for profit (Safari hunting). We question whether your decision is based on conservation grounds given that we are only talking about 25 of the 600 animals permitted to be culled under the plan. While safari hunting is only a smaller part of the wider management plan your decision might create perverse and totally unwanted consequences for the conservation of biodiversity in the Top End.

Such a move inhibits remote Aboriginal economic development opportunities, and severely limits the multiple-use philosophy of Aboriginal land and wildlife development. It also sends a message to traditional Aboriginal landowners in the Northern Territory that their land and wildlife management aspirations are wrong. It also signals to them that appropriate land use should be based on exotic animals, large scale clearing, and agricultural land use. In short, practices which can damage the cultural, economic, and ecological integrity of their traditional homelands.

Certain Aboriginal groups in our region have expressed their desire to become engaged in crocodile safari hunting operations and we ask that you reconsider your decision. You could

consider limiting the safari hunting initiative to a pilot scheme operating on Aboriginal lands and conducted by Aboriginal traditional owners.

Commercial utilisation of wildlife can help address the long-term need for economic development, and at the same time enhance biodiversity conservation and cultural maintenance.

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