

# HUMAN VULNERABILITY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING PREY

**I**N THE EARLY wet season, Kakadu's paperbark wetlands are especially stunning, as the waterlilies weave white, pink and blue patterns of dreamlike beauty over the shining towers of thundercloud reflected in their still waters. Yesterday, the waterlilies and the wonderful birdlife had enticed me into a joyous afternoon's idyll, as I ventured onto the East Alligator lagoon for the first time, in a canoe lent by the park service. "You can play about on the backwaters," the ranger had said, "but don't go onto the main river channel. The current's too swift, and if you get into trouble, there are the crocodiles! Lots of them along the river!" I had followed his advice carefully, and glutted myself on the magical beauty and birdlife of the lily lagoons, untroubled by their crocodiles.

Today, I had been tempted to repeat that wonderful experience, despite the light drizzle beginning to fall as I made my way to the canoe launch site. I set off on a day trip in search of an Aboriginal rock art site across the lagoon and up a side channel. But the drizzle had turned to rain within a few hours and the magic had been lost. At 35°C, the wet season rains could be experienced as comfortable and welcome: they were late this year, and the parched land and all its inhabitants eagerly awaited their relief. But today in the rain, the birds were invisible, the waterlilies were sparse, and the lagoon seemed even a little menacing. I noticed now how low the fourteen-foot Canadian canoe sat in the water, just a few inches of fibreglass between me and the great saurians, the closest living relatives on earth to the ancient dinosaurs.



A U S T R A L I A

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Not long ago saltwater crocodiles were considered endangered, as virtually all the mature animals were shot out of the rivers and lakes of Australia's north by commercial hunting. But after twelve years of protection, their numbers were beginning to burgeon. They were now the most plentiful of the large animals of Kakadu National Park, which preserved a major area of their breeding habitat. I was actively involved in the struggle to keep such places, and for me the crocodile was – and still is – a potent symbol of the power and integrity of this place and the incredible richness of its aquatic habitats.

After hours of searching the maze of shallow channels in the swamp, I had been unable to locate the clear channel leading to the rock art site as shown on the ranger's sketch map. When I pulled my canoe across in driving rain to a rock outcrop rising out of the swamp for a hasty, sodden lunch, I had experienced strongly the unfamiliar sensation of being watched. But I had never been one for timidity, in my philosophy or in my life. So I decided, rather than return defeated to my sticky caravan, to explore further a clear, deep channel closer to the river I had travelled some way along the previous day.

The rain squalls and wind were growing now, and several times I had to pull my canoe over to tip the rainwater out of it. The channel soon developed steep mud banks and many snags, and the going was slow. But on beyond this section, I found my channel opening up but eventually petering out, blocked by a large sandy bar. I pushed the canoe towards the bank, looking around care-

fully before getting out in the shallows and pulling the canoe up. I would be safe from crocodiles in the canoe, I had been told, but swimming, and standing or wading at the water's edge were dangerous. The edge was one of the crocodile's favourite food-capture places. I saw nothing, but the feeling of unease that had been there with me all day intensified.

The rain had eased temporarily, and I picked my way across the sandbar covered with scattered scrub to see whatever there was of this puzzle place. As I crested the gently sloping dune, I was shocked to glimpse the muddy brown waters of the East Alligator River gliding silently only a hundred yards ahead of me. The channel I had followed had evidently been an anabranch, and had led me back to the main river. Nothing stirred along the river bank, but my attention was caught by the great tumble of escarpment cliffs away up beyond the stream. One especially striking rock formation on the skyline, a single large rock balanced precariously upon a much smaller one, held my gaze. As I looked, my mutter of unease turned to a shout of danger. The strange formation put me sharply in mind of two things: first, of the indigenous Gagadgu owners of Kakadu, whose advice and permission to come here I had not sought, and second, of the precariousness of my own life, of human lives. And well it might have: as a solitary specimen of a major prey species of the crocodile, I was standing in one of the most dangerous places on the face of the earth.

