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# DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND AGEING

## 2004 CROC FESTIVALS™ RESEARCH WEIPA, PORT AUGUSTA, ALICE SPRINGS, MOREE & THURSDAY ISLAND

### FINAL REPORT

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CULTURAL & INDIGENOUS  
RESEARCH CENTRE AUSTRALIA

**(formerly CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES)**

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## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Croc Festivals™ are a vehicle for promoting positive health, education, social justice and reconciliation messages and an avenue for students, both primary and secondary, to present dance performances. The majority of students who participate are Indigenous. In 2004 the Croc Festivals™ were conducted in eight communities across Australia.

- Weipa (QLD)
- Derby (WA)
- Port Augusta (SA)
- Swan Hill (VIC)
- Moree (NSW)
- Geraldton (WA)
- Alice Springs (NT)
- Katherine (NT)

## PAST AND CURRENT RESEARCH

Since 2000, the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) has jointly funded evaluations of the Croc Festivals™ with other Australian Government Departments, including the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), to assess the degree to which social, health and education-related objectives are achieved through each Department's involvement in the Croc Festivals™. Given the consistency of evaluation results between 2000 and 2003 it was felt that there was value in future evaluations moving away from the current format and concentrating on the following:

1. What makes the Croc Festival™ work and what leads to positive community impacts?
2. What characteristics of the Croc Festival™ are transferable to other festivals and community events?
3. How does the Croc Festival™ contribute to opportunities and strategies related to health and social capital (such as strengthening social relationships and trust) and general education skills (such as literacy and numeracy skills) and opportunities.

The Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) managed the research process on behalf of the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) and commissioned Cultural Perspectives in collaboration with the Australian Centre for Health Promotion, University of Sydney to undertake research to evaluate the 2004 Croc Festivals™.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative research was conducted during the Festival and in the months following the Festival. This allowed the evaluation to explore the community impact of the Croc Festivals™ in the immediate and longer term, to look at what makes the Croc Festivals™ work, and to understand the impact in relation to health and education outcomes.

Research was conducted in Port Augusta, Moree, Weipa, Thursday Island and Alice Springs. These locations represented a mix of communities who were hosting the event for the second time (Alice Springs), and communities who had hosted a number of Croc Festivals™ (Port Augusta, Moree and Weipa). Thursday Island and Weipa were also included to explore the impact of hosting the event every two years, instead of annually, and the impact on a travelling community.

Research was conducted during the Croc Festival™ in Alice Springs, Port Augusta and Moree. During the event qualitative research was conducted with students (group discussions and depth interviews), Croc trainees (group discussion) and teachers, activity supervisors and other stakeholders (depth interviews). In addition observational research was conducted for a number of activities.

In the months following the Croc Festival™ all locations were visited. Again depth interviews and group discussions were held with students and teachers. In addition a series of consultations were conducted with community members who could speak about the impact of the Croc Festival™ on the wider community.

## **OVERALL PERCEPTIONS**

Satisfaction with the Croc Festival™ was extremely high across the research, with a strong perception expressed that the Festival offers a unique learning and social experience for students. In most cases community members also spoke of the Croc Festival™ as an event that was unlike any other in the community in the way it brought the whole community together in both organising and participating in the event. In addition the Croc Festivals™ were distinguished from other community based events, insofar as they provided a real experience for students and their families to have fun together without alcohol or other drugs.

The commitment to the event was very strong in all communities, and those involved talked about the time, energy and resources devoted to the event. For small communities this was seen to create challenges and considerable pressure, however the research demonstrates that communities are willing to dedicate the energy needed to make Croc Festival™ a success.

The research suggests there are opportunities for improving community ownership and participation, and it is important that initial consultations reach a wide cross-section of the community. Widespread promotion of the

events is necessary to increase awareness and encourage participation. As well, it may be possible for current community members to nominate other individuals and organisations that would benefit from their involvement, and that could bring their expertise and knowledge to the events (such as youth groups and other community organisations). Inviting a broader group would also increase the presence of local role models, which is an important component for the success of the Festivals. It would also be beneficial to develop a “how-to” manual for each community that could include a list of the contacts, timelines, information on how to arrange a press release, and logistical issues with setting up the activities (eg a map of the careers market venue with power points indicated).

Community members believe that the considerable commitment of the community, both financially and in-kind, was instrumental to the success of the event. There was some concern expressed that community volunteers and the communities themselves were not sufficiently recognised by Indigenous Festivals Australia (IFA). These discussions were often framed in a discussion about a perceived lack of transparency about how funding dollars are distributed in staging the event. It will be important that consideration be given to the level of recognition volunteers receive, so that their commitment is rewarded.

