Being Croc-savvy: Ecology, crocodile education, and rescuing propositional knowledge

Kate Rossmanith

Introduction

This article is about two true stories set in Queensland, Australia, that took place in the first decade of this century. The first concerns the late celebrity Croc-Hunter Steve Irwin, his newborn baby, and a public relations debacle; the second is an account of some awkward education strategies enacted by wildlife rangers as they scrambled to impart crocodile-safety knowledge to locals in far north Queensland. The stories function as case studies, for they concern the ways in which people teach other people to live in crocodile country: in other words, teaching them how to live in place.

In the 1970s in Australia, saltwater crocodiles became an endangered species. As croc populations recover from intense hunting, and as people from southern Australia migrate to the warm north, there has been an increase in croc-human encounters. While “problem crocs” are removed and relocated – and while commercial crocodile farms exist for breeding, and producing croc-skins, flesh, and other by-products – the emphasis is on managing healthy wild populations and protecting crocodile wetlands. In her essay “Us and Them,” Annie Krien writes of our complex relationship with animals, at one point asking what happens to an eco-system when people forcibly remove predators; my article in part asks what happens to people’s “ecology of place” when predators are re-introduced. Locals in far north Queensland are finding that the existence of crocodiles on their beaches, rivers and lagoons is becoming a part of everyday life. People must learn to live around Crocodylus Porosus, one of the most dangerous reptiles on earth.

Using these accounts, along with phenomenological understandings of “ecology” and “home”, this article explores the uneasy role of bodily practice in that pedagogy designed to instruct communities on how to move and behave in place. It considers the curious relationship between practice, discourse and experience, and it contributes to scholarship interested in the nature of knowledge – most particularly recent research in phenomenological anthropology and performance studies. My work is about the tension between propositional knowledge and everyday place-based performance. Richard Schochner defines performance as a “showing of a doing” (2002: 22). In the two accounts I present in this article, Steve Irwin and wildlife rangers continually engage in just that: showing the community how to live in crocodile country.

In the crocodile-education approaches, there is an awkward relationship between the discourse of “croc safety” – the propositional knowledge developed by rangers for the community – and the complex, embodied ways of being required to live safely in croc country. These sometimes competing sets of knowledge – these involving declarative statements about the world, and these involving knowing-how-to-move-in-an-environment – often preoccupy scholars interested in human geography, performance and place. In their ethnography of hill-walking in Scotland, for instance, Hayden Lorimer and Katrina Lund study the interplay between the regulatory discourse promoted in guidebooks, the “geometric spatialities of the mapped mountain,” and what they call the “sensed spatialities of the body” (2003: 132); in other words, people’s embodiment of mobile practices in place.

Such sets of knowledge also concern those post-Hegdegerrian scholars preoccupied with place, embodiment and home. In their study of ecologies of place, performance studies scholars Carl Lavery and Simon Whitehead point out that if the etymology of the word “ecology” fuses the meanings of oikos (house) and logos (science, law), then [e]cology can be regarded as a type of domestic science, a way of being at home (2012: 111). They write that, for Heidegger, “to be in place forms the basis of an authentic ontology, which [Heidegger] associates with dwelling and building” (2012: 111). Crucially, in their reimagining of Heidegger’s work, they argue that “home doesn’t start with language […] it starts with the body” (2012: 114).

My article takes up this theme by investigating how people are taught an embodied way of being in relation to home and habitation. I should note that I do not explicitly explore how Australian Aboriginal communities cohabit with crocodiles. Long before European settlement, many Indigenous Australians were – and still are – living with crocs, and have varied and rich relations with them. I should also note that scientist Graham Webb has written extensively on crocodiles and crocodile management programs in Australia’s Northern Territory. My article, however, is not on crocodile science, nor management programs, but rather the micro-bodily, educative practices enacted by people (mostly wildlife rangers) to teach other people live around crocodiles.

Between 2006 and 2008 I took three short fieldtrips to the Cairns and Port Douglas area. I conducted 20 interviews with locals and rangers about how people are being taught to live around saltwater crocodiles (see Rossmanith 2012). I want to suggest that the rangers at Queensland’s Department of Environment and Resource Management in their wildlife presentations and in the croc-safety literature, were attempting a challenging task. They aimed to rescue “sensed spatialities of the body” – a knowing how and where to move around crocodiles – in order to codify them discursively for community. In Irwin’s case, this resulted in a set of clumsy statements about what he was doing when he took his newborn into a crocodile enclosure. In the case of rangers in far north Queensland, it exposes the incoherent and often unbridgeable gaps between discourse, practice and experience – gaps that are, perhaps, common to those community-education strategies designed to translate an instructive “knowing how” into a reflexive “explaining how”. As I shall argue, what people know about being-in-place (their placial ecology), and how they talk about and teach on what they know, are two different things.

