



REVULSION

— AND —

REVERENCE

Crocodiles in Singapore

Crocodiles elicit fear and respect by turns – and occasionally, even indifference. **Kate Pocklington** and **Siddharta Perez** document reptilian encounters at specific times in Singapore's history and their impact on the human psyche.

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On 6 November 2017, the National Sailing Centre suspended all water-based activities in the sea off East Coast Park for four days after an estuarine crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) – also known as the saltwater crocodile – was spotted in the waters there.¹ This was one of five reported crocodile sightings in 2017, drawing both media and public attention to this elusive reptile that inhabits the rivers, reservoirs and seas around Singapore.²

Crocodiles have always been native to Singapore, but their numbers have dropped drastically due to unbridled hunting as well as destruction of their natural habitats throughout Singapore's modern history. In their search for new habitats, these reptiles have often strayed into urban areas.

One of the early documented crocodile encounters in a public space took place in 1906 at the Swimming Club at Tanjong Katong. The reptile was seen sunning itself on the club's diving platform when someone took a shot at the creature, prompting it to flee in haste.³ The most recent recorded

sighting to cause a media flurry occurred in January 2018 at Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, where a crocodile was seen basking under the sun on a path cutting through the forest.⁴

In colonial times, crocodiles were often caught and taken to police stations as bounty.⁵ These days, however, the Public Utilities Board is more likely to receive calls from an anxious member of the public whenever crocodile sightings occur in water bodies or outside the perimeters of public spaces under the purview of the National Parks Board. The Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES) too receives its share of calls to assist in the rescue and relocation of wildlife that have strayed into public spaces.

Reptilian Encounters

Not surprisingly, sightings of crocodiles in urban Singapore are treated as freak occurrences. Mistaken identity aside,⁶ media reports of crocodile sightings raise

Crocodiles were hunted down during the colonial period in exchange for rewards from the authorities. Villagers posing with a captured crocodile, c.1910. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

alarm and strike fear in people's hearts about the invasion of such large reptiles into public recreational spaces.

Such sensational media reporting is based on the premise that people are more comfortable appreciating crocodiles from a safe distance – confined in public spaces such as zoos and farms.⁷ Those who grew up in the 1980s and 90s would remember two such attractions that promised the thrill of being "up close and personal" with crocodiles.

The Singapore Crocodarium at East Coast Parkway and Jurong Reptile and Crocodile Paradise, which opened in 1981 and 1988 respectively, bred crocodiles and staged performances that attracted large crowds. Stuntmen would risk life and limb as they wrestled with the reptiles as a form of entertainment.⁸

precious *keris* was lost, the crown, fortunately, was safely retrieved. Perceiving this entire incident as an ill omen, the raja ordered his fleet of ships to turn back to Malacca at once.²¹

1977: The Year of the White Crocodile

In 1977, a group of plucky Venture Sea Scouts set out to capture a white crocodile²² that was said to inhabit Pulau Sarimbun in the northwest coast of Singapore. Newspaper reports on this expedition were published on 2 May, 30 April, 13 June and 25 June 1977.²³

These scouts were following up on an unrecorded sighting of a white crocodile

by another group of Venture Sea Scouts five years earlier.²⁴ Recalling the incident, Cheong Ah Sang said that his group of 12 scouts had “caught a glimpse of the white crocodile in 1972”. Determined to trap it, he decided to lead a team of 32 scouts on a quest to search for the reportedly 13-foot-long reptile.

On 30 April 1977, *The New Nation* reported that Cheong’s group embarked on a three-day expedition using 11 canoes and were escorted by a nine-metre whaler. He told the reporter:

“We hope to come across the white crocodile hopefully around Sarimbun Island. We may use a net with a stick

and a rope to trap it or we may bait it with chicken and fish.”²⁵

In venturing into the waters of the Straits of Johor where Pulau Sarimbun is located, these young adventurers were returning full circle to the historic Hang Tuah’s encounter with the white crocodile. Cheong’s expedition, however, failed in its bid to capture the crocodile.

