

# CROCODILE ATTACK EATEN ALIVE

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Borroloola - population: 300, lies 270 kilometers east of the Stuart Highway, on the Carpentaria Highway and approximately 700 kilometers south east of Darwin, in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The 'Loo', as it is affectionately known to the locals, swelters in tropical heat, humidity and flies, being typical Gulf cattle country. The area is primarily harsh scrub slashed through by the McArthur River, suitable only for cattle and the particular breed of Territorian who revels in isolation, challenge and independence. It also lies some 67 kilometers inland (by river) from the sea and due no doubt to its virtual isolation, is a fisherman's haven. It becomes the Mecca for amateur anglers during the Borroloola Barramundi Classic held in October of each year, a time during which the small community is virtually invaded by the 'Barra Seekers' in their endeavor to extract the quicksilver treasure from the McArthur. In addition to the 'Barra', the river also plays host to what some would describe as a more sinister resident, the Salt Water Crocodile (Saltie) some of which have grown to gargantuan size, having lived and tolerated the invasion of 'their' territories since the first arrival of man on the riverbank. In fact, a healthy respect has evolved amongst the local two-legged residents of the area for their reptilian co-tenants. Both normally avoid each other. However, it was late in the afternoon of Monday, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 1986 that suspicion, dread and a growing realization was confirmed that one of the giant reptiles

inhabiting their stretch of the McArthur had partaken of a particularly grisly feast at some stage over the preceding forty-eight hours.

The following is a reconstruction as far as can be ascertained of the meeting between man and reptile in the wild:

Around 7:00pm on Saturday evening, 6 September, 1986 Lee McLeod (alias Rusty Wherret) a ringer who had been working on fencing contracts in the Borroloola area, left the Borroloola Hotel with a mate, Dennis Vowken. Both were in an intoxicated condition at the time and on leaving went to Rocky Point, some 500 meters from the Hotel, being the boat ramp area on the McArthur River. On arrival they consumed more liquor and finally fell into a drunken sleep on the bank of the river.

It's now thought McLeod woke during the night and went for a swim. At any rate when Vowken woke and discovered him missing around midnight, nothing was thought of it. McLeod's shirt was still there where he had been and Vowken felt no concern until late on Sunday the 7<sup>th</sup>, when he reported him missing. A search was conducted of Borroloola and surrounding area to no avail. It was then thought he may have gone for a swim, got into difficulties, and drowned.

At this stage the search was led by Senior Constable Rex Grass and Constable Mal Jensen. It was conducted along the banks of the McArthur. At approximately 4:30pm on Monday the 8<sup>th</sup>, the dismembered legs of McLeod

were found 100 meters upstream from where he had fallen asleep at Rocky Point.

It was known that a Saltie approximately 4.6 meters (15 feet) in length and referred to as 'Gus' by the locals, inhabited that stretch of the river. It was highly likely he was the culprit. This was partially confirmed by the particularly putrid stench from his breath: Conservation Commission Officers, all with considerable experience in crocodile lore, were called to the area and whilst patrolling for him noted this fact whenever they were in close proximity, whether they could see him or not, were aware of his presence by the stench of his breath. Even submerged, the bubbles expelled were putrid enough to cause near vomiting if they caught the unaware leaning from a boat and catching the bubble burst in the face. It appears this fact is peculiar to the crocodile, especially if it has taken a human, as was the case here. Apparently, the contents of the croc's stomach virtually ferment in a cocktail of powerful juices and acids, giving rise to the croc's particularly fetid breath. It was after dark on the Tuesday when the Conservation Commission Officers, Bryan Walsh, Phil Hauser, Bill Binns and Ross Bryan, set forth to hunt 'Gus'. The intension at the time being should the croc be 3 meters (10 feet) or under, a gut sample was to be taken, remove him to another area and release him. The eventual prize caused some degree of shock and relief that 'Gus' hadn't placed them in a situation whereby he

was taking samples from them.

The boat used by the Commission Officers was specially built for occasions such as this, the hunt for 'Gus'. It was 5.5 meters, of shallow draught, heavy gauge aluminum with forward off-set control console to enable the operator to maintain visual contact, decking was self draining and covered in special carpet to reduce noise. In addition to the covered decking, the boat was fitted with an electric motor for silent running and painted matt black to reduce glare from the spotlights at night. 'Gus' was sighted several times at night by means of eyeshine reflection in the spotlights. However, it wasn't until just after midnight on Thursday, the 11<sup>th</sup> that they were in a position to do something about it. As the sighting was consistent with a large croc spotted earlier, a switch was made from the outboard motor to the electric. Whilst slow, it was also necessarily quiet, enabling close approach without alarming the quarry. It was believed by all the crew that this approach alteration had confused the crocodile concerned as the approach distance was shortened immediately, the crocodile going direct to the site where the victim's remains had been found. Minimal use was made of the light, it was only used to locate him then switched off. The phosphorus activity was exceptional in the water, some movements made by the crocodile could be followed in pitch darkness by tracking his fluorescent glow as he surged through the water. Any close approach during this time angered the croc, causing him to exhale, snorting from his nostrils loudly, before diving. The putrefaction that could be smelt from his breath had the capture crew convinced they were on the right track. Whilst crocodile breath is rarely sweet

smelling, this particular smell was quite different to the normal smells encountered in capture work.

After heading back towards the boat ramp, the crocodile again returned to the vicinity of the remains and was approached from behind as he rested on the water's edge. As the boat moved to within 15m he began to back into the water. The harpoon was thrown in the general area of the rear hind leg, being the only presentable area that the small harpoon barbs could penetrate.