I turned decisively to go back the way I had come, with a feeling of relief. I had not reached the rock paintings, I rationalised, but it was too late to look for them now. The rock formation presented itself as the *telos* of the day. I had come, I had seen something interesting, now I could go, home to caravan comfort.

**A**S I PULLED the canoe out into the main current, the torrential rain and wind started up again; the swelling stream would carry me home the quicker, I thought. I had not gone more than five or ten minutes back down the channel when, rounding a bend, I saw ahead of me in midstream what looked like a floating stick, but one I did not recall passing on the way up. As the current bore me towards it, the stick seemed to develop eyes. A crocodile! It is hard to estimate size from the small nose and eye protrusions the crocodile in cryptic mode leaves above the waterline, but it did not look a large one. I was close to it now, but I was not especially afraid; an encounter would add interest to the day, as with the smallish one we had detoured to examine close up the week before from a ranger's boat.

Although I was paddling to miss the crocodile, our paths were strangely convergent. I saw that it was going to be close, but was totally unprepared for the great

blow I felt against the side of the canoe as I was almost past it. Again it came, again and again, now from behind my head, shuddering through the flimsy craft. I paddled furiously, but the blows continued. The unheard of was happening, the canoe was under attack, the crocodile in full pursuit! For the first time, it came to me fully that I was prey. I must somehow get out of the canoe, or risk being capsized or pulled into the deeper water of mid-channel.

The bank now presented a high, steep face of slippery mud, difficult to scale. There was only one obvious avenue of escape, a paperbark tree with many low branches near the muddy bank wall. I made the split-second decision to try to leap into the lower branches and climb to safety. I steered the canoe over to the bank by the paperbark, and stood up ready to jump. At the same instant, the crocodile rushed up alongside the canoe, and its beautiful, flecked golden eyes looked straight into mine. Perhaps I could bluff it, drive it away, as I had read of British tiger hunters doing. I waved my arms, shouted "Go away!" (We're British here.) The golden eyes glinted with interest. I tensed for the jump, and leapt. Before my foot even tipped the first branch, I had a blurred, incredulous vision of great toothed jaws bursting from the water, as I was seized between the legs in a red-hot pincer grip, and whirled into the suffocating wet darkness below.

The course and intensity of terminal thought patterns in near-death experiences can tell us much about our frameworks of subjectivity. A subjectively-centred framework capable of sustaining action and purpose, must, I think, view the world "from the inside", structured so as to sustain the concept of an invincible, or at least a continuing, self; we remake the world in that way as actionable, investing it with meaning, reconceiving it as sane, survivable, amenable to hope and resolution. The lack of fit between this subject-centred version, in which one's own death is unimaginable, and an "outside" version of the world comes into play in extreme moments. In its final, frantic attempts to protect itself from the knowledge of vulnerability and impending death that threatens the normal, subject-centred framework, the mind can instantaneously fabricate terminal doubt of extravagant, Cartesian proportions: *this is not really happening, this is a nightmare, from which I will soon awake*. This desperate delusion split apart as I hit the water. In that flash, when my consciousness had to know the bitter certainty of its end, I glimpsed the world for the first time "from the outside", as no longer *my* world, as raw necessity, an unrecognisably bleak order which would go on without me, indifferent to my will and struggle, to my life as to my death. This near-death knowledge, the knowledge of the survivor and of the

prey, has some strange fruits, not all of them bitter.

Few of those who have experienced the crocodile's death roll have lived to describe it. It is, essentially, indescribable, an experience beyond words of total terror, total helplessness, total certainty, experienced with undivided mind and body, of a terrible death in the swirling depths. The crocodile's breathing and heart metabolism is not suited to prolonged struggle, so the roll is an intense initial burst of power designed to overcome the surprised victim's resistance quickly. Then it is merely a question of holding the now feebly struggling prey under the water a while for an easy finish to the drowning job. The roll was a centrifuge of whirling, boiling blackness, which seemed about to tear my limbs from my body, driving water irresistibly into my bursting lungs. It lasted for eternity, beyond endurance, but as I seemed all but finished, the rolling suddenly stopped. My feet touched bottom, and my head rose, broke the surface. Spluttering, coughing, I sucked at air, amazed to find myself still alive. The crocodile still had me in its pincer grip between the legs, and the water came just up to my chest. As we rested together, I had only just begun to weep for the prospects of my mangled body, before the crocodile pitched me suddenly into a second death roll.