In interpreting this, it is important to note that community members, teachers and facilitators all commented on the sound organisational skills and professionalism displayed by IFA, and in most cases participants spoke positively about IFA’s support and commitment. There were several suggestions for improvements to facilities (such as toilets, showers, mattresses and available food), similar to those received in previous research, but overall perceptions of IFA were positive.

Most people identified a negative impact to their community should they cease to host the Croc Festivals™. While generally participants were pragmatic about the enduring loss to students health and education outcomes many children and the community would miss the event, and it “would take away a thread from the tapestry of the town”.

It was clear from the research that the Indigenous focus of the Croc Festivals™ is a major attraction, and all participants included in the research felt this focus should not be reduced. Most felt that the current balance of Indigenous-specific events and mix of Indigenous students to non-Indigenous students was appropriate, however there was some concern that the focus would diminish as the Festivals grow.

Overall, the reactions to the activities of the Festival were extremely positive, particularly towards the ‘I want to be’ workshop and the Croc future skills as they combined interactive, practical activities with career information. While there were some concerns about the lack of appropriate age tailoring of some activities, and catering for students for who English is a second language, these were overshadowed somewhat by a perception that students engaged strongly with the activities and they added to the wider learning experience of students. The research did highlight areas that could be improved, and these include increasing the level

of interaction of the careers market, increasing the presence of local role models, especially local Indigenous role models, and increasing the amount of Indigenous cultural activities included in the program.

## **HEALTH OUTCOMES**

The sponsorship objectives of DoHA are to reduce the prevalence of smoking, drinking and other drug use in the community, to promote healthy lifestyles, as well as the relationship between positive choices and healthy lifestyles. There are clearly limitations on the ability of an annual event to significantly influence behaviour with regards to alcohol and other drug use, given the wide range of social, economic and environmental factors that impact on substance use. As well, changes in behaviour and identifying cause and effect relationships are difficult to measure, particularly through qualitative research.

Overall, as in previous research, it was clearly acknowledged that the Croc Festivals™ are one of many health education platforms that students are exposed to, and the messages promoted during the Festival complement other strategies in the area. The health activities were seen as beneficial because students engaged with the messages as they are delivered in a positive and different way. It is important to note though, that an analysis of the scheduling program suggests that only between a quarter and a third of students actually visited the health expo in Moree, Port Augusta and Alice Springs (at the time of writing the scheduling information for Weipa was unavailable).

Despite this, the results suggest that many students who participate in the Croc Festivals™ receive messages about the positive benefits of a healthy lifestyle, and the negative consequences of using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. It appears that these messages are delivered clearly across the Festivals, and that students are 'listening.' In terms of the behavioural objectives, research participants were hesitant to make any links between behaviour and participation in an annual event. We therefore suggest that the Festivals build on and reinforce messages that are already being delivered through schools and communities, and that the Festivals enhance the acceptance of these messages because of the interactive way that they are being delivered. As well, the broader impact of the Festivals on resilience and social capital offer opportunities for positively influencing health outcomes.

## **EDUCATION OUTCOMES**

There is a wide range of literature on educational outcomes for Indigenous students, and there is considerable debate about how the differences in academic achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students can be addressed. This literature points to a vast range of factors that have an impact on educational outcomes, ranging from health and nutritional issues (eg hearing problems, poor nutrition, poor eyesight) to family, social and economic factors (eg parent's education level, parental discomfort with schools and cultural notions of shame and fear of failure, and socio-economic background).<sup>i</sup>

The objectives of DEST's sponsorship are to improve education outcomes for students by increasing awareness of the importance of school, linking education with future career opportunities, generating and reinforcing intentions to stay at school, and through this, improving attendance and retention in school. There are clearly limitations in the ability of an annual event to significantly influence school attendance and retention, given the range of factors that influence this behaviour. Given this, the specific sponsorship objectives with regards to awareness, attitudes and intentions were assessed, with an exploration of possible influences on literacy and numeracy.

Observation research of the 'I want to be' workshop found that there were high levels of engagement with the activity, which delivered messages about co-operation and teamwork, self-esteem, goal setting, risks associated with behaviours that limit life's choices and developing relationships. The activities within the workshop clearly emphasised the importance of school for the students' future.

Observation research of the careers market suggests that while the careers market was popular among students, the popularity seemed to be based on the fact it was an opportunity to gather give-aways rather than an opportunity to engage meaningfully with career-related information. This observation was shared by some of the careers market activity facilitators, as well as teachers. On the other hand there was also a number of businesses and organisations that saw the careers market as an opportunity to promote themselves as a career option. A number of teachers also saw value in the networking opportunities it provided them, especially those from remote areas who had difficulty accessing career-related information.

An analysis of the scheduling program indicated that a significant proportion of students did not attend the careers market or the 'I want to be' activities. Based on the scheduling program it appears that more students visited the 'I want to be' activity (around half for Port Augusta and Moree, and about 80% in Alice Springs) than the careers market (about 15% in Port Augusta and 28% in Moree). There was no careers market held during the Alice Springs Croc Festival™.

