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Australia's Northern Safari

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Abstract

Introduction

Filed during a 1955 family trip from Perth to the Gulf of Carpentaria, Keith Adams's *Northern Safari* showed to packed houses across Australia, and in some overseas locations, across three decades. Essentially a home movie, initially accompanied by live commentary and subsequently by a homemade sound track, it tapped into audiences' sense of Australia's north as a place of adventure. In the film Adams interacts with the animals of northern Australia (often by killing them), and while by 1971 the violence apparent in the film was attracting criticism in letters to newspapers, the film remained popular through to the mid-1980s, and was later shown on television in Australia and the United States (Cowan 2: Adams, *Crocodile Safari Man* 261). A DVD is at present available for purchase from the website of the same name (*Northern Safari*).

Adams and his supporters credited the film's success to the rugged and adventurous landscape of northern Australia (Northeast vii), characterised by dangerous animals, including venomous spiders, sharks and crocodiles (see Adams, "Aussie": "Crocodile"). The notion of Australia's north as a place of rugged adventure was not born with Adams's film, and that film was certainly not the last production to exploit the region and its wildlife as a source of excitement. Rather, *Northern Safari* belongs to a long list of adventure narratives whose hunting exploits have helped define the north of Australian as a distinct region and contrast it with the temperate south where most Australians make their lives.

This article explores the connection between adventure in Australia's north and the large animals of the region. Adams's film capitalised on popular interest in natural history, but his film is only one link in a chain of representations of the Australian north as a place of dangerous and charismatic megafauna. While over time interest shifted from being largely concentrated on the presence of buffalo in the Northern Territory to a fascination with the saltwater crocodiles found more widely in northern Australia that interest in dangerous prey animals is significant to Australia's northern imaginary.

The Northern Safari before Adams

Northern Australia gained a reputation for rugged, masculine adventure long before the arrival there of Adams and his cameras. That reputation was closely associated with the animals of the north, and it is generally the dangerous species that have inspired popular accounts of the region. Linda Thompson has recognised that before the release of the film *Crocodile Dundee* in 1986 crocodiles "received significant and sensational (although sporadic) media attention across Australia —attention that created associations of danger, mystery, and abnormality" (118). While Thompson went on to argue that in the wake of *Crocodile Dundee* the saltwater crocodile became a widely recognised symbol of Australia (for both Australians and non-Australians) it is perhaps more pertinent to consider the place of animals in creating a notion of the Australian north.

Adams's extended and international success (he showed his film profitably in the United States, Canada, England, Germany, South Africa, Rhodesia, and New Zealand as well as throughout Australia) suggests that the landscape and wildlife of northern Australia holds a fascination for a wide audience (Adams, *Crocodile Safari Man* 169-261). Certainly northern Australia, and its wild beasts, had established a reputation for adventure earlier, particularly in the periods following the world wars. Perhaps crocodiles were not the most significant of the north's charismatic megafauna in the first half of the twentieth century, but their presence was a source of excitement well before the 1980s, and they were not the only animals in the north to attract attention: the Northern Territory's buffalo had long acted as a drawcard for adventure seekers.

Carl Warburton's popular book *Buffaloes* was typical in linking Australians' experiences of war with the Australian north and the pursuit of adventure, generally in the form of dangerous big game. War and hunting have long been linked as both are expressions of masculine valour in physically dangerous circumstances (Brennan "Imperial" 44-46). That link is made very clear in Warburton's account when he begins it on the beach at Gallipoli as he and his comrades discuss their plans for the future. After Warburton announces his determination not to return from war to work in a bank, he and a friend determine that they will go to either Brazil or the Northern Territory to seek adventure (2). Back in Sydney, a coin flip determines their "compass was set for the unknown north" (5).

As the title of his book suggests, the game pursued by Warburton and his mate were buffaloes, as buffalo hides were fetching high prices when he set out for the north. In his writing Warburton was keen to establish his reputation as an adventurer and his descriptions of the dangers of buffalo hunting used the animals to establish the adventurous credentials of northern Australia. Warburton noted of the buffalo that: "Alone of all wild animals he will attack unprovoked, and in single combat is more than a match for a tiger. It is the pleasant pastime of some Indian princes to stage such combats for the entertainment of their guests" (62-63). Thereby, he linked Arnhem Land to India, a place that had long held a reputation as a site of adventurous hunting for the rulers of the British Empire (Brennan "Africa" 399). Later Warburton reinforced those credentials by noting: "there is no more dangerous animal in the world than a wounded buffalo bull" (126). While buffalo might have provided the headline act, crocodiles also featured in the interwar northern imaginary. Warburton recorded: "I had always determined to have a crack at the crocodiles for the sport of it." He duly set about satiating this desire (222-3).