Two Stories: The croc-baby stunt and croc-education strategies

On 2 January 2004, Steve Irwin prepared to hand-feed a chicken carcass to a 4-metre-long saltwater crocodile. He was performing a demonstration at Australia Zoo, the wildlife park he owned in his home state, Queensland. Inside the reptile enclosure, surrounded by a live audience and television cameras, he kept a steady distance from the animal, gently advancing and retreating until he felt right to dangle the meet in front of giant jaws. Viewers were stunned: As Irwin clutched the dead chicken in one hand, he cradled his baby son, Bob, in the other. “Bob’s one month old, so it’s about time he did his first croc-come,” Irwin told spectators. At the time of the incident, Irwin was an international multi-million-dollar star, his Crocodile Hunter documentaries broadcasting in more than 130 countries to at least 500 million people. However, the ‘croc baby stunt’, as it quickly became labelled, draw fierce criticism from child welfare groups and many of Irwin’s formally devoted fans. CNN ran a website poll asking if people if they thought Irwin had “endangered his baby.” Of the 12,000 votes that flooded in, 91 per cent said he had (Shears 2006: 141). The incident even prompted Australia’s Queensland State Government to review its croc-handling laws. A year after the stunt, it released new rules prohibiting children and any untrained adult from entering crocodile enclosures.

More fascinating than the incident itself or the public’s response to it was Steve Irwin’s justification of it, specifically, why he took his baby son into the enclosure and why in his mind, and in his wife’s mind, there was no chance of the child coming to any harm. At a news conference Irwin (CBC News 2004) said:
A year or two before the croc-baby stunt, a different sort of education strategy was being implemented. In 2002 the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service launched its “Croc Wise” education campaign. This took place, as one ranger explained to me, “when the big rush to the north happened — people arriving from the southern states who weren’t used to living around crocodiles.” Crocodiles live in and around estuaries and lakes where they happily breed, using the beaches to move between rivers. It is worth noting here that, despite their reputation, crocodiles have been responsible for few human deaths in the post-protection era. Croc-sightings, however, are on the rise. There are ongoing debates as to the reason for this. Some argue that the croc population is expanding; others say that the growing human population has resulted in more people to see the crocs in the first place. Referring to people’s growing anxiety, and the fact that croc attacks are rare, one ranger told me, “The biggest problem with crocs is that you can see them.” Despite crocs being protected, and there are hefty penalties for killing one, many people call for intense culling. In October 2007, two boys in Cairns caused a commotion when they killed a 2-metre croc. They used it out of a drain with meat on a hook before bashing it to death with a rock. Many residents defended the boys’ actions, explaining that, due to the number of croc sightings in suburban creeks and drains, they had “all been forced to take matters into their own hands” (Brown: Online). In an effort to placate wildlife officials on the one hand, and angry residents on the other, the mayor of Cairns said: “It’s a fact of life. Crocodiles get in[to town, then] they get out.”

When the mayor announced that crocodiles in town were “a fact of life,” his phrase betrayed the push by governments and wildlife officials for local residents to experience living with crocs in just this way: as natural as any other fact of life. But simply proclaiming something “a fact of life” does not make it so. In an effort to encourage an easier relationship between people and crocs, strategies were implemented to educate the community about crocodile safety behaviour. In 2003, wildlife rangers from the OPWS began travelling to communities in the area, giving presentations at schools and erecting poster displays at esteddofds and other events. “We were like a travelling road show,” I was told by one of the rangers involved. “I’ve always said the best way to teach people about crocodiles is through teaching children,” he said. Each presentation lasted 35 minutes, with the rangers explaining to the children. “We teach you about crocodiles, why we love crocodiles, and why they should be respected.” After a session on facts about crocs (“Did you know they don’t have vocal chords?”), the rangers taught a section about safety. As the ranger explains:

> We’d show them a picture of a mum, dad and kids swimming in dirty water, with their dog playing at the water’s edge. We’d ask the children: “What’s wrong with this picture?” We’d show them a photo of a man standing on a log on the water, dangling a fishing line. We’d show them a photo of fish carcasses on boat ramps. And we’d keep asking: “What is wrong with these photos?”