When the whirling terror stopped again (this time perhaps it had not lasted quite so long), I surfaced again, still in the crocodile's grip, next to a stout branch of a large sandpaper fig growing in the water. (Strong saviour tree, how can I thank you?) I reached out and held onto the branch with all my strength, vowing to let the crocodile tear me apart rather than throw me again into that spinning, suffocating hell. For the first time I became aware of the low growling sound issuing from the crocodile's throat, as if it was very angry. I braced myself against the branch ready for another roll, but after a short time felt the crocodile's jaws suddenly relax. Unbelievably, I was free. With all my strength, I used the branch to pull myself away from it, dodging around the back of the fig tree, and, again avoiding the forbidding mud bank, tried once more the only apparent avenue of escape, to climb into the paperbark tree.

As in the repetition of nightmare, when the dreamer is stuck fast in some monstrous pattern of destruction impervious to will and endeavour, so the horror of my first attempt was exactly repeated. As I leapt again into the same branch, the crocodile again propelled itself from the water, seizing me once more, this time round the upper left thigh. I briefly felt a hot sensation there

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before I was again submerged in the terror of the third death roll. This roll, like the others, stopped eventually, and we came up again in the same place as before, next to the sandpaper fig branch.

I knew I was growing weaker, but I could see the crocodile taking a long time to kill me this way, tearing me slowly apart. It seemed to be playing with me, like a huge growling cat with a torn mouse. I did not imagine that I could survive, so great seemed its

anger and so great its power compared to mine, but I prayed for it to finish me quickly. I decided to try to provoke it, to attack it with my free hands. Feeling back behind me along the head which still held my body in its jaws, I encountered two lumps. Thinking I had its eye sockets, I jabbed my thumbs into them with all my might. They slid into warm, unresisting holes (which must have been the ears, or perhaps the nostrils), and the crocodile did not even startle. In despair, I resumed my grasp of the branch, dreading death by slow torture. Once again, after a time I felt the crocodile jaws relax.

I knew now I must break the pattern. *Not* back into the paperbark; up the impossible, slippery mudbank was the only way. I threw myself at it with all my failing strength, scrabbling with my hands for a grip, failing, sliding, falling back to the bottom, to the waiting crocodile. A second try, this time almost making it before sliding back, breaking my slide two-thirds down by grabbing a tuft of grass. I hung there, exhausted, defeated. *I can't make it. It'll just have to come and get me*, I thought. It seemed a shame, somehow, after all I had been through. The grass tuft began to give way. To stop myself sliding further, I instinctively jammed my fingers into the soft mud, and it supported me. This was the clue I needed for survival. With my last strength, I began to climb up the bank, pushing my fingers into the mud to hold my weight. I reached the top and stood up, incredulous. I was alive! I felt a great surge of elation.

**T**HE ESCAPE from the crocodile was not the end by any means of my struggle to survive. I was alone, severely injured, and many miles from help. During the struggle with the crocodile, I was so focused on survival that the pain and the injuries had not really registered. But as I took my first urgent steps away from the vicinity of the crocodile, I knew something was wrong with my leg. "The bastard's broken my knee," was my first thought. I did not wait, however, to inspect the damage, but took off away from the crocodile in the direction of the ranger station.

After I had put more distance between me and the crocodile and felt a bit safer, I stopped to find out what was wrong with my leg. Now I was aware for the first time of how serious my wounds were. I did not remove my clothing to see the damage to the groin area inflicted by the first hold. What I could see was bad enough. The left thigh hung open, bits of fat, tendon and muscle showing, and a sick, numb feeling suffused my entire body. I tore up some of my clothing to try and bind the wounds up, made a tourniquet for the thigh, then staggered on, thinking only of getting back to the ranger station. Still elated from my escape, I imagined myself, spattered with blood and mud, lurching sensationally into the station. I had gone some distance before I realised with a sinking heart that I had crossed the swamp above the station in the canoe, and that without it I could not get back to the station under my own steam. Perhaps I would die out here after all.

