



In death, Steve Irwin has taken on legendary status. Global tributes to the Crocodile Hunter have overwhelmed Australia and the few who dared criticise him.

Larger than life



BY PAUL TOOHEY
& NICK TABAKOFF

IF IT GOES UP, MUST IT COME down? Not necessarily. Steve Irwin is proof of that. He's still up, even though he's six feet under. Always over the top, if not over the edge and shoulder-deep in a dodgy bilabong. Irwin had a giant cartoon key stuck in his back. He'd never stop except to grab bursts of sleep. Then he was up again, like an uncontrollable kid.

We didn't know and love Irwin as the Americans did. We judged Irwin against David Attenborough, but Americans were never that confused. And, in some especially rapid revisionism, we are now being told that it was only snobs who ever had issues with Irwin.

It's rubbish. Finding someone who didn't appreciate Irwin's personality was dead-set easy two weeks ago, especially among northern people who might have a good working knowledge of the subjects in which Irwin specialised. Why pretend otherwise? But, Germaine Greer aside, the critics have graciously stepped back.

REMEMBER THE SMILES Steve Irwin in happy times with wife Terri and children, Bob and Bindi

The response has been extraordinary. The Australia Zoo has become an acreage of floral tributes as thousands have made the pilgrimage to the heartland. Irwin's family was offered a state funeral; they acted with sense and dignity in turning down the offer – it is not that they are anti-public or anti-media, but Irwin didn't need to be buried as a commodity. The family said on Monday that they didn't yet know whether it would be possible for the public to visit his gravesite at the zoo, as fans can mourn at Elvis' at Graceland.

Australia has taken a crash course in Irwinism. And the Irwin creature makes a more interesting study than any of the animals he wrangled.

In the US, Irwin's death led the NBC national news, and an "appreciation" appeared on the editorial page of the stately *New York Times*, which celebrated him as "44 going on six", but also as someone whose "energetic wonderment has seeped into the brains of significant numbers of children". Several years ago, a new costume began to appear among the ghouls, witches and superheroes of Halloween night. Kids were wearing khaki shirts and hiking boots.

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THE STEVE AND TERRI STORY

Love on sight

TERRI: I never expected to end up on the Sunshine Coast, or visiting Beerwah, but driving by there was this little tiny sign and this little tiny zoo and I thought, "I'll just go in to check it out." I went through the gate and Australia Zoo opened up into this beautiful gardens and happy animals and there was a crocodile demonstration going on with this guy. He was in with the crocodile talking about animals the way you would talk about what you had for lunch. "And now I'm going to feed this huge crocodile, isn't he a little beauty," he was saying. And I was like "well, I've never thought of a crocodile as beautiful but I'll have a look". And I stood and I listened to him talk about crocodiles – that they were passionate lovers and beautiful mothers and what special animals they were ... And then he handed the crocodile some food and it came screaming out of the water and grabbed the food and he was as calm as if he was mailing a letter. I was sold. I thought this man is the most incredible guy I have ever seen. He's probably married. He's gotta be taken.

STEVE: When I saw Terri in the crowd, I looked up and our eyes met and my heart just went "bang bang bang". Just started thumpin'. It was love at first sight. I know this just sounds like it's coming out of a Mills and Boon novel but it's true. Love at first sight. Next thing, woah, I remembered where I was and Agro's trying to kill me. So I wrapped it up and said thanks for coming and she stayed back and talked to me.

TERRI: He said hello and I think I said something really clever like "hi".

STEVE: Crikey. Our love just went ballistic.

TERRI: And at that precise moment, Laurie took a photograph of us. I still have it to this day. It's the funniest moment. I don't know how if there's any married couples who have a photo of the exact moment they first met.

Ken Ramirez, vice-president of Animal Collections and Training at Chicago's Shedd Aquarium, said American kids thought Australia a really "cool" place, full of danger and excitement: "When we took classes, it was amazing how often we would hear a kid say, 'I saw the Crocodile Hunter show this animal living in this place on this food'. So that means they were really paying attention to what he said, and what he was trying to teach them."

