

News Note

Report of Crocodile Attack in the Western Caroline Islands: by Peter T. Wilson, Fisheries Management Biologist, Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, Koror, Palau.

Crocodiles have long been known to be dangerous to man. However, they are fortunately confined to rather remote parts of the world and as a consequence their activities receive little publicity and attacks are infrequently recorded.

A fisherman who was fortunate enough to survive such an attack was recently admitted to the hospital on Palau with wounds received from such a marine crocodile (*Crocodilus porosus*) while he was fishing at night. These crocodiles are common in the Palau Islands which are located about 400 miles north of New Guinea at 7 N. Latitude and 134 E. Longitude. The largest of several hundred islands in this group and the largest in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands is Babelthaop which is approximately 25 miles long, 8 miles wide, is sparsely inhabited, and has many rivers running island for considerable distances.

Crocodiles are very common in these areas, but being pelagic they are also found throughout the rest of the many islands in this group.

Koror, the island's capital, is located just south of Babelthaop and at its closest point is only about a quarter of a mile from this much larger island. 400 people live on Koror and as is the case throughout the entire group of islands, the people rely on fish to form a major portion of their daily diet.

One of the most popular methods of fishing is diving at night with an underwater flashlight and spear. Though sharks and crocodiles are common in these waters attacks such as are reported here have not occurred, or at least been reported, frequently.

Takada Spoons, a Palauan government employee and part-time fisherman, had been working at the Koror Power Plant the night of the attack and on finishing his shift at midnight returned home where he picked up his fishing gear and went to T-Dock where he planned to go spear fishing. He entered the water about 0200 in the morning with his spear and goggles, and underwater flashlight, and a fish stringer tied around his waist. He went to a hole not far from T-Dock that he had fished many times before. As he went out to the hole on his bamboo raft he noticed that the tide was going out. When he reached the hole, he dove around the edge in about 3 feet of water for about 2 hours. He did not go into the center of the hole as the water there was about 12 feet deep with a white sand bottom and few fish.

After two hours of diving he had caught 12 fish which he had put on his stringer which was still tied to his waist. About this time he decided he was through diving for the night, turned off his flashlight to save the batteries and swam across the center of the hole toward his raft. At just about the center

point he was suddenly grabbed from the right and behind by what he immediately thought was a crocodile. The crocodile's twisting and turning took him down to the bottom of the pool. On the way down Takada managed to reach his flashlight which was hanging from his shoulder and turn it on. He looked over his right shoulder and was able to see one eye of the crocodile and a row of big teeth sunk into his back. After seeing that it was indeed a crocodile Takada dropped his flashlight, which was still on, and reached over his right shoulder with his left hand to gouge the eyes of the animal. He could only reach its right eye and when gouging it seemed ineffective, he hammered away at the crocodile's lower jaw with his spear gun to which he was still hanging on. At the same time he was avoiding the whipping of the crocodile's tail which was very apparent to him by the twisting of the animal's body and the commotion in the water. In spite of all this activity he was finally able to get his feet underneath him and to push himself off the bottom toward the surface with all his strength.

The course of their struggle had apparently taken them to shallower water for when he came to the surface he was able to stand with his chin just out of water. However, there was still the problem of the crocodile which continued to hang on and thrash about with its tail. Takada managed to get in another lick or two with his spear gun and then was pulled back down to the bottom for the second time. Again he got his feet under him and pushed himself to the surface. This time the animal finally let go. His first reaction was to grab his flashlight and look around for the crocodile. When he didn't see it he managed to drag himself over to his raft where he pulled himself aboard and yelled for help to some friends who were nearby.

Word traveled ahead of him quickly (quite a trick as no phone was nearby, it was approximately 0430 in the morning and the hospital was about a mile away) and when he got to shore, with the help of his friends the ambulance was waiting to take him to the hospital.

When questioned about the size of the animal, Takada felt that he couldn't really tell. All he saw of the crocodile was its jaws. Measuring the jaw marks on his body and relating these to measurements of specimen skulls indicate that the animal must have been at least 10 ft. long. As crocodiles have been taken up to 25 ft. in Palau, it can be seen that this is not an unusually large specimen.

Examination at the hospital showed that he had puncture wounds of the right breast and right shoulder with multiple bruises all over the right shoulder and chest including the right side of the back. The doctor also noted in the hospital log that Takada had decreased movement of the chest with diminished air entry all over.

Perhaps the best lessons to be learned from this report is not to tie fish to your body on a stringer. While Takada was swimming across the hole, his fish were dragging behind him on a line which was only five feet long. The night was dark and his light was out. It is possible that the crocodile sensing the fish

in some manner, homed on them and detecting the bigger animal in the vicinity of the fish attacked him. This would indicate that crocodiles may use their sensory organs in feeding and if so, it would seem prudent to remove speared fish from the water, or if this is not possible, tie them to a float a considerable distance away when fishing in areas which crocodiles are known to frequent.

Takada was hospitalized for a period of 6 days, given treatment, and is now back at work; and diving at night when he needs fish.