I realised I would have to rely on being found by a search party. But I could maximise my chances by moving downstream towards the swamp edge about three kilometres away. I was still elated at my escape: at least I now had a chance of survival. I had recently been reading a book which mentioned how soldiers in the First World War had been able to walk quite long distances with severe injuries, and had survived. If they could do it, so could I, and there was nothing better to do. Whenever I lay down to rest, the pain seemed even worse. I struggled on, through driving rain, shouting for mercy from the sky, apologising to the angry crocodile, calling out my repentance to this, its place, for the fault of my intrusion. I came to a flooded tributary, and had to make a large upstream detour to find a place where I could cross it in my weakened state.

My considerable bush experience now stood me in good stead, kept me on course (navigating was second nature), and practised endurance stopped me losing heart. But as I neared the swamp above the ranger station after a journey of several hours, I began to black out, and had to crawl the final distance to its edge. I could do no more for myself; I selected a spot, and lay there in the gathering dusk to await what would come. I did not expect a search party to arrive until the following day, and doubted I could possibly last the night.

In the end I was found in time, and survived against many odds, thanks to a combination of the ranger's diligence, my own perseverance, and great good fortune. A similar combination of good fortune and human care enabled me to overcome an infection in the leg which threatened amputation or worse. I

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probably have Paddy Pallin's incredibly tough walk shorts to thank for the fact that the groin injuries were not as severe as the leg injuries. I am very lucky that I can still walk well, and have lost little of my previous capacities. But Lady Luck (or Mother Necessity) shows here, as usual, her inscrutable face: was I lucky to survive, or unlucky to have been attacked in the first place?

The wonder of being alive after being held, quite literally, in the jaws of death has never entirely left me. For the first year, the experience of existence as an unexpected blessing cast a golden glow over my life, despite the injuries and the pain. The glow has slowly faded, but some of the gratitude for life it left will always be there, even if I remain unsure whom I should thank for my life (perhaps first my most immediate helper, the sandpaper fig). The sense of gratitude was the gift of that searing flash of near-death knowledge, the glimpse "from the outside" of that unimaginably alien world from which the self as centring observer is absent.

THESE REMAIN many puzzles about the events, puzzles both social and biological; for example, about the reasons for the attack on the canoe itself, which is unusual in crocodile lore, and about the size of the crocodile. It has always been difficult for me to estimate its size; for most of the attack it was either only partly visible, or had hold of me from behind, and estimating its size was in any case not foremost on my mind. The press estimate of fourteen feet, which they somehow arrived at and published widely some five days before I made any sort of statement, was I think certainly an overestimate, since my glimpse of the partly submerged crocodile next to the fourteen-foot canoe suggested that it was not as long as the canoe. But if the press had an interest in exaggerating the size of the crocodile, the park service, which feared legal liability, had an interest in minimising it; neither group was interested in my views on the matter, as the only witness. Thus some park service pronouncements have claimed that it was only a very small crocodile, a claim I do not think fits the facts.

The park service speculates that the crocodile may have been a young male evicted from breeding territory and perhaps embattled by other crocodiles. Their theory is that it engaged with my canoe after a collision in mistake for one of these older aggressive crocodiles. But from my perspective there are some problems in this account. The crocodile most likely observed the passage of my canoe on the way up the channel only a short time before, and it did seem to intercept the canoe. It is very unlikely

that it was accidentally struck by the canoe, as the story assumes and as some press reports claimed; crocodiles are masters of the water, and this one was expecting me and saw me coming. And why should a small crocodile of less than ten feet aggressively attack a much larger, fourteen-foot canoe "crocodile", unless we add the assumption that it was bent on suicide? The smaller the crocodile is assumed to be, the more implausible such an attack story becomes. Since crocodiles become sexually mature at around ten feet, the park service's minimisation story of a "self-defence" attack by a "small" evicted crocodile is not even internally consistent. My personal estimate is that it was probably a medium crocodile in the range of ten to twelve feet which did not know the area well.