Buffalo had been hunted commercially in the Northern Territory since 1886 and Warburton was not the first to publicise the adventurous hunting available in northern Australia (Clinch 21-23). He had been drawn north after reading "of the exploits of two crack buffalo shooters, Fred Smith and Paddy Cahill" (Warburton 6). Such accounts of buffalo, and also of crocodiles, were common newspaper fodder in the first half of the twentieth century. Even earlier, explorers' accounts had drawn attention to the animal excitement of northern Australia. For example, John Lort Stokes had noted "alligators" as one of the many interesting animals inhabiting the region (418). Thus, from the nineteenth century Australia's north had popularly linked together remoteness, adventure, and large animals; it was unsurprising that Warburton in turn acted as inspiration to later adventure-hunters in northern Australia. In 1954 he was mentioned in a newspaper story about two English migrants who had come to Australia to shoot crocodiles on Cape York with "their ambitions fed by the books of men such as Ion Idriess, Carl Warburton, Frank Clune and others" (Gay 15).

The Development of Northern 'Adventure' Tourism

Not all who sought adventure in northern Australia were as independent as Adams. Cynthia Nolan's account of travel through outback Australia in the late 1940s noted the increasing tourist infrastructure available, particularly in her account of Alice Springs (27-28, 45). She also recorded the significance of big game in the lure of the north. At the start of her journey she met a man seeking his fortune crocodile shooting (16), later encountered buffalo shooters (82), and recorded the locals' hilarity while recounting a visit by a city-based big game hunter who arrived with an elephant gun. According to her informants: "No, he didn't shoot any buffaloes, but he had his picture taken posing behind every animal that dropped. He'd arrange himself in a crouch, gun at the ready, and take self-exposure shots of himself and trophy" (85-86). Earlier, organised tours of the Northern Territory included buffalo shooter camps in their itineraries (when access was available), making clear the continuing significance of dangerous game to the northern imaginary (Cole, *Hell* 207).

Even as Adams was pursuing his independent path north, tourist infrastructure was bringing the northern Australian safari experience within reach for those with little experience but sufficient funds to secure the provision of equipment, vehicles and expert advice. The Australian Crocodile Shooters' Club, founded in 1950, predated *Northern Safari*, but it tapped into the same interest in the potential of northern Australia to offer adventure. It clearly associated that adventure with big game hunting and the club's success depended on its marketing of the adventurous north to Australia's urban population (Brennan "Africa" 403-06). Similarly, the safari camps which developed in the Northern Territory, starting with Nourlangie in 1959, promoted the adventure available in Australia's north to those who sought to visit without necessarily roughing it. The degree of luxury that was on offer initially is questionable, but the notion of Australia's north as a big game hunting destination supported the development of an Australian safari industry (Berzins 177-80, Brennan "Africa" 407-09). Safari entrepreneur Allan Stewart has eagerly testified to the broad appeal of the safari experience in 1960s Australia, claiming his clientele included accountants, barristers, barmaids, brokers, bankers, salesmen, journalists, actors, students, nursing sisters, doctors, clergymen, soldiers, pilots, yachtsmen, racing drivers, company directors, housewives, precocious children, air hostesses, policemen and jockeys (18).

Later Additions to the Imaginary of the Northern Safari

Adams's film was made in 1955, and its subject of adventurous travel and hunting in northern Australia was taken up by a number of books during the 1960s as publishers kept the link between large game and the adventurous north alive. New Zealand author Barry Crump contributed a fictionalised account of his time hunting crocodiles in northern Australia in *Gulf*, first published in 1964. Crump displayed his trademark humour throughout his book, and made a running joke of the 'best professional crocodile-shooters' that he encountered in pubs throughout northern Australia (28-29). Certainly, the possibility of adventure and the chance to make a living as a professional hunter lured men to the north.

Among those who came was Australian journalist Keith Willey who in 1966 published an account of his time crocodile hunting. Willey promoted the north as a site of adventure and rugged masculinity. On the very first page of his book he established his credentials by advising that "Hunting crocodiles is a hard trade; hard, dirty and dangerous; but mostly hard" (1). Although Willey's book reveals that he did not make his fortune crocodile hunting he evidently revelled in its adventurous mystique and his book was sufficiently successful to be republished by Rigby in 1977. The association between the Australian north, the hunting of large animals, and adventure continued to thrive.

