



SALT WATER CROCODILES

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Timor-Leste is one of the countries where the largest living reptile on earth can be found: the saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*). The male adult averages from around five meters in length to some records showing up to six or even seven meters. This animal lives mainly in South-East Asia but its habitat ranges from the East coast of India to Northern Australia.

The Tetun' word for saltwater crocodile is *lafaek*, which is also used in reference to the Timor Tree Monitor (*varanus timorensis*) known as *lafaek rai-maran* (dry land crocodile) (Kaiser et al. 2011: 61). However, most Timorese use the Portuguese term for grandfather (*avô*) to refer to this animal, because *lafaek* is considered to be a rude (*kasar*) term to talk about them. In their vision of the world and construction of their environment, most Timorese consider saltwater crocodiles to be *lulik* (sacred) creatures who play one of the most important roles between human and non-human entities.

The importance of crocodiles in Timorese culture can be measured by some expressions where all Timorese people are referred to as 'children of the Crocodile', and the island of Timor as the 'land of the Crocodile'. These expressions are largely based on the narrative of origin that accounts for the formation of the very island of Timor, where a half-submerged crocodile transformed himself into the island in gratitude for the assistance given by a boy (the first Timorese) when the animal was in need. A complete account of this narrative can be found in the book *Textos em Teto da literatura oral Timorense* (Sá 1961), which has been incorporated into the national narrative, as Seixas (2010) pointed out. Nevertheless, there are other narratives of origin—from different sacred houses (*uma lulik*)—that account for human-crocodile relations. Some of them tell stories about crocodiles ascending up the river stream in search for a wife to marry and how, after these accounts, wife giver-wife taker relations were established between them. Other tales talk about the story of a war between humans and crocodiles in a time when a great flood made most of the island submerge under the sea, and when humans—assisted by deities such as the Sun—made the water recede and therefore the crocodiles retreated with it.

The cultural importance of crocodiles can also be found in material culture. It is quite common to find sacred houses (*uma lulik*) carved with crocodile motifs, as well as carved figures of crocodiles. The crocodile motif can also be found in traditional textiles (*tais*), and many other handicrafts made around the country.



0891 Avo (grandfather). © David Palazon, Suai Loro, 2013.

This particular relation with crocodiles, as well as their protection by traditional law, has made crocodiles a prey which should not be hunted by the population, even when they attack humans.² Crocodile attacks are normally blamed on the victim for a variety of reasons, such as disrespect for their ancestry. It is also common to hear that crocodiles do not attack good people, just bad ones. According to Lencastre (1934), crocodiles attacking only criminals or bad people, was an idea used as a local significance for seeking justice. For example, in a traditional justice ceremony, two people would enter the water, therefore exposing themselves to being attacked by a crocodile. If none was attacked, none was guilty, but if the animal attacked either of them, they were found guilty.

There are no records showing crocodile skin exports from the island—at least from 1954³ to 1975—although some hunting was occurring during that period. According to Portuguese sources (Lencastre 1934), saltwater crocodiles were identified for extermination by governor Celestino da Silva due to the high number of attacks on the local population.



Nowadays crocodile attacks continue to be a serious problem for Timorese people, especially for those whose livelihoods are dependent on coastal activities, such as fishermen. Although many crocodile attacks on fisherman and others go unreported, there are some records that show the importance of this problem.⁴ According to Tsujimura et al. (2012) the majority of crocodile attacks occur in the Tasi Mane (Southern Male Sea), where the crocodile population is higher. Despite the fact there has been some initiatives to tackle this problem, there is still much to do about it.

1. National language of Timor. 2. Nonetheless, there are some people in the area of Viqueque district that do hunt them. 3. See "Conselho do Serviço Técnico Aduaneiro. Tabela de valores fiscais dos productos de exportação com discriminação dos destinos, a vigorar no próximo mês de Novembro" in *Boletim Oficial de Timor* nº 44 (30 de Outubro de 1954), p. 621. 4. See "Accident report" in <http://peskador.org/>.

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