

Crocodiles All The Way



A crocodile basking in the sun by the river banks of Mavadipalli Aru

A troop of eagles swarming the skies overhead where a small river ran under a bridge that lay over the road leading from Kalmunai to Ampara drew our gaze... Curious, we stopped and inched towards the bridge and peered at the murky waters of Mavadipalli Aru. As we stared, breaking the smooth surface of the water a snout appeared, followed by the long scaly body of a crocodile...

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Standing on the bridge, on what appeared to be a small footpath, we scanned the body of water looking for the crocodile that appeared and disappeared just as fast. The tooting horns of the vehicles reminded us of the busy road behind. However, eager to get a good look at the crocodile that had ventured into a water body so close to a main road and town, we waited patiently. Our patience was soon rewarded with the appearance of not one but several scaly visitors that seemed to leisurely cruise the waters with their horned heads grazing the surface and their jagged tails swishing behind. Each appeared and disappeared, perhaps

sinking to the depths scouring for food.

On the other side of the bridge where the water body flowed through creating a river with a small river bank, a couple of people were washing their bikes and some other items. As we approached them we saw a crocodile drift by under the water just a couple of feet away from the people making its way probably to join its friends on the other side. Reaching the two people, we spoke to them about the area. "This place is called Mavadipalli and the river is called Mavadipallu aru (river)," said one adding that the crocodiles that seemed to just meander by in the river have been a part of their lives always. Pointing to a narrow gravel pathway sandwiched between paddy fields, they assured us that if we were to drive along that path we would be able to see more crocodiles. Encouraged by the notion, we made our way there.

Even before we started 'chasing crocodiles', we were stopped in our tracks by an approaching bullock cart that was laden with hay. Pulled by two white bulls, the cart slowly yet steadily sauntered towards us and then proceeded along the main road. Once in the gravel path we took some time to look at the verdant fields that held a hint of brown amidst the sun. The grazing cows, the darker outline of the emerald green trees in the distance all added to the serene charm that prevailed. Soon the right hand side of the path gave way to the Mavadipalli Aru that wound its way to the far distance with no end in sight.

Sri Lanka has two types of crocodiles, Saltwater or Estuarine crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) and the Mugger or Marsh crocodile (*Crocodylus palustris*) or more commonly known as geta kimbula and hala kimbula in Sinhalese. Undoubtedly our impromptu encounter was with the mugger crocodile, the most common species of crocodile in Sri Lanka that makes homes in fresh water bodies such as large rivers, reservoirs, marshes and even in man-made irrigation tanks and canals, similar to the Mavadipalli Aru. It is believed that the name 'mugger' is derived from the Hindi word magar, which stands for water monster. Characterised by a broad snout when compared to other crocodile species, a grown mugger crocodile is said to reach a length of ten feet while its diet consists of fish, reptiles, birds, small insects and at times even large mammals.

Now our search for crocodiles started in earnest as we keenly watched every movement on land and in the water to catch more glimpses of our four-legged scaly friends. And true to the words of the people by the river bank we were

meeting crocodiles around every corner—some barely visible in the waters as they made their way towards the main road. As we slowly drove along the road, we spotted a large crocodile basking in the sun some distance away. The crocodile seemed to sense the approaching vehicle and it quickly slithered into the water with speed and agility. From that point on, similar incidents became increasingly common as basking crocodiles hearing the roar of the vehicle would splash into the waters from their comfy perches, admittedly making us feel a pinch of guilt for having disturbed their peace.

What surprised us the most was how crocodiles, people and other animals seemed to 'coexist'. Every now and then we would come across lonely fishermen waiting stoically with their fishing rods dipped in the river, while manoeuvring around the next corner, we would see a crocodile soaking in the rays of the sun with its wide mouth open. At one point we saw a herd of buffaloes wallowing in the cool waters while at another setting, a herd of goats gingerly ventured near the river. We surmised that the people and the animals living in the area must be used to these crocodiles and know how to be aware of them as it had become a way of life. And as strangers to the area we should be careful as not to go near these creatures and keep a safe distance.

For long hours we chased after the crocodiles aiming to reach the end of the Mavadipalli Aru in the hopes of seeing these beasts in groups as is said to be common among mugger crocodiles. However, as the skies darkened it was time for us to head-back. Unsatisfied for not having reached the end of the river and the quest for seeing more of these amazing creatures we vowed to return once again to retrace our steps to see the crocodiles of Mavadipalli Aru.

