Calls for safety probe to net Far North’s rogue operators

Croc bites tour boat

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

Experts warn the wild crocodiles have become familiar with the 27 plus tour boats that operate on a 3km stretch of the croc-infested Far North Queensland river.

In an unprecedented attack and with little warning, 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.

Tourists scattered for safety as the huge crocodile left behind bite marks in the metal.

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

“It was a bit frightening,” Mr White told The Courier-Mail during a croc-spotting tour this week. “He is a very big croc. Fat Albert charged us and put some teeth marks in the boat.”

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

But 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 off another croc-watching boat five days ago in another unprecedented incident, 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 while he was boogie boarding in floodwaters with his brother on the banks of the river earlier 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.

Crocodile Express owner Dean Clapp, who has worked on the river for 25 years, has called for a safety audit and review of permit holders.

“That big croc could have tipped that boat over. He got too close,” he said. “I think there has been a drop in safety standards and loss of respect for the crocodiles.”

The Environmental Protection Authority has deployed rangers to interview operators and assess Fat Albert. Crocodile expert Professor Craig Franklin, of the University of Queensland, said it was rare for crocs to approach or attack a boat. “I’d be worried,” he said.

DANGEROUS DAINTREE: A dominant 5m male crocodile Fat Albert (above) lunged nearly a metre out of the water and bit the railing of tour boat Solar Whisper (left).

Picture: Brian Cassey