The things “wrong” with those pictures include swimming in muddy water, the cloudiness of which crocodiles like to hide in; allowing a dog near in or in the water, as crocodiles are attracted to them; standing on a log on the water while fishing, where the bait attracts crocs and you are in a position to be attacked; and leaving fish scraps on boat ramps, as it encourages crocs to seek out food there.

By 2007 the rangers ceased delivering these presentations as it was felt that crocodile information had reached the community. At the time of my fieldwork, the Department of Environment and Resource Management (DERM) relied on crocodile warning signs as well as the pamphlets, posters and bumper stickers it distributes. The bright yellow croc signs are erected next to lakes, rivers, mangroves and beaches where crocodiles are known to live. Crocodiles inhabit this area — attacks can cause injury or death, they read, and they feature a figure of a crocodile’s head with its jaws wide open, and a human figure swimming with a red cross through it. Keep away from the water’s edge and do not enter the water. Take extreme care when launching and retrieving boats. Do not clean fish or feed fish waste at the water’s edge. Camp well away from the water. Similarly, the pamphlets and other croc literature announce Be croc wise in croc country! followed by a dozen or so guidelines, including:

1. Obey crocodile warning signs.
2. Never swim in water where crocodiles may live even if there is no warning sign present.
3. Camp at least 2 metres above the high-water mark and at least 50 metres from the water’s edge.
4. Never prepare food, wash dishes, or pursue any activities near the water’s edge or adjacent sloping banks.

Speaking with a senior ranger at DERM about the literature, he told me: “You just stick to those steps, plus a bit of common sense.” I asked: “If I just stick to those steps, won’t I be exacting common sense?” He responded: “Yes — and you just have to be sensible.”

The problem with common sense: rescuing sensed spatialities of the body

My exchange with the ranger reveals the extent to which the guidelines can never quite capture common-sense practices in crocodile country. It appears that no matter how comprehensive the list might seem, or how many photos rangers show the kids, a local learning to live in croc country must add it to its “common sense” or “being sensible.” This is reflected by the inclusion in the croc literature: Never take unnecessary risks in crocodile habitat and Never swim in water where crocodiles may live even if there is no warning sign present. What exactly is an unnecessary risk? And what water do crocodiles live in? As Clifford Geertz has shown us, common sense is indeed not common at all; it is profoundly particular.

In developing and delivering the croc education, the OPWS and DERM have attempted to translate “sensed spatialities of the body” into a tidy list of “dos” and “don’ts.” The result is that the presentations by rangers, and the croc literature, all involve an awkward relationship between propositional knowledge that can be articulated as a series of declarative knowings, and the deeply embodied knowledge that these same rangers carry with them. In other words, training residents to live around crocodiles involved, for the rangers and other wildlife experts, rescuing a set of propositional statements — a series of
safety instructions – from a set of knowledge not necessarily transparent to those rangers. Put simply, non-propositional knowledge is often impossibly difficult to talk about.

The uneasy relationship between these different kinds of knowledge is reflected in the language rangers used to describe what it is they are doing. The rangers I spoke with talked about their work as “educating”; they were educating the children about crocodiles. To them they were depositing knowledge into people’s minds. They were enlisting a sort of “information deficit model”, a term coined in the 1980s by social scientists to describe the attitudes of many scientists: namely, that the community need to be taught science and that this knowledge deficit that can be “fixed” by giving the public more information. When I asked one ranger why he had been involved in training the locals to live with crocodile country, he rejected the term. “Training just is not the right word,” he told me. However, this resistance to the idea of “training” perhaps revealed a mis-recognition on the ranger’s part of what is taking place. When rangers presented talks and circulated safety instructions, they were not only disseminating propositional knowledge that can be condensed into a series of facts to be recited; they were simultaneously offering modes of bodily practice. By displaying the pictures of what not to do, by giving practical instructions of doings, and by introducing children to their own “ranger embodiment,” the rangers were offering people ways of being in the world.