It was *him* the Americans liked. He wasn't just telling them about Australia: he'd dish up their own animals and feed them right back to them.

"I think audiences across the globe loved Steve because he was authentic," US-based Discovery Channel president Billy Campbell said. "What you saw on TV was exactly the way he lived his life." Campbell said Irwin was "as pure as anyone I've ever known. His passion was infectious and our description of the show was that Steve literally pulled you off your couch and into the scene. His willingness to get 'too close' sometimes was magnetic, plus his incredible love and knowledge of wildlife was educational as well as entertaining."

One US couple had particular reason to honour Irwin in these last few days. Scott and Deborah Jones are from Quad Cities, four close-grouped cities divided by the Mississippi River, west of Chicago. In 2003, Scott, a master dive instructor, took a group of

ROCK THE CROC
Steve Irwin's knowledge and close relationship with animals made him a household name



senior citizen divers to Baja, Mexico, on the Sea of Cortez.

Irwin approached the dive boat and told them he was filming sea lions and hammerhead sharks in the vicinity. "He told us he'd stay out of our way," said Scott. "He just did that out of politeness. He went and did his own thing."

Scott Jones became unhappy that the local dive master he'd employed – she was supposed to have knowledge of conditions – "wanted to take us into a current and rough water. And I said no, this was to be the first dive of this trip and most of the divers were in their 60s. Some were in their 70s".

Scott argued with the dive master, insisting she find the group still, shallow water in order to get them orientated. "Everyone got suited up. They were following the dive master, as they normally do, and my dive buddy and I were shooting video and following the group.

"About 20 minutes into the dive, I saw Katie [Vrooman]. She was 77 years old. I saw her all by herself. That was strange. She'd been diving for 13 years and was always never more than six, eight feet from her dive

My Life with Steve

BY JOHN STAINTON

He was a courageous friend and a great dad – and success did not spoil him.

The time I felt most scared for Steve was in Tasmania when he was diving with seal colonies which attract sharks. The man who had the boat said there's a great white around here, the size of a mini-bus. I was sick with worry. I don't swim. The water always used to haunt me because I couldn't be there to help.

Once in Africa, I was filming Steve handling an Egyptian cobra, a very aggressive snake. Suddenly his back was against my chest and I went flying through the air and ended up sitting



HEROGRAM
Rescued diver Scott Jones

“I’m sorry for your country – you’ve lost a tremendous human being”

DEBORAH JONES WIFE OF SCOTT, RESCUED BY STEVE IRWIN

“By the time I got to her, another wave bashed her against the wall again. And then I realised she wasn’t breathing and I was doing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I continued with it for a couple of hours. I was getting bashed against the wall also.”

They were now completely separated from the main dive party.

“I found a place, a little cove, where it wasn’t so rough. After a couple of hours, I gave up mouth-to-mouth because I realised I wasn’t doing any good. And just held on to Katie’s body as long as I could.

“And then nightfall came, high tide came in, which enabled me to climb up onto these rock formations. I dragged Katie up with me because I didn’t want to lose her. There was a full moon that night, and through the night I was hearing strange noises – it was sea lions, I think. I even thought I heard

my wife calling, even though she was a thousand miles away.

“The people from our group later told me Steve had a satellite phone and had made calls to get search airplanes out looking for us. He was searching also in his boat. He stopped all production and made an effort to try to find me and Katie.

“The next day – like, 27 hours later – a kayak saw me. They got in as close as they could – there was rough current and jagged rocks – and threw me a bottle of water, and they paddled out to Steve’s boat to tell him. And then Steve got his dinghy and came out to where I was. He jumped in the water, climbed up on the rock and put a life jacket on me and was asking me questions, getting me relaxed.

“We jumped back in the water and he got me into the dinghy and over to the big

buddy. She and her buddy were always close – it was like they had an invisible string joining them.