Possible explanations for the anomalous attack are almost limitless. Perhaps the crocodile's motives were political, against a species-enemy; human beings are a threat to crocodiles, of a more dire kind than crocodiles are to human beings, through the elimination of habitat. Perhaps its motives were religious, the thought that any human being who ventured alone in such conditions into these waters in such a flimsy craft was offering itself as a sacrifice to crocodile kind. I think myself that the answer may lie in the extreme weather conditions plus the ambiguous nature of the canoe and the crocodile's curious relationship to the land-water boundary. The crocodile is an exploiter of the great planetary dualism of land and water. As Papua New Guinea writer Vincent Eri suggests in his novel *The Crocodile*, the creature is a magician: its technique is to steal the Other, the creature of the land, away into its own world of the water, where it has complete mastery over them. Water is the key to the crocodile's power, and even large crocodiles rarely attack in the absence of water. If a person in a canoe is perceived by the crocodile as *outside* its medium of mastery, they are not seen as prey and are safe from attack. If a person is somehow perceived as *in* or *potentially in* the water, as they might easily be on an early wet season day of torrential rain when the boundaries of the crocodile empire are exploding, they are much less than safe.

Clearly we must question the assumption, common up until the time of my attack, that canoes are as safe as larger craft because crocodiles perceive them in the same way as outside the crocodile's medium; it may be that at this flimsy end of the boat scale the perceptual balance can, like the canoe, easily tip towards occupants being perceived as in the water if conditions, and crocodiles, are right. Although the canoe is an efficient and delightful

mode of travel in these waters, I think the decision to ban its use may have been wise, if the objective is to eliminate risk. Whether and where that is a suitable objective is another matter.

The most puzzling question of all, of course, is why it let me go. I think there are several factors here. Since it was not one of the very large crocodiles which can kill with little effort, I was perhaps marginal as prey for it, given the depth of the water and the way it had hold of my body. These factors made it hard for it to hold me under, and it may have let me go the first time to try to get a better hold, higher up the body. I have no doubt that, had it been able to keep me submerged after the first roll, there would have been no need for a second. Its failure to keep me submerged suggests that it was a stray or a newcomer to the area, a crocodile perhaps from the crocodile highway of the river, which did not know the terrain well and was not familiar with the good drowning spots in the shallower channel waters. My friend the sandpaper fig, who allowed me to retain a determined grip on my own medium, must have also played a major role. Thus in another encounter in the Territory a few years earlier than mine, an adult man was saved from a thirteen-foot crocodile which was dragging him off in shallow water by the determined grip of a little girl who held his arm and pulled the

opposite way. Perhaps, too, the crocodile let go its hold because it was tiring; I experienced the crocodile through the roll as immensely powerful, but that intense burst of energy cannot be long sustained, and must accomplish its purpose of drowning fairly quickly. Although my fear that it would slowly tear me to pieces may thus have been unwarranted, I still believe that its power was such that in unobstructed waters it would have finished me.

My advice for others similarly placed is the same as that of Vincent Eri, who uses the crocodile as a metaphor for the West in his theme of the relationship of colonised indigenous culture to colonising Western culture. If the crocodile-magician-coloniser can drag you completely into its medium, you have little chance; if you can somehow manage to retain a hold on your own medium, you may survive.

ONE OF THE SOCIAL puzzles is why these sorts of events create such a media sensation. I recall thinking with relief, as I struggled away from the attack site, that I would now have a good excuse for being late with an overdue article, and would have an unusual story to tell my little cir-

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cle of friends. I saw the event as a personal incident likely to create only minor interest. The intense publicity and media interest in my attack (and other similar attacks) were an unpleasant surprise, and I see another element of Western dualistic thinking in this and in the sensationalised treatment the media accorded the prey phenomenon.