A hit was made and the line went taut as the giant reptile swung to port and submerged. The croc surfaced midstream, then submerged again and swam towards what appeared to be its 'sulking' hole, a deep location in a 'false arm' towards the eastern bank. Not knowing how well the barbs had been implanted, the waiting and stalking was done on the basis that the harpoon head might not be well implanted and 'Murphy's Law' would prevail.

After some twenty minutes of laying on the bottom, Gus surfaced, moving northwards straight for a dead Melaleuca that had fallen into the river. After weaving his way through the dead tree in an effort to dislodge the harpoon head, he surfaced on the other side swimming steadily northwest. The line was cut and rejoined to spare spool in the boat, placed in a bucket and tied up in a dead tree. This enabled the crocodile to keep moving, giving the boat crew time to race to the other side of the snag and re-locate the line. The line was then retrieved and pursuit recommenced.

After retracing their steps back towards the west bank, and repeating this technique of overcoming snags, logs, trees, etc., an additional five times, the place started to look like a giant spider's

web. The crocodile was using every known ploy to evade capture, the boat crew countering with every technique they could think of to continue pursuit, cutting up life jackets to use as floats, racing back for bucket and spool, and so the chase continued.

They were finally towed by the crocodile clear of snags but they were heading towards more. A decision was made that if the harpoon had held through the obstacles to date, it was probably well implanted and worth an attempt to pull him to the surface. This was achieved after extreme effort and Gus was shot in the back of the head by a .308 solid. The crocodile died instantly, with no thrashing but with some regurgitation. In fact, it wasn't until this stage they were aware of the size of the giant saurian they were playing tag with.

Despite being suspended in water an animal of this size is incredibly heavy; it took considerable effort to eventually get a noose around his head and truss him along side the boat. Gus was then towed back to the boat ramp, beached and the police roused to complete the autopsy.

On examination he was estimated to be 5 meters (16 feet 3 inches) in length. Estimation being due to the fact that his eleven tail scutes, which are the erect jagged looking tail scales, were missing. These erect scales, or scutes, form two rows down the back of the croc, merging into a single row towards the end of the tail. As stated, the last eleven were missing, obviously due to territorial fights in the past. His estimated weight would have gone close to a ton and he would have been approximately 60 years of age. As a side issue it is interesting to note that another 4.3 meter (14 feet) croc has

moved into the territory recently vacated by Gus and that several local dogs have already 'gone missing'.

At 3:30am on Thursday morning the remains of McLeod were found inside the crocodile. It was found that digestive juices had already reduced bone matter to the consistency of rubbery gristle, flesh to a jelly like substance and skin bleached and rubbery-like in texture.

From the bruising sustained to the hands and arms, it is evident McLeod was alive when taken. It would appear he was taken from behind, crushed through the middle by the immediate power of the jaws and whilst struggling to escape his arms and hands were lacerated and punctured by the croc's teeth. He was carried upstream for a hundred meters before the final 'death roll' and flailing of the by now useless body severed the legs and arms, one of the legs being 'flicked' high onto the riverbank. The legs had been severed/ripped from the torso above the pelvic joint which was still intact, the pelvic bone being rendered vertically through. The awesome power is evident in the fact it was the flailing action on the body which literally tore the arms and legs from the torso, the action as stated earlier, flicking one of the legs high on the riverbank. The arms were later swallowed at leisure.

From papers in McLeod's effects, it was established he had possibly been fingerprinted in Queensland so a request was made by the Northern Territory Police to their Queensland counterparts for a set of impressions. Senior Constable Dave Prowse of the Territory Police took possession of skin tissue of what appeared to be the right and left thumb, left index and part of the left palm.

This tissue was thoroughly washed in

warm water, dried and then dusted with black powder, the powder being wiped off with methylated spirit leaving a deposit between the ridges. The skin was then placed between two sheets of microscopic slide glass and photographed with oblique lighting, then again with transmitted lighting on Pan-X film. Both were successful and McLeod was positively identified by fingerprint comparisons with the Queensland impressions.

It is of interest that approximately five months prior to this a person was attacked, crossing the river carrying a carton of beer, was mouthed and 'spat out'; he lost the carton. He was 'medevaced' to Darwin for treatment to a severely lacerated right shoulder and arm. However, it is not possible to establish if it was 'Gus' who was the responsible party or a smaller 'Saltie' who had also moved into the territory controlled by 'Gus' at that time. A smaller croc was captured in a croc trap set by the Conservation Commission for 'Gus', this being in the vicinity where the legs were recovered, it being a known fact that crocs will return to feed from prey they have killed and stashed, in this case, McLeod's legs. The smaller croc was released back into the river. 'Gus' at no stage made any move towards or gave any indication that the set trap would work. The only alternative was the course that transpired, the harpooning and shooting of 'Gus'.

It is a little sad when all the circumstances are viewed in retrospect, that chance meeting of man and beast resulted in a horrific, agonizing exodus from this world by McLeod and the tracking, harpooning and final destruction of one of nature's relics of prehistoric times. A relic, it might be

added, who maintained sovereignty over his particular 'territory' for the last fifteen odd years, ever since their kind were protected from being shot into extinction. This dominance only being maintained by fighting off all comers until man, a creature from another element trespassed his domain, presenting himself as prey at a time when food was an apparent priority. There is no doubt had Gus fed in the days preceding his encounter with McLeod or, for that matter, had McLeod's reasoning not been clouded by alcohol, there would have been no cause for writing this account. Borroloola - population 299.

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