“The current picked up and visibility went down to zero. I came to the surface and then I saw Katie get caught by an incoming wave and smashed against one of the walls – there were these kind of wall formations, kind of like an island. Rough waves were going different directions.

on the dirt. I had got too close and Steve protected me. He had a sixth sense, it was creepy. He had an animal instinct with people. He’d say, “I don’t really trust that person but if you want me to put up with them, I will.” He was always right.

I first met him around 1987 when he was working at the Queensland Fauna and Reptile Park. He was wearing khakis. In 1992, we made the first documentary for *The Crocodile Hunter*. When we got on location, it was a disaster. He was trying to be a presenter. I said, “You’re not Steve any more.” This is the only advice I ever gave him.

Steve had a very big heart. He had terrific energy. His biggest problem was he couldn’t sit still. The only quiet time was about 5am, when we’d chat with a cup of tea. He loved a cup of tea. I never had a cross word with him in 15 years. Never. We worked so closely, in dreadful conditions – in jungles, in swags, with mosquitoes and leeches. I hate that sort of stuff, I’m a five-star man. It was a funny relationship.

He was one of the few people I knew who didn’t get off on the money. The fame didn’t give him

a big head. From 1996 *The Crocodile Hunter* took off in the US and Steve was thrown into a different world – limos, hotels, security. He wasn’t keen on the autographs, photos and handshakes. You have to put on a happy face all the time. It’s a chore.

Sharing her husband with the world was tough for Terri. I’m not going to say that they had a fairytale romance, but they were great mates, deeply in love. There hasn’t been much in their life that hasn’t hit television. America has grown up with their family.

Two years ago, we did the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York. Animal Planet had a huge float with a big crocodile and Steve stood on top. It was bitterly cold; he was in his shorts for three-and-a-half hours. In front of the crowd were big burly New York cops. As soon as they heard people yelling, “Crikey! We love you Steve!” the cops turned round and, to a man, took a shot of him with their mobile phones. Afterwards I said, “Wasn’t that an honour for a boy from Beerwah to end up on Fifth Avenue with 2 to 3 million yelling how much they love

you.” He reflected on it. “Yeah,” he said. “But I was scared I was going to have to pee.”

We’d get into trouble when things were going really good. In January 2004, I was on a cruise ship off the coast of Mexico when I saw the baby Bob incident on CNN. Steve was really hurt by that. He would not apologise. If he believed in something, he’d stand by it.

Steve was one of the best dads. He’d have “Bob time” and “Bindi time” and we’d work our

life around that. Terri would say she’s got three kids and he was one of them. As a family, they spent the whole of August camping out in North Queensland where he was doing research. He said it was the best month of his life.

I’m at peace that he died at a happy point. The saddest thing is he had everything to live for. When he was brought back to Croc One, I realised what was going on. It’s a horrible thing to re-live. I find it really hard at night, I can’t get it out of my brain.

This week has been roller-coaster, with ups and downs. That’s what it was like for 15 years ... Now I’ve got to do it without Steve. I don’t know how. [He sobs.] It’s going to be hard, but I’ll do it. I’m fortunate to have had such a friendship and the legacy of years of amazing memories.

As told to Claire Scobie

GREAT FRIEND John Stainton has “years of amazing memories”



boat and then Steve was taking off my suit. On my back, you could see how I was beat up by rocks. And he went into the cabin to get something [medicine], and at the same time, someone said behind me, 'What do you think of the Crocodile Hunter?'

"At the time, I really didn't know who Steve Irwin was. My daughter and wife watched his shows all the time, but I hadn't. Then when I got home, my wife and daughter turned on Animal Planet and educated me on Steve. And I become one of his fans. My wife and I wrote him a very nice thank you letter."

"I think," said Deborah Jones, "one of the important things that Scott wants to get across to your countrymen is that Steve was the kindest, most gentlemanly person. I'm a nurse. The way he removed the dive suit and attended to my husband's wounds. Without him I wouldn't have my husband. I'm sorry for your country - you've lost a tremendous human being."

To dress Irwin up as a hero for what he did would be wrong; indeed, if his film crew had not joined the search party, they would have been plain irresponsible. And Irwin was not someone to let an opportunity go. He had a cameraman film him jumping into the water rescuing Scott; but it seems his hard-wired commercial instinct paused when he found Scott sitting with the body of Katie.