According to the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, “only the pure of heart can see the white crocodile”. Taking this advice to heart, another group of scouts led by Paul Wee prepared for the hunt by vowing to fast and refrain from consuming pork. They had earlier revealed their intention to donate the captured animal to the zoo. However, after two failed attempts, the scouts were ordered to call off the hunt by the Chief Commissioner’s Office.²⁶

The Crocodile Lives On

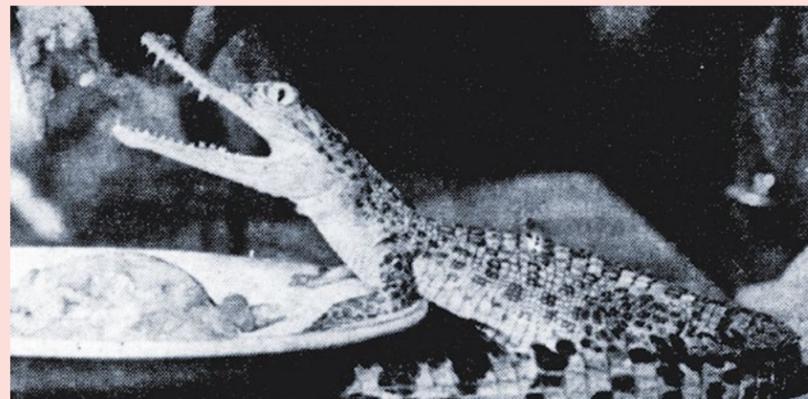
Leaving the sightings of the elusive white crocodile aside, it is worth examining early maps of Singapore and drawing logical connections between the names of the surrounding islands and their geography.²⁷ Place names can be a useful key in identifying local terrain, and can indicate the presence of certain species of animals.

The names Pulau Buaya (near Jurong Island) and Alligator Island (Pulau Pawai today), which appear off the southwestern coast of Singapore on maps dating back to the early 1800s, suggest the presence of crocodile populations (as well as abundant mangrove habitats) at some point in the islands’ history. These indicators, along with references in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, imply that from north to south, Singapore was once home to a sizeable population of crocodiles.

While the white crocodile remains an elusive mystery, there is a local lore about such a creature appearing in the Kallang River every 20 years. Although no actual encounters of white crocodiles have been recorded at the river, the reptile still looms large in the public imagination.

News reports and public records on crocodile sightings in Singapore over the last 200 years have enabled us to pinpoint the physical locations of these reptiles on the island as well as track encounters that have taken place between crocodiles and humans.

The idea of “public space” is frequently challenged in the various encounters between humans and crocodiles in this article. The natural human tendency is to react negatively, from shutting down



A baby crocodile was exported from Singapore to the London Zoo in 1936. Here, the crocodile is being fed his first morsel of meat from a pair of forceps at the zoo. Image reproduced from *The Malaya Tribune*, 29 December 1936, p. 11.

PET CROCS

Interestingly, crocodiles were also kept as pets or bred in the backyard of houses in Singapore. In 1948, it was possible to buy a live baby crocodile for as little as 25 to 40 Malayan dollars, and if the customer so desired, have the reptile killed and skinned, and made into a pair of custom-made shoes.¹

Keeping crocodiles as pets could sometimes lead to peculiar and troublesome consequences.

