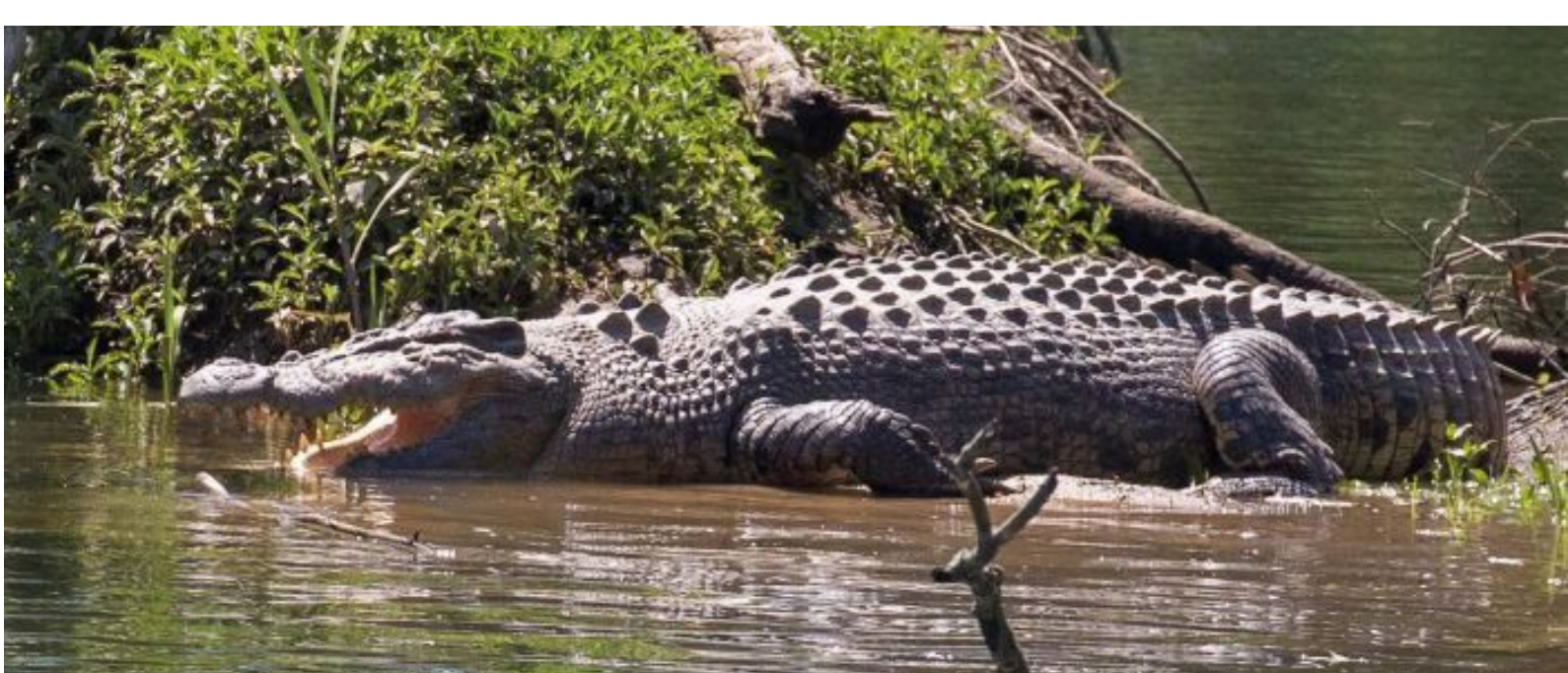


# The Oracle of Gordonvale

1527 Words



ABC

Back in 1989, I spent two years in Australia, where there were plenty of opportunities to teach a person that humans sometimes are not at the top of the food chain and life was very fragile.

Five of us were in the car on the way to Cairns in northern Queensland. We stopped in this place called Gordonvale, about fifteen miles south of Cairns. We needed petrol and we were busting for the little boy's room.

When we were washed up, stocked up and in trim, we went into the cafe there to get our plan straight for Cairns. It wasn't long before maps draped

the table and soon after that the beers arrived, along with a sun blistered old boy with a limp and a big grin on his face. It was a hot sticky day and the sweat coming through his hat was almost glistening.

"G'day" he said. "Trevor. You young blokes pommies are you?"

He sat down and put his hat on the table and the half-smile from the waitress told us he'd mastered this patter years ago.

"Listen, you young fellas. You're new here, just passin' through and all. But there's something you need to hear. Call it a public service announcement."

We sat back with our beers and bedded in for it.

"You see, these three lads came through here a few weeks ago. They went out to take a bit of a swim in Pine Creek, Yarrabah river, few clicks away over there. They missed all the signs, jeez, so many bloody signs as well. And they all say 'Do not get out of the car and do not swim in the river, this river belongs to the crocodiles.'"