The research suggested that for many students messages about careers and the importance of school are delivered successfully through Croc Festivals™, although there are limitations in that not all students attend activities in relation to these objectives. As well, the success of these activities is influenced by the interest of the students themselves, and we believe the limited engagement of the careers market means that students who are not already contemplating their opportunities are unlikely to receive strong messages about different career options and what is required to realise these opportunities.

Research respondents, including teachers, activity supervisors and stakeholders, were reluctant to comment on the impact of student participation in the Festivals on school attendance and performance, although there were many examples of attendance increasing prior to the Festivals. This was particularly the case for some schools that used the Croc Festival™ as a reward for school attendance, thus improving overall school

attendance in the short-term. Indeed, many teachers commented that the Festival had a positive effect on school attendance both in the lead up to and directly after the Festival. The conclusion therefore is that messages about the importance of school are being heard by many of the students, but that it is not possible to link this with long-term educational outcomes with regard to school attendance and retention. However, there are opportunities to enhance the potential impact on these long-term behavioural outcomes by extending the reach of the Festivals beyond the three-day event, and encouraging schools to incorporate messages before and after the Festivals. While there were many examples of this happening already, this appeared to be very dependent on the individual teachers and schools. Consideration needs to be given to how this approach can be further encouraged. There appeared to be limited use of the teacher resource provided by IFA, so there is a need to develop these options further. One opportunity is to include a briefing for teachers during the Festival that provides suggestions and resources for teachers for extending the life and learning of the Festival.

## ENHANCING RESILIENCE IN STUDENTS

Much has been documented about the notion of ‘resiliency’, which is made up of protective factors, found both within individuals and their environments, which impact upon the health and well-being of young people and consequently on their educational outcomes. The results of the research suggest that there are a number of protective factors for resiliency for which the Croc Festival™ has influence. While there were several examples provided of how Croc Festivals™ have contributed to strengthening the individuals’, families’, school/community’s social framework for fostering resilience, the extent to which this occurs was difficult to assess.

In relation to *internal* protective factors (personality, physical health and an individual’s interaction with their environment) the Croc Festival™ was shown to have an impact in the following areas:

- **Self-esteem:** This was seen as particularly important when viewed in the context of a student’s educational development.
- **Respect:** This was seen as an important building block in both personal and community development, particularly in empowering individuals to develop lifestyles conducive to health.
- **Motivation:** There were numerous examples of how the Croc Festival™ offers students something to work towards, which was seen as an important motivator with regards to school. Many believed that the Festival also offered opportunities to broaden horizons and encourage goal setting. Limitations were acknowledged by participants, as the motivation to stay at school was felt to be driven by many factors, including the need for this to be developed at home/in the family.
- **Social and communication skills:** This was particularly relevant to those students involved in traineeships, skills programs in the lead-up to the Croc Festival™, and those students for whom English is not their first language.

- **Pride and school bonding:** There was evidence of stronger school bonding among some students through improvements in student/teacher relationships, and the peer teamwork associated with practising and performing on stage.

The Croc Festival™ was also seen to influence the protective factors that exist in a number of external environments including the family, peer, school and community environments.

### Family

While participants found it relatively easy to discuss interactions between students, teachers and community organisations, it was much more difficult to discuss the link between the Croc Festival™ and improved interactions between family members. However there were some links made, particularly in relation to pride in their children's performance, and families' involvement with the school.

Many spoke of the opportunity for parents to get involved by attending the performances and the chance to watch their children perform as an important benefit of the Festival. This was seen as especially relevant for Indigenous parents who may have limited involvement with school activities, often attributed to parental discomfort with schools. It can be argued that the Festival is helping to break down historical barriers between parents and schools, merely by providing a school-based activity where parents feel comfortable and proud of their child's achievement.

While the impact of the Croc Festivals™ in relation to families is restricted because many parents have limited exposure to the event beyond the performances, the Croc Festivals™ are an example of a model of education that delivers learning in an interactive, fun way and enables student, parent and community involvement.

### Social/peer

In relation to protective factors associated with students' social and peer relationships the Croc Festival™ was shown to have an impact in the following areas:

- Meeting and mixing with students from other schools and cultural backgrounds. The positive promotion of cultural diversity within communities is considered one of the protective factors influencing resiliency in young people.
- A sense of collective pride and achievement and positive peer bonding. This was considered a strong positive impact of performing at the Croc Festival™, as it was considered somewhat unusual given the general negative direction of peer pressure in relation to 'achievement' experienced in many of the school communities.