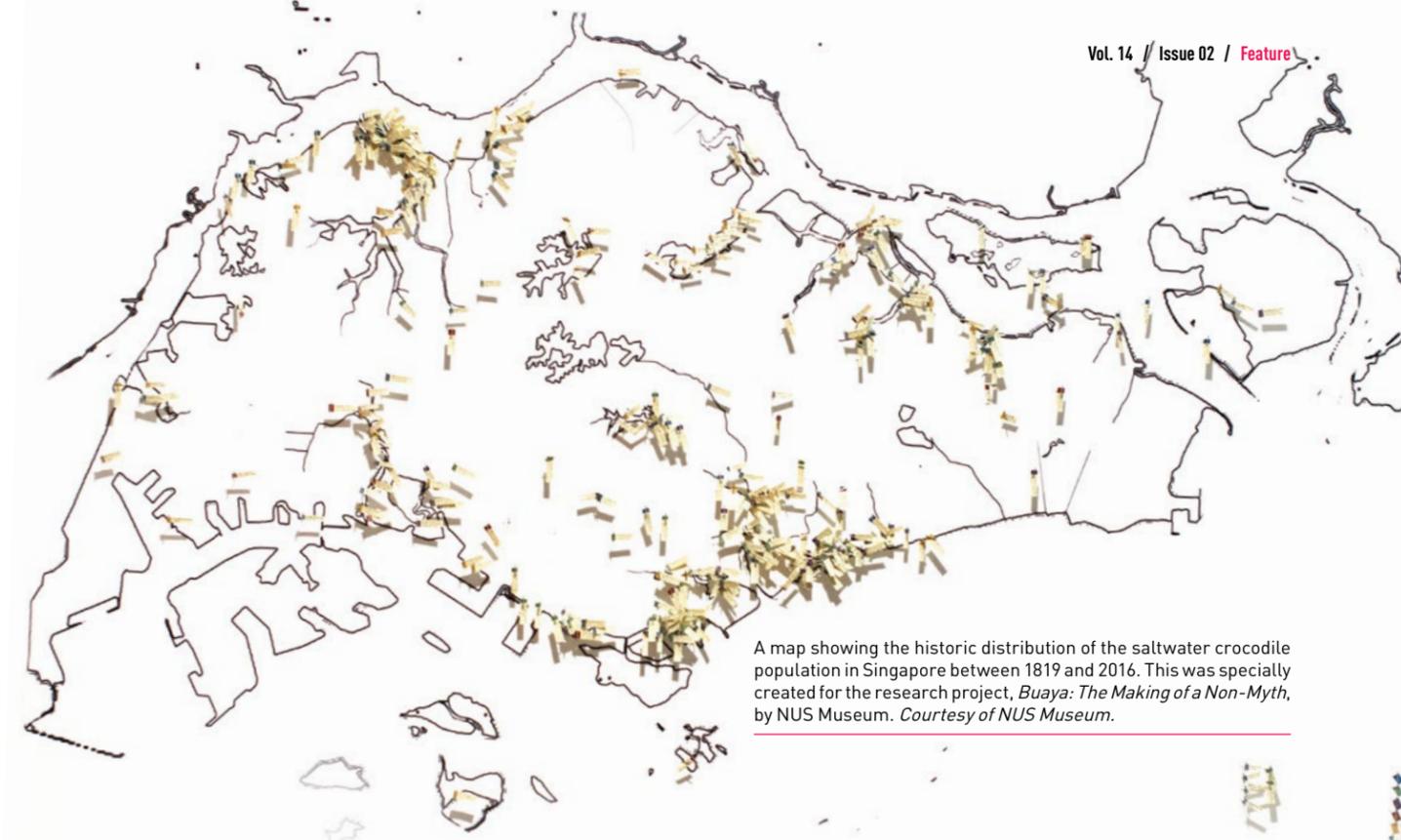
In 1899, a 70-yard “menagerie race” took place in which a “young crocodile driven by Captain Lucy” competed against a goose, a goat, a monkey and two donkeys (the crocodile did not win the race).²

In the late 1800s, the pet crocodile of a Captain Gamble that became too big as an adult was released into the Botanic Gardens Lake only to later bite one of the gardeners. In order to capture the crocodile, the lake had to be drained and

poisoned with tuba roots, unfortunately killing every living thing residing in the waters. The crocodile, however, was nowhere to be found, the creature having presumably left the confines of the freshwater lake.³

Notes

- 1 The Malayan dollar was used from 1939 to 1953 in Brunei and Malaya (under British colony and protectorate). Shoes made of lizard skin were also popular. See Choose your own crocodile. [1948, May 2]. *The Straits Times*, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 2 Gymkhana meeting. [1889, September 4]. *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 3 The Gardens crocodile. [1892, January 23]. *The Straits Times*, p. 2; The hunting of the crocodile. [1892, January 27]. *The Straits Times*, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG. [Note: Before this incident, crocodiles were kept at the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Today, the Marsh Gardens has a signboard informing visitors how it was “once the location of a rhinoceros wallow and alligator [sic, crocodile] ponds when the Singapore Botanic Gardens had a zoological collection in the 1870s.”]



A map showing the historic distribution of the saltwater crocodile population in Singapore between 1819 and 2016. This was specially created for the research project, *Buaya: The Making of a Non-Myth*, by NUS Museum. Courtesy of NUS Museum.

activities in parks and water-based clubs to draining and poisoning lakes.

The public spaces developed for encounters with crocodiles question the notion of for whom or for what they were controlled for – zoos and marine parks are

regulated spaces that allow encounters (or “non-encounters” in reality) with crocodiles within a safe setting for humans, while reserves are spaces controlled for the mobility of wildlife. Yet, the making of these spaces is constantly reconfigured

when crocodile sightings take place. In the myriad encounters with these reptiles, whether from actual documentation or from cultural memory, the crocodile’s existence still escapes being understood in public history. ♦

