Surf’s up as crocs ride tides in search of food and mates

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SCIENTISTS have revealed that saltwater crocodiles surf the ocean in search of food, mates and territory, travelling hundreds of kilometres by hitching a ride on the tides.

Craig Franklin, from the University of Queensland’s school of biological sciences, said for short journeys saltwater crocodiles swam with or against the current. But for larger trips the reptiles opted to surf, using ocean currents to get to their destination.

“They are far more impressive than we thought,” Professor Franklin said. “They are riding oceanic currents for hundreds of kilometres. This would be a feature that is innate in estuarine crocodiles.”

As part of the study, ecologists tagged 27 adult crocodiles in the remote North Kennedy River in North Queensland with sonar transmitters and tracked their movements over 12 months with underwater receivers.

They found both male and female crocodiles always began long-distance travel within an hour of the tide changing — though researchers are at a loss to explain how the reptiles know when to begin their journey.

“Animals have internal clocks and it may be that these crocodiles are tuned into tidal cycles,” he said.

One of the tagged male crocodiles left the North Kennedy River and travelled 590 kilometres over 25 days down the west coast of Cape York Peninsula, timing his trip to coincide with the seasonal current system in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Professor Franklin said surfing crocodiles made sense.

“It’s a great way to conserve energy, so they’re far more efficient,” he said.

“But the other reason is that they are not great aerobic swimmers . . . their whole body is designed to launch themselves in or out of the water to catch prey.”

Professor Franklin said essentially the saltwater crocodile was designed as a sprinter, rather than a long-distance swimmer, with the “four-legged dog paddle” their stroke of choice. The reptile could survive for long periods in salt water without eating or drinking.

The findings, published yesterday in the Journal of Animal Ecology, help explain why the saltwater crocodile is found across such a large area — from northern Australia to Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Vanuatu.

“It helps explain how they have been able to cross vast oceans.”

One of the tagged male crocodiles travelled 590 kilometres over 25 days. PICTURE: AUSTRALIA ZOO