If we turn for a moment to Irwin, the croc baby incident, and his subsequent explanation, we can examine the complexity of trying to articulate one’s embodied knowledge within a pedagogical paradigm. Rather than dismiss Irwin’s apologia as the words of an inarticulate “Aussie larrikin” (Great 2005), it is perhaps better understood as an attempt by him to articulate a particular order of knowledge peculiar to people who live and work around crocodiles. When Irwin’s audiences witnessed in him theatrical flourish and virtuoso feats, they simultaneously saw a subtle, ingrained awareness – expressed, for instance, in the minutiae of his movements – of how to be around crocodiles. Fans called this a sixth sense, the genius of a crocodile whisperer; “He liked to approach his animal subjects as naturally as possible. In the raw without any protection. His sixth sense was his armoury, his defiance” (Shears 2005: 25). However, this “sixth sense,” with all the mystery it invokes, and all the power and charisma it bestows on people thought to possess it, is better understood as a very particular kind of embodied knowledge that had worked its way into Irwin. He’d yell facts to audiences and cameras – “Did you know that crocodiles have three eyelids?”; at the same time, he’d move lightly, keeping a steady balance, before leaping on top of a 5-metro croc in exactly the right spot. Through him we encountered both propositional knowledge – a “knowing that” – and non-propositional knowledge – a “knowing how” (Higgs and Titchen 1995: 256-6). Drawing on his in-depth ethnographic fieldwork with the Warlpiri people in northern Australia, anthropologist Michael Jackson makes a distinction between people’s knowledge of the world and their knowledge urgently of and for the world (1995: 37). In other words, different knowledges work in tandem.

The non-propositional, professional craft knowledge manifested itself in Irwin as an embodied way of being. When he crouched a certain distance from crocodiles, or when he kept on their backs, he enacted a set of knowledges – “knowing how” – without thinking about it, without being conscious of a deliberate way of acting. That is not to say he was not conscious, but rather, as Edmund Russoell and Maurice Merleau-Ponty might put it, Irwin’s body “held sway in consciousness” (Russell 1970: 170): “my body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my ‘symbolic’ or objectifying ‘function’” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 140-141).

Importantly, embodied knowledge feels so natural to those who possess it that it often doesn’t feel like knowledge at all. It no longer feels epistemological but, rather, ontological: not what we might learn and know about the world but how the world is. This is, perhaps, why Irwin found it almost impossible to explain how he took his baby into the enclosure, why he was “in complete control,” and why the baby would be safe: Irwin’s knowledge was so embodied in him, in his movements and muscles, that it ceased to feel like knowledge. It was “tact,” “taken-for-granted,” experienced as “obvious and ordinary” (Higgs and Titchen 1995: 527). When Australian talk show host, Andrew Danton, asked Irwin about his gift with animals, and whether he, Irwin, had a sense of this gift, Irwin replied: “How on earth could I explain that?” (ABC Enough Rope 2004) Three months later Irwin introduced his son to a crocodile and was immediately compelled to explain it. Interestingly, his justification, that he was “teaching” Bob to be “croc savvy,” was articulated after the fact; his intuitive, feelingful sense of how to be, at the press conference, labelled by Irwin in terms of epistemology and pedagogy: he possessed knowledge he was transferring to his son. In this moment of articulation, Irwin yoked a particular discourse – “teaching knowledge” – to a specific set of practices – clutching a newborn to his chest as it gently advanced towards a croc, carefully dangling a chicken carcass. “My dad did the same for me,” a bewildered Irwin told the press. (There is indeed an account of Steve’s father teaching nine-year-old Steve to go into the rivers at night in far north Queensland to catch crocodiles).

Recall Irwin’s words in the enclosure during the show: “It’s time Bob did his first croc climb.” The discourse was one of “doing”, not “learning”; Bob “did” the demo. Here the discourse (“doing”) operating within the practice differed from the discourse (“teaching and learning”) operating about the practice. In my experience as a researcher of theatre rehearsal practices, there is often a distinction between the talk associated with a practice while practitioners are engaged in that practice, and then how that practice gets talked about later to other people. For practitioners, there is often a “conscious discourse” they use to talk about their work; a less conscious discourse “when the rehearsal is up in that level” (Lefebvre 2006: 149). As Irwin described it, his son’s practice of “doing” later became one of “learning”. His shift in discourse was not meant to fool or deceive the public; it was simply that, as Jackson might put it, the knowledge whereby Irwin lived – the knowledge to which he was blind – was not necessarily identical to the knowledge whereby he explained life (1995: 2).

