Lazy no more: crocs shock researchers with a marathon swimming display

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CROCODILES are known for basking in the sun near river banks, but Australian scientists have discovered the "lazy" reptiles are also marathon ocean swimmers.

By tracking three wild crocodiles that were moved away from their home, the research team found they swam between 10 and 30 kilometres a day to get back to their capture site.

One crocodile, nicknamed Weldon, stunned observers by circumnavigating north Queensland's Cape York Peninsula to return home, covering more than 400 kilometres in 20 days.

"The general feeling about crocodiles is they sit on the sides of banks and always seem to be motionless," said University of Queensland zoologist Craig Franklin.

"But these are big ocean voyages by any measure."

The project began several years ago when researchers — with the help of late "Crocodile Hunter" Steve Irwin — trapped three male crocodiles, Weldon, Ronald and Banana.

Satellite trackers were attached to their necks, and they were taken by helicopter between 52 and 130 kilometres away from home.

Banana and Ronald were moved up and down the peninsula's coastline, while Weldon was shifted from the west coast to the east.

After a few months cruising around in their new location, the crocodiles revealed their navigational skills by heading for home, including Weldon, who researchers thought would be "totally disoriented".

Professor Franklin said the crocodiles might be using magnetic fields and the position of the sun as their compass, in a similar way to birds, whom they are more closely related to than to other reptiles.

The findings had excited the entire research team, including Irwin, who played an important role in the project before his death last year, he said.

"The results are so impressive, and you can imagine his enthusiasm for what we were discovering."

The project was a collaboration between the university, the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, and Irwin's Australia Zoo.

The findings were published in the online journal Public Library of Sciences One.
Not so still life: A croc fitted with a tracking device shows off a tooth or two. The animals have been found to swim up to 30 kilometres a day.