Notes

- 1 Lim, M.Z. (2017, November 9). Water training will resume on Friday, with no further crocodile sightings: S’pore Sailing Federation. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website.
- 2 Lee, M.K. (2017, August 24). Warning signs put up at Changi Beach Park after crocodile sighting. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website; Tan, A. (2017, August 8). Crocodiles spotted in north-eastern Singapore. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website. [Note: One of these sightings involved the death of a 1.5-metre-long crocodile which was hit by a car at Kranji. See Wild crocodile dies from injuries after accident along Kranji Way. [2017, June 6]. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website.]
- 3 A “croc” at the swimming club. [1906, May 15]. *Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 4 Lam, L. (2018, January 22). NParks to extend barricade to pathway where crocodile was spotted at Sungei Buloh. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from The Straits Times website.
- 5 Untitled. [1856, December 16]. *The Straits Times*, p. 5; Thursday, 25th August. [1870, August 27]. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 6 When seen from afar, monitor lizards have been mistaken as crocodiles due to their similar shape and colouration. Unlike monitor lizards, crocodiles do not have a forked tongue. See It was just a harmless lizard... [1957, January 27]. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 7 Richards, A. (1960, April 6). Flirting with danger in croc farm. *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 8 Page 10 Advertisements Column 1. [1981, March 22]. *The Straits Times*, p. 10; Chia, M. (1988, September 4). Croc park to open soon in Jurong. *The Straits Times*, p. 12; Goh, K. (1988, December 15). A big bite of the business. *The New Paper*, p. 18. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 9 Lim, S. (1989, March 7). Croc bites trainer during show. *The Straits Times*, p. 18. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 10 Paradise lost. [2007, January 26]. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 11 Yee, A.T.K., et al. (2010, June 4). The present extent of mangrove forests in Singapore. *Nature in Singapore*, 3, 139–145. Retrieved from Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum website.
- 12 Yee, et al, 4 Jun 2010.
- 13 Clerk keeps all-night vigil at creek for a 20-ft crocodile. [1960, March 17]. *The Straits Times*, p. 14. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 14 Croc scares fishermen. [1960, March 18]. *The Straits Times*, p. 16. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 15 *The Straits Times*, 18 Mar 1960, p. 16; Ponggol croc returns with a mate. [1960, March 26]. *The Straits Times*, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 16 *Kramat*, or *keramat*, from Arabic *karama*, translated as “miracle”. Whilst often deemed as a material shrine, *kramat* is not exclusive to a physical space nor spiritual entity, but a complex sacred “shrine” to both, visible and invisible, and applied to the mobile or immobile physicality of a spirit.
- 17 They offer a silent prayer to ‘sacred’ crocodile. [1960, April 19]. *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 7. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 18 Richards, A. (1960, June 29). Villagers to hold a feast for kramat to scare away crocs in the canal. *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 19 Shy croc in a flower pond spreads fear among kampung folk. [1960, August 17]. *The Singapore Free Press*, p. 9. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

- 20 Abdullah Abdul Kadir. [1918]. *The autobiography of Munshi Abdullah* (W.G. Shellabear, Trans). Singapore: Printed at the Methodist Pub. House. Retrieved from BookSG.
- 21 Kassim Ahmad. [2010]. *The epic of Hang Tuah*. Kuala Lumpur: Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia. [Call no.: RSEA 398.2209595 HIK]
- 22 This incident in 1977 gives room for speculation. Were the scouts searching for what they thought was the mythical white crocodile? Or were they looking for a crocodile that was possibly afflicted by a rare biological condition? One such condition could be albinism, a congenital disorder characterised by the absence of natural pigment, causing even the eyes to be of a different colour. Another cause could be hypomelanism – a reduced amount of melanin. In snakes that are affected by this condition, some coloured parts (mostly black) of their bodies are retained. There is also leucism, which is a partial loss of pigmentation that causes part or all of the crocodile to be white.
- 23 Scouts hope to bag white croc. [1977, May 2]. *The Straits Times*, p. 5; Scouts hunt for white crocodile. [1977, April 30]. *New Nation*, p. 2; Another hunt by scouts for white croc. [1977, June 13]. *The Straits Times*, p. 8; Tan, B. (1977, June 25). A fourth bid to catch the white croc. *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 24 Scouts hunt for white crocodile. [1977, April 30]. *New Nation*, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 25 *New Nation*, 30 Apr 1977, p. 2.
- 26 Another hunt by scouts for white croc. [1977, June 13]. *The Straits Times*, p. 8; Tan, B. (1977, June 25). A fourth bid to catch the white croc. *The Straits Times*, p. 12. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 27 Survey Department, Singapore. [1839]. *Map of the Island of Singapore and its Dependencies* [Topographic Map]. Retrieved from National Archives of Singapore website.