


Is it right to take wild crocodile eggs?

adapted from an article by Ashley Donnelly

- 1 It is the stuff of adventure novels – rugged Australians dropping into wild saltwater crocodile nests to snatch day-old eggs from territorial females. The eggs command a high price from farms which produce meat, leather and other goods, so there are plenty of people willing to take on the risky job. But whether this derring-do should be legal or not has become a hot topic in the state of Queensland, where the government is reviewing its crocodile management plan.
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- 2 Proponents say legalisation in the neighbouring Northern Territory brought substantial economic benefits, particularly to indigenous communities, without affecting crocodile numbers. Federal MP and former crocodile farmer Warren Entsch strongly supports legalising egg harvesting in Queensland. He would like to see a quota of eggs taken from nests, harvested, then sold to farmers who supply skins to global fashion houses. Mr Entsch said the number of saltwater crocodiles in the Northern Territory had grown substantially despite the provision for egg harvesting, with current estimates putting their population at around 100,000. “Now there are more crocodiles in the Northern Territory than before when the ‘white fella’ came to Australia,” said Mr Entsch. “The proliferation of the crocodile is huge and that in itself is causing a few problems.”
 - 3 Conservationists say that only a few crocodiles reach maturity in the wild and claim that removing eggs could have a devastating impact. “There’s a reason why their survival rates are so low, because only the strongest fittest baby will survive,” Australia Zoo crocodile research team leader Toby Millyard said. He added that accurate surveys of crocodile populations had not been conducted for a decade and needed to be completed before a decision was made. “Anything people say about crocodile numbers is really hearsay and opinion,” he added.
 - 4 The final report into a live egg-collection trial in Cape York is expected to be released by the Queensland Government in the coming weeks. Robbie Morris, environmental manager of Pormpuraaw Aboriginal Shire Council in Cape York, said the study has shown there would be no impact on populations if just a limited harvest of wild eggs are taken from nests that are at risk of being washed away by flooding. He added: “If we do actually

get the go-ahead to do a wild egg harvest there would be scope for three or four permanent positions at the farm for local indigenous people.”

- 5 Andrew Picone of the Australian Conservation Foundation said a range of issues needed to be considered before allowing egg harvesting in Cape York. “At face value it presents some problems but without any other economic opportunities on the Cape York, things like mining and other extractive industries will continue to be seen as the only option, and undermine tourism.” He agreed that expanding the farming industry in Queensland could also provide culturally appropriate opportunities for remote indigenous communities.
- 6 Meanwhile, the Northern Territory recently increased the number of eggs that can be harvested each year by 40%. Its Wildlife Trade Management Plan also allows for the take of 1,000 live crocodiles. The government aims to double its crocodile products industry to A\$50m in four years.

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