

This month's NEPA feature reflects on the perspective of a member of our social media team who is often on the receiving end of videos sent to the Agency that depict cruelty to animals, in particular, the American crocodile.

Crocodile cruelty is on the rise; Here's why it should concern us all

Each week, videos of Jamaicans harassing or harming crocodiles find their way into NEPA's social media inboxes. On October 1, we received photos of a crocodile that was brutally killed near the Hellshire Bridge with its tail severed and a rope tied around its mouth. There seems to be no letting up and ironically, we received another vile video on the very day our nation honoured its finest and best on Heroes' Day.

Some videos are brazenly streamed live, and often involve people throwing stones, taunting, or trapping the animals for entertainment. It's moments like these that make me stop and think, how did we reach a point where cruelty became content? Fanning the flames are the social media comments that echo harmful beliefs that it's kill or be killed, and crocs serve no meaningful purpose in our environment.

As someone who helps manage NEPA's social media pages, getting these videos never feels routine. Each one stings, and it's hard to watch something so disturbing and then switch gears to write a caption or a response. Behind every post we share is a small team that truly cares about protecting Jamaica's wildlife, and seeing these creatures we work so hard to defend being treated this way is indeed heartbreaking.

Last month as our nation braced itself for the passage of Hurricane Melissa, our team was careful to advise the public that crocodile sightings were likely to increase as the animal is displaced by rising flood water and outlined steps to take if one comes in contact with a crocodile. We did this in the hope that persons will adjust their behaviour as they gain a better understanding of the creature. However, despite our pleas, we have since received several videos of crocodile abuse. We recognize that it is easy to look at a crocodile and see danger. They're large, they hiss, they live in swamps, and for many, fear comes naturally. Movies have also done a poor job of depicting the animal. But fear should never justify cruelty. The Jamaican crocodile is a vital part of our ecosystem.

Crocs vital role to our ecosystems

The Jamaican crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*) is a protected species under the Wild Life Protection Act (WLPA). These animals play a vital role in maintaining the health of our wetlands by keeping fish populations balanced and supporting the stability of our coastal ecosystems. As scavengers, they help keep our waterways clean by removing dead or infected animals that could otherwise spread disease. An unhealthy coastline is a poor habitat for marine life and ultimately, the economic livelihood of fisherfolk is affected. Fishermen are then forced to go further out to sea

for a decent catch. Therefore, the ecological role of crocodiles cannot be overstated and harming them will disrupt the very systems that sustain our communities.

Many of the incidents of crocodile harassment, injury, and illegal capture occur in communities that border wetlands, where people and wildlife are forced into closer contact due to habitat loss. For thousands of years, crocodiles have lived alongside us and contrary to popular belief, they are not “invading” our spaces; we are encroaching on theirs. The truth is, most crocodiles prefer to stay away from humans; they seek quiet, undisturbed areas where they can hunt and nest safely. And during times of flooding, displaced crocodiles will, on their own, return to their habitat. It is when we provoke them that conflict between man and the animal ensues.

Yes, greater enforcement is needed, and NEPA continues to work closely with the police to investigate and prosecute wildlife crimes, but legislation alone will not fix what is, at its core, a mindset issue. Of concern also is the fact that constantly giving ourselves licence to engage in acts of cruelty towards any living creature will ultimately erode our humanity. As such, NEPA also works with other stakeholders, including community members and students, to bring about behaviour change.

Be Croc Wise

Leighton Mamdeen, Environmental Officer in NEPA’s Fauna Unit, observed that many crocodile encounters are not random attacks, but the result of unsafe human practices. “When people go spearfishing, they often attach their catch of fish to their sides as they continue diving,” Mamdeen explained. “The problem is, once those fish start bleeding, the scent travels through the water and attracts crocodiles. They’re not after the person; they’re after the fish, but in the process, the person can get hurt. We’ve had cases where a crocodile bit a diver and only released him after the fish came loose. In another instance, a woman was gutting fish along a riverbank when a crocodile, drawn by the smell, approached and dragged her into the water. The animal wasn’t targeting her; it was responding to food.”

Mamdeen also added, “Even beyond fishing, people sometimes throw meat scraps or chicken remains into rivers. Over time, this teaches crocodiles to associate humans with food, which increases the likelihood of future encounters. People should therefore take care in how they dispose of meat waste and ensure that pets and livestock are kept away from waterways.”

NEPA will continue its efforts to stem these acts of cruelty by educating the public and enforcing the law. Nevertheless, we also need citizens to take responsibility and refrain from inflicting harm on crocodiles and to act when they see abuse by calling NEPA. In the meantime, it is critical that Jamaicans understand that the survival of Jamaica’s crocodiles is not just about saving a species, it’s about preserving balance, and appreciating our shared responsibility to protect our island’s natural heritage.

Micholyn Hurd, Public Education and Community Outreach Officer – NEPA



**Image of a crocodile that was killed near the Hellshire Bridge in Portmore, St. Catherine
Credit: Damion Whyte (@roostersworldja on Instagram)**