These 1960s crocodile publications represent a period when crocodile hunting replaced buffalo hunting as a commercial enterprise in northern Australia. In the immediate post-war period crocodile skins increased in value as traditional sources became unreliable, and interest in professional hunting increased. As had been the case with Warburton, the north promised adventure to men unwilling to return to domesticity after their experiences of war (Brennan, "Crocodile" 1). This part of the northern imaginary was directly discussed by another crocodile hunting author. Gunther Bahnemann spent some time crocodile hunting in Australia before moving his operation north to poach crocodiles in Dutch New Guinea. Bahnemann had participated in the Second World War and in his book he was clear about his unwillingness to settle for a humdrum life, instead choosing crocodile hunting for his profession. As he described it: "We risked our lives to make quick money, but not easy money; yet I believe that the allure of adventure was the main motive of our expedition. It seems so now, when I think back to it" (8).

In the tradition of Adams, Malcolm Douglas released his documentary film *Across the Top* in 1968, which was subsequently serialised for television. From around this time, television was becoming an increasingly popular medium and means of reinforcing the connection between the Australian outback and adventure. The animals of northern Australia played a role in setting the region apart from the rest of the continent. The 1970s and 1980s saw a boom in programs that presented the outback, including the north, as a source of interest and national pride. In this period Harry Butler presented *In the Wild*, while the Leyland brothers (Mike and Mal) created their iconic and highly popular *Ask the Leyland Brothers* (and similar productions) which ran to over 150 episodes between 1976 and 1980. In the cinema, Alby Mangels's series of *World Safari* movies included Australia in his wide-ranging adventures. While these documentaries of outback Australia traded on the same sense of adventure and fascination with Australia's wildlife that had promoted *Northern Safari*, the element of big game hunting was muted.

That link was reforged in the 1980s and 1990s. *Crocodile Dundee* was an extremely successful movie and it again placed interactions with charismatic megafauna at the heart of the northern Australian experience (Thompson 124). The success of the film reinvigorated depictions of northern Australia as a place to encounter dangerous beasts. Capitalising on the film's success Crump's book was republished as *Crocodile Country* in 1990, and Tom Cole's memoirs of his time in northern Australia, including his work buffalo shooting and crocodile hunting, were first published in 1986, 1988, and 1992 (and reprinted multiple times). However, Steve Irwin is probably the best known of northern Australia's 'crocodile hunters', despite his Australia Zoo lying outside the crocodile's natural range, and despite being a conservationist opposed to killing crocodiles. Irwin's chosen moniker is ironic, given his often-stated love for the species and his commitment to preserving crocodile lives through relocating (when necessary, to captivity) rather than killing problem animals. He first appeared on Australian television in 1996, and continued to appear regularly until his death in 2006.

Tourism Australia used both Hogan and Irwin for promotional purposes. While Thompson argues that at this time the significance of the crocodile was broadened to encompass Australia more generally, the examples of crocodile marketing that she lists relate to the Northern Territory, with a brief mention of Far North Queensland and the crocodile remained a signifier of northern adventure (Thompson 125-27). The depiction of Irwin as a 'crocodile hunter' despite his commitment to saving crocodile lives marked a larger shift that had already begun within the safari. While the title 'safari' retained its popularity in the late twentieth century it had come to be applied generally to organised adventurous travel with a view to seeing and capturing images of animals, rather than exclusively identifying hunting expeditions.

Conclusion

The extraordinary success of Adams's film was based on a widespread understanding of northern Australia as a type of adventure playground, populated by fascinating dangerous beasts. That imaginary was exploited but not created by Adams. It had been in existence since the nineteenth century, was particularly evident during the buffalo and crocodile hunting bubbles after the world wars, and boomed again with the popularity of the fictional Mick Dundee and the real Steve Irwin, for both of whom interacting with the charismatic megafauna of the north was central to their characters. The excitement surrounding large game still influences visions of northern Australia. At present there is no particularly striking northern bushman media personage, but the large animals of the north still regularly provoke discussion. The north's safari camps continue to do business, trading on the availability of large game (particularly buffalo, banteng, pigs, and samba) and northern Australia's crocodiles have established themselves as a significant source of interest among international big game hunters. Australia's politicians regularly debate the possibility of legalising a limited crocodile safari in Australia, based on the culling of problem animals, and that debate highlights a continuing sense of Australia's north as a place apart from the more settled, civilised south of the continent.

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