### School

In relation to school based relationships, there were several examples of the Croc Festivals™ ability to ‘break down barriers’ and allow interaction in a more relaxed, informal and fun social situation, which resulted in enhanced trust in some student/teacher relationships. The number of students who did their performance practice outside school hours was seen as indicative of the increased student motivation toward school as a result of the Croc Festival™.

Students’ are exposed to new technologies, new activities such as sports and dancing, and have the opportunity to meet new people, and this was seen to bring a touch of ‘novelty and newness’ to the students’ learning experience, particularly relevant for students from rural and remote communities.

### Community

The Croc Festival™ has been recognised as an important vehicle that encourages interaction between different sectors of the community, which has positive implications for resilience enhancement. Local role models are of particular relevance to Indigenous students as research into Indigenous school retention shows that students are more likely to stay at school longer when there is sustained contact with people of higher education levels.

Many people commented on the success of the Festival in being drug and alcohol free and it was seen to be an important community-supported message to provide to young people, which helped to strengthen the community’s social framework for fostering resilience

While there were several examples of the Festivals influencing each of these internal and external protective factors, it is difficult to assess the extent to which this occurred, and the impact this has on health and educational outcomes. The research however does suggest that this is an important outcome of students’ involvement, and that consideration should be given to how this can be enhanced further. As well, it is important to be realistic about what can be achieved from a three-day event. While many could identify immediate outcomes, in terms of long-term outcomes, the Festival was seen as “*a brick among many bricks*”.

## **COMMUNITY IMPACT**

Although it has been defined differently by different disciplines, the concept of ‘social capital’ is valuable in describing some of the complex pathways between social phenomena, and the education and health outcomes achieved by individuals and communities or populations. It is important to note that the evidence is of an *association* between these phenomena and educational or health outcomes – with some evidence that communities that have higher levels of social capital have higher rates of educational attainment and better health status than other communities. While it is difficult to define exactly what social capital is there is evidence to suggest that children and young people who are surrounded by families and communities that

are cohesive, connected and that share norms of respect, support and tolerance are more likely to stay at school and to be healthier throughout their lives. The research demonstrates a number of ways in which Croc Festival™ strengthens community relations and resources through greater interaction between different sectors that helps to create a more supportive community environment. There are a number of areas related to social capital and community resilience in which Croc Festival™ has some influence:

#### Local identity

Participants saw the Croc Festival™ as strengthening the communities in which they were held. They found the Festivals contributed to the community's positive self-image by offering opportunities to showcase their community in a positive way, and that they increased community supportiveness and unity by coming together to stage a large, professional, family event that was inclusive of all sectors of the community.

#### Trust

Similarly, the Festival was thought to build trusting relationships by opening up lines of communication between organisations, as well as making business related interactions easier. Trust is an important factor in helping to bond a community together and enable social interactions to take place with more ease.

High levels of trust in communities has been shown to enhance cooperation, interaction and engagement in community activities, and is associated with attitudes of altruism and reciprocity.

#### Social networks

Educational outcomes and health outcomes are determined not only by personal decisions made by individuals, but by the physical, social and economic environments within which people live, work, and play. When environments are supportive it is easier for children and young people to make positive choices about education, careers and health. For this reason it is vital that all sectors work together to improve children and young people's life chances.

The research demonstrates many examples of a range of sectors and organisations within host communities joining together to stage the event, even if only for a defined period. Building good working relationships among different groups and organisations is a necessary first step in developing effective longer-term partnerships – and the Croc Festivals™ appear to have been a useful platform for such relationships.

#### Cultural context, social norms and values

The Croc Festival™ was shown to create opportunities for dialogue and partnerships between different sectors of the community. It also promoted reconciliation by bringing the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities together in a way that no other community event was shown to do.

The literature around social capital shows that communities in which prevailing social norms and values support dialogue among people from different cultures and in which difference is not only tolerated but valued are more cohesive, and provide all their members with the confidence and support they need to grow and flourish – physically, psychologically and socially.

### Employment

The Croc Festival™ provided some, although limited, employment opportunities for community members, especially Community Development and Employment Program (CDEP) workers.

In relation to students, the careers market provided some opportunity for local businesses to promote themselves as an employment option for school leavers, although there were only a few examples provided where a direct relationship between school-leaver employment and the Croc Festival™ could be made.

While examples of enhancing social capital are present, the research does not provide information on the extent to which this is happening within communities, and whether these benefits are evident in the long-term. We believe there is an opportunity to improve the impact that the Festivals have on social capital by increasing awareness among community members of the benefits that this interaction and networking offers individuals, organisations and the community overall, and by providing guidance on how these benefits can be realised. Examples identified in this research can be used in the implementation of this strategy. While we acknowledge that the outcomes in this regard depend heavily on the community themselves, IFA, through their engagement with community representatives, has an opportunity to enhance the capacity of communities to develop social capital and therefore extend the long-term impact of the Festivals on communities.