The Joneses believe Irwin never used the footage in order to portray himself as a hero - just a small grab as an aside to his hammerhead and sea lion documentary.

"There were some very private words between my husband and Steve up on that rock," said Deborah. "Steve asked him some questions about Katie. My husband has never told me what was said - it was a very intense moment. But the footage showed Steve saying, 'We're gonna take care of you, we're going to bring you the boat, sir.'"

"We're sorry your country's sad now. We really are."

Did Irwin just carry a little extra in his tank? Or was it something else entirely? In a 2002 magazine report, writer Frank Robson noted that Irwin cried several times in their interview; Irwin's mate, producer and business partner, John Stainton, recounted that when he caught up with Irwin after not seeing him for a month, Irwin cried. Tears fill Irwin stories.

This fragile behaviour - coupled with his machine-gun chatter, his grandiose talk of saving the world, his repeated declarations of love for his family, his unstoppable drive, his rejection of sleep - made some wonder whether he had a condition.

Ray of sunshine

The world's cartoonists found a smile in an untimely death.



■ REG LYNCH THE BULLETIN



■ PATRICK COOK THE BULLETIN

People always called him "crazy", but in a positive way; he often said it of himself. It is also possible that Irwin - who never used alcohol, cigarettes or coffee - might simply have employed a better brand of battery than the rest of us.

Journalist Claire Scobie once asked Irwin: "Do you mind that people think you are a bit mad?"

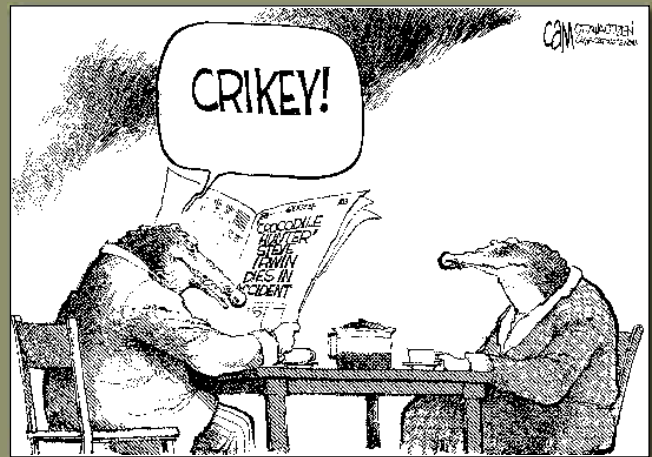
Irwin: "Oh, no, mate, that goes with the

territory. I am, I am mad as a cut snake, no doubt about it. In fact - you met Dad - he made sure that I had the front part of my brain cut out, when I was, like, seven, so I don't view things like normal people do."

That career, stopped by a stingray stiletto to the heart, became an empire. Stainton has said the show would go on. "This is a tragedy. It has to be dealt with, and it has to be moved on from." Irwin's daughter Bindi is



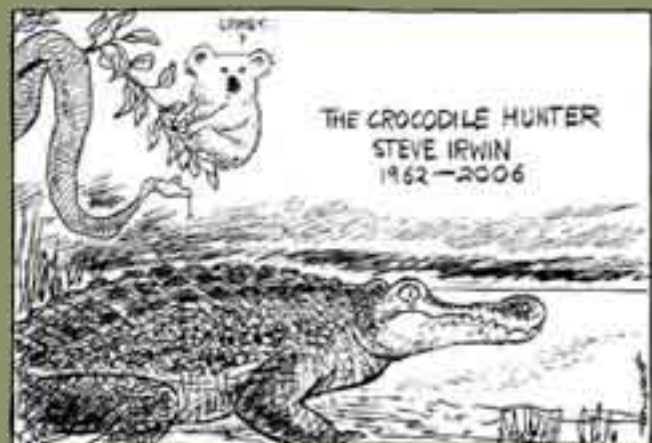
■ BOB ENGLEHART THE HARTFORD COURANT, CONNECTICUT, US



■ CAGLE CARTOONS THE OTTAWA CITIZEN, ONTARIO, CANADA



■ DANA SUMMERS THE ORLANDO SENTINEL, FLORIDA, US



■ TOM SCOTT, THE DOMINION POST, WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND



■ SEAN DELONAS NEW YORK POST, NEW YORK, US



■ PAT BAGLEY THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE, UTAH, US

the centrepiece of the “moving on” process: “We’ll be busy getting Bindi off the ground in the next few months, and I guarantee we’ll be doing Bindi movies next year.”

First up is a series starring Bindi, 8, being made for the US Discovery Kids channel. “We’ve got 26 episodes to shoot for Discovery America of her show, *Bindi, The Jungle Girl*,” he says. “There’s seven episodes of that we’ve done already. The rest, the next

19, are going to be harder, because she’ll be on her own all the way.” (Irwin had been filming clips for his daughter’s show at the time of his death.)

“When that hits the world airwaves next year, it cements her as a unique wildlife character. There’s no other girl who can handle animals like her dad, and singing and dancing... you wouldn’t do it with her if she didn’t thoroughly enjoy what she did.”

In recent years, Irwin’s earnings and output decreased. It was always envisaged that the precocious Bindi – whom Irwin convinced himself was not exposed to the limelight at too young an age – would ride the next big money wave home. The child had been raised to become Australia Zoo’s lead exhibit.

“There’s enough cards in the pack to play a good round of poker,” said Stain-



“ He’s only dead in body. He’s as alive in spirit as he ever was. ”

ADRIAN BARROW, SAATCHI AND SAATCHI

ton, referring to Bindi, the girl Mowgli. Stainton recently told Irwin: “She will overtake you in a couple of years.” Irwin replied: “I’ll sit back and relax, and let her take over.”

Irwin had factored in his own death, at least in the context of his business. Trevor Harch, managing director of Evans and Harch Constructions, built the zoo’s centerpiece 500-seat “crocoseum” and entrance. He recalled his first close encounter with Irwin. He drove into the zoo, tendering for some work. Irwin drove up, saying: “What are you doing here?”

When Irwin was placated, Harch asked: “You play around with these dangerous animals: what happens if one of them gets you?”

Irwin replied: “Trevor, if that happens, the show is set up so that Terri and Bindi take it to the next level. It’s all under control.”

“The zoo will end up being exactly what he wanted it to be: an attraction as big as Disneyland that people around the world come to see,” said Stainton. “Disneyland is a destination. [Steve] saw it as Disneyland in Australia in a zoo form.”

Adrian Barrow, director of strategy and branding expert for Saatchi and Saatchi, said: “I think the commercial reality is they’ll do incredibly well. The zoo will be very popular, particularly with overseas tourists. There will be a sort of morbid fascination with visiting his home, in effect. It will end up being a shrine to everything he was, as a dinky-di, larger-than-life Aussie character.”

Given that Irwin may be more famous

SAD SCENES Surfers at Steve’s local break, above, and visitors to his zoo, below, pay tribute



in death than in life, Barrow said there was a chance to bring together genuine cashed-up conservationists to champion the Irwin way.

It was not always this way. “While he was alive, while there were obviously a lot of people who loved him, there were some among the liberal elite who thought he was from a century we’ve moved on from. Now he’s gone, there’s nothing stopping his estate from using his fame and conservation values, from having a crack at what he wanted to have while he was alive.”

In the meantime, they could market his spirit. “It’s like a perfect storm,” said Barrow. “Here is a guy who wrestled crocs for a living, who died horribly at the hands of a dangerous animal – which, from a branding point of view, is an irresistible story. He’s only dead in body. He’s as alive in spirit as he ever was.”

At Australia Zoo on Sunday afternoon, that message yet got through to the assembled mourners. The scene was silent and sombre. For them, Irwin had not risen again. He was just gone. ●

Additional reporting by Gerard Wright and Claire Scobie.