Of course, although not articulated by Irwin during the incident, Baby Bob’s “doing” of the demo was simultaneously a process of learning. In a later interview, Andrew Danton asked the Irwins: “Babies at that time can’t distinguish their dad’s face, [and] their brains are still in a formative stage. Is Bob really going to learn about a croc when his brain is still that basic?” (ABC Enough Rope 2004) In the enclosure, the baby may not have been “learning about a croc,” but perhaps he was “learning” Pressed to chest, he felt his father’s heat and sweat, the visceral indices of bodily labour; he moved with Irwin’s movements and heartbeat, or rather, the movements and heartbeat moved him; he smelled the soil and skin of reptile. He was encountering, corporeally, his father’s way of being, a set of knowledges in action.

Just as Irwin was forced to reflect on exactly how he was teaching Bob, the rangers who developed the crocodile education were attempting to translate ways of being into safety instructions. That the rangers acknowledged the difficulty of this is reflected in the less conscious discourse of “croc awareness” they used to talk about their work. While overtly they were in the business of “educating the community,” they were also developing “croc awareness” in people. And yet the rangers found it impossible to articulate what this croc awareness consisted of. “It’s just a general awareness. Being aware,” a ranger told me when I asked him to clarify what he meant. I want to suggest: that this so-called “awareness” involves an intensely visceral engagement with place and the movement of crocs in it.

Conclusion: Place, world and animal presence

The “croc baby” incident and Irwin’s explanation of it went beyond enriching and teaching croc-savvy craft knowledge; part of Irwin’s feeling that he was in complete control was caused by disassociating: the ground wrenching under him, the trees and rivers rearing around him, rendering the previously familiar zoo enclosure and surrounding croc territory, and his orientation within it, frighteningly foreign. That is, the place, and his emplacement
In place – his ecology of place – was as central to his set of knowledges and awareness as was knowing how to wrestle reptiles.

For wildlife rangers accustomed to dealing with crocs in the wild, they are not only familiar with how to handle the reptiles but also the place – crocodile territory – has, in the words of Edward Casey, “come to be embedded” (2001: 688) in them. The presence of crocodiles is incorporated into how they move around, shaping their “place-world” as they actively live and experience it. Here, in this place, animal presences shape them. This is most acutely manifest in rangers’ movements and behaviour at the edges of lakes and rivers, as crocodiles are perhaps most dangerous at the water’s edge. They stalk their prey by remaining still with their tiny eyes resting just above the waterline. They sense movement at the water’s edge, and they wait – often a day or more – for the movement to be repeated in the same spot. Rangers know to enact a “safe distance” from the water’s edge, orienting themselves in relation to the potentially fatal launch of the reptile.

If rangers have embodied a particular ways of moving and behaving in croc country, how successful have they been in teaching the community? Are people learning to live around crocodiles? I asked a senior ranger how he measured the effectiveness of the “travelling road show” presentations and the croc literature, and he replied: “I just know it works.” When I asked how he knew, he recounted a story:

We got a call from a grazer who lives out west (I won’t tell you how far west because it’s frightening to think a croc could travel that far inland). He told us that a croc was in his waterhole and that it had taken a couple of his cattle. The grazer said to us: “There is an answer and it costs $2.30.” That’s the cost of a round of ammunition. But instead of shooting the croc, the guy had phoned us. To me this was incredible that a grazer, a guy like that, would phone us croc guys to remove the animal rather than him shooting it.

In this way, the OPWS ranger measured the effectiveness of croc education by the reduced number of attacks on crocs by humans. In other words, “not harming crocs” is being yoked to “living with” them. The OPWS and DERM were, of course, concerned about croc attacks on people, but that this ranger referred to crocodile protection reflects the mutualistic croc-human relationshapes wildlife officials were attempting to encourage.

According to the locals themselves, they are learning to live around crocs, but this learning is occurring in both formal and informal ways. As I have written elsewhere (Rossmanith 2012), it is not only the bright yellow croc-warning signs and the croc-safety literature that is educating people; perhaps more powerfully, it is the way such knowledge circulates informally amongst residents. This “training” not only involves sharing knowledge about where crocs might be (I saw a big one at the inlet,” a parent might tell a school teacher), but it also includes the sharing of crocodile stories, close escapes, and advice on how to move around the area. It is not unusual for there to exist a clumsy correlation between public education strategies and the erratic ways in which people engage with such knowledge (see for example Simmons 2003). In what must be a relief for the rangers, the croc-education is working, but perhaps it is working in ways that they could never have imagined.

References


