Probe into north Queensland tour operators

Tourist fears as croc bites boat

Peter Michael

TOUR operators on the Daintree River face a safety probe after a monster 5m crocodile attacked a boat and a tourist fell overboard.

Experts warn the wild crocodiles have become familiar with the 27-odd tour boats operating on a 3km-stretch of the croc-infested far north Queensland river.

In an unprecedented attack, the dominant 5m male, known as Fat Albert, lunged nearly a metre out of the water and bit the railing of a small tour boat.

With little warning, the huge crocodile sent tourists scattering for safety and left bite marks in the bent metal.

Solar Whisper owner and crocodile guide David White said they had been watching the big male fight a 4m rival known as Scarface moments before it turned on his boat.

“It was a bit frightening,” he said this week. “He’s a very big croc.”

He said after the adrenalin died down the tourists told him it had been the highlight of their holiday.

Mr White said he knew of big crocs charging other boats and his encounter was simply a chance for competitors to “sink the boot in”.

“It is mating season. And the big males tend to get a bit feisty this time of the year,” he said.

But with competition fierce, it is not only the crocodiles that are getting a bit snappy.

Rival operators believe the attack last Monday, combined with a tourist falling overboard from another croc-watching boat five days ago, is a disturbing trend.

The unlucky tourist was quickly plucked from the river.

Daintree River Train owner Steve Doble, who lost his son Jeremy, 5, to a crocodile on the banks of the river this year, said it was time for a cull of croc-watching permits.

He said there were too many tour boats, too few tourists, and the odd rogue operator.

Permits allow for a total capacity of 3320 people a day, based on all 17 cruise operators running five trips each on 27 boats, in the $4 million-a-year industry.

Actual visitor figures are far below that.

There are about seven adult male crocodiles — with dozens of smaller females — in the short river section visited by the bulk of the tours.

Crocodile expert Prof Craig Franklin, of the University of Queensland, said it was rare for crocs to approach or attack a boat.

“I am concerned by that kind of behaviour,” he said.

“I’d be worried. These are iconic animals, but if they are a threat to human life, they should remove the problem crocodile or modify the behaviour of boats in the area and make them keep their distance.”