His voice was effortless and soothing, a voice that drew you into his bright blue eyes. He sat forward.

"The thing was," he said. "To tease them into thinking it was okay to swim in the river, there was a rope attached to the branch of a big tree right next to it. So the young blokes took it in turns to swing themselves into the river.

One of them had just landed in a big splash when the other two saw something long and shiny hit the water from the opposite bank.

They shouted and pointed over to where the croc entered the water but the croc was now under the water, so their mate thought they were full of it.

Then the bloke in the water noticed something moving behind them. It was two more massive crocs swinging their tails from side to side.

The bloke in the water shouted right back at them but their response was only frantic pointing and muffled panic back at him.

He then turned round to see a snout just above the waterline about twenty yards away and closing fast.

He put his head down and covered the quickest twenty yards a human has ever achieved in water. By the time he reached the bank, the other two had seen their own reptiles and were falling over each other to climb up the tree.

The one in the water ran out and just managed to join them before the three crocs converged on them.”

There were a few exhales and we ordered another round.

“So, you had three guys stranded up a tree, under siege from three pissed off crocs, who were circling them at the bottom of the tree, bumping into each other every so often and pissing each other off as well.

It was like a frenzy. The crocs were waiting for one or all of them to do something stupid and fall out of the tree but the lads stayed right where they were.

One of the crocs even put his front legs on the tree trunk, like he could climb up it.

The young blokes remembered the way they got down to the river earlier. About twenty yards up the bank, there was a field and a wire fence. If they could reach that, they were in the clear. Now, they were safe, but crocs are very patient when it comes to food, and they weren't going anywhere.

They tried to distract the crocs by chucking bits of tree into the river, even at the crocs themselves, but the crocs didn't budge, and if they needed to get any more pissed off, this managed it.

A few hours went by and they wondered about how things might play out when they started getting tired. There comes a time when you just shut down, it can't be avoided any more.

But it was the crocs who seemed to get sleepy first. One by one, their eyes closed and the young blokes saw an opportunity. The noises coming from the crocs were deep rumbling snoring noises and they'd backed off about ten feet from the tree.

The young blokes had to assume they were sleeping. If they could just get out of the tree without waking them up, they had a decent start to the fence. It was this or wait to fall asleep and fall out of the branch.

But then, just as the blokes were picturing the way back down the tree, all three crocs suddenly snapped out of it. They took off into the river and were gone underwater.

This was their chance, and with thud, thud and thud, panic bluster descended the tree. One of them smiled at another, imagining the fence within reach up the bank but he didn't get a smile back. The other bloke had seen three snouts in the water and now they were three crocs rifling out of the water as one, straight at them.

The blokes took off up the bank, this time covering the quickest uphill twenty yards ever achieved by humankind.

Closer and closer to the fence, they got. The crocs were gaining but finally, they were there. The fence was higher than they remembered but they flung themselves at it and, with ripped jeans and crocodile breath up their arses,

they managed to get over it and fall in a heap on the other side, struggling to breathe.

When they caught their breath, they looked at the crocs on the other side of the fence, and all they could manage was manic laughter.

They started shouting at the crocs, throwing stones and whatever came to hand at them. They flipped them off and laughed and spat at them, the whole victory dance.

The crocs sneered scorn back at them from the other side of the fence and didn't move. One of the blokes even dared himself to get closer to the fence, confident that crocs didn't do barbed-wire fences. He got as close as he could, upright and proud, and then one of the crocs moved its head to look at him and he was back with the others quick smartish.

When one of the crocs took off at a rate of knots away from them along the fence line, it had become a dozy lizard and the young blokes smelt the cowardice of defeat.

But the crocs knew this place, every inch of it. About ten yards along the fence line, there was a hole, just big enough for them to fit through.

The lads were still laughing at the story they would tell later. They turned calmly to head across the field. It wasn't until the croc was five yards behind from them that they heard the sound of it and turned to look.

They had the faces of people screaming for their lives but they were too scared to make a sound. They took off up the hill but the third lad lost his footing at pretty much the most inopportune moment known to humankind.

He scrambled to regain it but the croc was on him and took him by the leg. The other two crocs were close behind and were still coming. The other two had to run. They couldn't help. Now came the screams of anguish as they

could only watch him and listen to his screams, being dragged back through the hole in the fence.

He tried to grab hold of the fence but it came away in his hand. His screams turned to bubbles as he was pulled underwater to be tenderised and wedged under something for later. When they found him, some of him, they found out how hungry the crocs that took him were.

Trevor sat back in his chair and shouted for another beer. He had the look of a man who had imparted some wisdom.

All we could do was look at him and look at each other and mumble. Being eaten alive by crocodiles.

We paid the tab and thanked him and left the cafe more than a little mindful of signs and rivers. More than a little respectful of the local nature. We'd learnt a lot of it in Sydney with the spiders but this was one of the finest public service warnings we'd ever heard.