



Johnstone River Crocodile Farm

Innisfail

Name: Andrew Young

DOB: 1963

Who is in your farming family?

I manage the farm on my own with several staff.

Where is your farm and what do you farm?

We operate a crocodile farm here for skins for the fashion world. Our farm is just outside Innisfail.

What is your farming background?

I have had many years working with crocodiles, lots, (took a break for a while), but about 20 years. I have always farmed them for their skins, but now I'm doing it on a much larger scale than ever before.

I actually grew up on a Hereford (cattle) farm on the north coast of NSW. I didn't really like farming then, and I still probably don't. But this is more like a business, than 'farming'. You got Occupational Health and Safety, ordering, accounts, and all of that as well as producing your product. Making 'product' is the easy bit. Making sure the business is operating properly and you are financially sound with what you're doing is more challenging. Budgeting, planning, forecasting, being adaptable, and looking outside the square.

Farming Memories - What has been so special for you living on a family farm?

One of the biggest things with crocodiles is people's fear of them, their unknown knowledge of them. But the reality is, they are a very gentle, soft animal. That surprises a lot of people.

If you can understand animal behaviour, understand how they operate, they are quite safe. You don't put your hand into a mechanical device on a farm, likewise, you don't put your hand into a crocodile's mouth! You need to understand the animals' behaviour. The behaviour of the animal (or the plant for that matter) is the biggest thing you need to understand.

Whether you farm sheep, cattle, wheat, you need to understand the behaviour of that animal or plant and farm accordingly. You may be able to change a small amount of that behaviour

to better suit your farming practice, but 95% of what you do will be dictated by the animal you are farming.

I've never been frightened around our crocodiles, but you certainly can learn from any mistakes you make. When you work on a croc farm, you don't start with big crocodiles, you start with little ones. It takes a lot of years to learn how to handle them. You don't put yourself in the position to be able to be injured. You need to put the proper checks and balances in before you start dealing with animals like these. We have 4500 animals on the farm. 4400 of them are not likely to harm you much if you get bitten, but the other 100, there's a chance you are going to get seriously hurt. But you just don't do stupid things... It's a Workplace, Health and Safety issue. In the last six years we have only had one small injury where someone received 20 stitches to his hand.



Animal welfare is one of the most important things - for any animal on a farm it's important. You need to watch you animals, observe and learn what is going on. We control feed, we control water, You are really watching what you are doing. Your objective is to make money so all of these decisions are critical - it's a business. After years of experience, you know what you are doing, but there are still always things to learn. You learn every day.

Farming Life Experiences - Family farming presents many challenges which often involve considerable effort to resolve. What experiences can you recall which presented you and your family with a significant problem?

Virtually, every week you get issues that arise on the farm. But you solve them. You put your thinking cap on and figure it out, but keep an open mind. You have to put in measures that will cut down the number of problems you have in the first place. It's also important to think outside the square. I might be driving around and see something in a completely different setting, that might have application here on the farm.

A good example is biosecurity. You don't want to be flipping animals back and forwards from pen to pen because you can risk spreading disease. Chlamydia is an example of a disease that crocodiles can suffer from when they come under stress. You might have 10 pens in a row, but one pen might have a reduced growth rate from stressed animals. You need to figure out what's going on - it could be as simple as the pen is at the end of a run and the staff drive too fast past the pen, stressing the crocodiles out. Even the other day when I had the Fire Brigade on a special visit to the farm, they were driving around, the crocs didn't know them and it freaked them out and stressed them. Crocodiles know what's going on, they know when something is different.

Farming crocodiles need to be about repetitive behaviour - repeat, repeat, repeat. Most crocodiles are insecure; they'd sooner dive into the water and hide when disturbed. Gentle and slow, never loud, that's how you need to treat them.

Feeding crocodiles is another thing. You don't just throw food in a pen. Don't forget, we are farming an aggressive animal in a community pen. If they fight with one another for food,

they can do damage to their skins and we don't want that. We need to spread the food and sometimes we even put icy-poles out for them! That's frozen meat. If the little ones in the pen aren't getting enough to eat, we'll feed out fresh meat, then frozen 'icy-poles' so the smaller ones get a chance to eat later on. It works well. These are some of the techniques we have introduced here.

This stuff you see on TV, like sitting on crocodiles, patting them on the head - it's stupid! We don't do any of that here. We can catch a big crocodile, if we need to, and don't even touch it. You don't climb all over them, why would you put an animal under stress like that? Our animals are too valuable to us, there is lot invested. One severe bite on a skin from another crocodile could cost you \$1000!

Looking Back - What lessons were learnt? What has your farming life taught you?

Farming life is a hard life. You can be very busy. Some weeks you might work 60 or 70 hours. You are always at work. You go to sleep thinking of work, you wake up at work. But when you have time to take the time - you make sure you take it! The biggest thing is trying to get the balance right between work and some time off.

You have to have a passion for what you do. I probably don't really 'like' crocodiles all that much, but I live them. If you don't have passion, you won't succeed. If you take a farm on, you're looking at a long term thing. You must be thinking years and years down the track. You need drive and you need supportive people around you. And if you haven't got passion and drive as a farmer, you may as well get out of the industry you are in, because you're not going to make it.



How to Grow a Crocodile

We keep breeders (mature crocodiles) on the farm. We collect eggs from them - entertaining, but safe, if you know what you are doing. We incubate the eggs ourselves - it's fairly tricky. We control the sex of the crocodile by controlling the incubation temperature. We want boy crocodiles because they grow quicker and bigger. You still get a few females hatching, but it's about 80% males to 20% females. Then they all go through different hatchery pens right up through to processing. So you have to understand the needs of the animals at all different life stages, from babies right through.

If you don't get the first bit right, you will pay the penalty down the track. In our industry, you don't see the end product for 3 or 3 ½ years. What you do at the start is very important at getting a result at the end. You may have to keep the animals an extra 12

months to get them up to the right size to harvest, and the extra time will mean extra production costs and less profit.

The animals are skinned here. The hides go overseas to be processed through a tannery. After that, the skins are graded and that determines what product can be made from them. It takes a long time. From start to finish, it's probably 5 years. The leather is used to make things like handbags and shoes. Crocodile makes one of the best quality leathers in the world - especially skin from our Saltwater Crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*). It's much better than other species of crocodile around the world. We don't farm our fresh water crocodiles either, the skin is not good enough. It's all about quality. We are better off producing a couple of thousand very good quality skins than, 5000 average quality.

It's an export market. Our biggest markets are throughout Europe and America. Our products are luxury items. I had a handbag in my hands the other day that was priced at \$250 000. But believe it or not, there are people in the world, where spending that amount is like us spending \$50!!