In much Aboriginal thinking about death, as Bill Neidjie's work makes clear, animals, plants and humans are seen as sharing a common life force, and many interchanges of form between human and animal are conceived. In the West, the human is set apart from nature as radically other. The threat of boundary breakdown lies behind Platonic-Christian accounts of death as the separation of the immaterial, eternal soul as continuing human essence from an inessential, perishable and animal body. One reason why death is such a horror in the Western tradition (unless reinterpreted along Platonic lines so as to maintain the separation) is that it involves the forbidden mixing of these hyper-separated categories, the dissolution of the sacred-human into the profane-natural. Death in the jaws of a crocodile multiplies these forbidden boundary breakdowns, combining the decomposition of the body with active animal triumph over the human species. Crocodile predation thus threatens the dualistic visions and divisions which justify rational human mastery of the planet. Humans may themselves be foremost among predators, but they themselves must not be food for worms, and especially they must not be prey for crocodiles. The disproportionate outrage with which acts of crocodile predation are greeted, the pogroms and retaliatory slaughters which aim to wipe the species out of whole regions, are conditioned by this denial of our animality, which may also underlie many of the difficulties encountered in maintaining other free populations of human-predatory species in the wild.

Another culturally revealing feature of much of the media coverage was the masculine appropriation of the experience. This appeared in a number of different forms, in the exaggeration of the crocodile's size and its portrayal as an heroic wrestling match, but especially in its sexualisation. The events seem to provide irresistible material for the pornographic imagination, which encouraged male identification with the crocodile and interpretation of the attack as sadistic rape. The reinterpretation of the experience in these sexual terms and its portrayal in porno films such as *Crocodile Blondee* reveal the extent to which sadism is normalised in dominant culture as masculine sexuality. Much of the Australian media seemed to have trouble coming to terms with the idea of women being competent in the bush, but the most advanced expression of this masculinist mindset was *Crocodile Dundee*, which was filmed in

Kakadu not long after my attack. If page-three articles and *Crocodile Blondee* eroticised the crocodile as male sadist, *Crocodile Dundee* took the more respectable course of eroticising female passivity and victimhood. The storyline split the experience along conventionally gendered lines, appropriating the active struggle, escape and survival parts of the experience for the male hero and representing the passive "victim" parts in the character of an incompetent, irrational and helpless woman who has to be rescued from the crocodile-sadist (a rival male) by the bushman hero. These representations of the experience reveal the extent to which contemporary culture retains masculinist elements at its core.

Other personal questions and lessons remain for me from the experience. Why had I been unable to pay attention to the signs which said I should turn back, which I experienced as unease? I learnt many personal lessons from the event, one of which is to place less faith in the rational mind and listen more to the messages and warnings coming from the senses and from other sources not necessarily accountable in our present frameworks of rationality. The human species has evolved over aeons not only as predator, but also as prey, and this has very likely given us capacities to scent danger which we cannot now recognise or account for. Thus it is not so much in the endurance of pain, in the near-death experience, or in the luck of survival, that the main interest and meaning of the experience lie for me.

As on the day itself, so even more to me now a decade later the *telos* of these events lies in the strange rock formation, which presented to me a lesson about the vulnerability of humankind known still, I think, to certain indigenous cultures, but lost to the technological one which now colonises the earth. The wisdom of the rock formation draws a link between my inability to recognise my vulnerability and the similar failure of my culture in its occupation of the planetary biosystem. The illusion of invulnerability is typical of the mind of the coloniser; and as the experience of being prey is eliminated from the face of the earth, along with it goes something it has to teach about the power and resistance of nature and the delusions of human arrogance. In my work as philosopher, I now tend to stress our failure to perceive human vulnerability, the delusions of our view of ourselves as rational masters of a malleable nature. The wisdom of the balanced rock does not, I think, instruct us to reintroduce the experience of being prey, but rather to try to become aware of the dimension of experience that we have lost, and to find other, hopefully humanitarian, ways to secure the knowledge of vulnerability that it represents. Let us hope that it does not take a similar near-death experience to instruct our culture in the wisdom of the rock.