

Herp Expert Steve Irwin Interview - Part 1

An interview with reptile expert Steve Irwin.

Interview and photo by Jeff Lemm

We've all seen him on television, the crazy Australian who, with all the enthusiasm of a 10-year-old boy, catches crocodiles and venomous snakes with his bare hands-the Aussie who tackles kangaroos and wild boars and lets the deadliest snakes in the world tongue-flick his face. Together with his American wife, Terri, Steve Irwin, better known as The Crocodile Hunter, has created one of the most popular shows on television.

I first corresponded with Steve in late 1995, before The Crocodile Hunter series had reached America. I knew him as a fellow varanid enthusiast who had bred rare Australian monitors. It wasn't until I visited his wildlife park, now called Australia Zoo, in 1996 that I learned of his enthusiasm and of the show. He gave me a tape of the first episode to watch and in hysterical disbelief I simply asked, "When will we see this in the States?"

The show aired a year later in America and it was a tremendous success. Since that time, we have worked together on rattlesnake episodes of the show and we still correspond about all things non-human. While herping Australia's east coast in December of 1998, I caught up with Steve at Australia Zoo. I taped the following interview to introduce Reptiles' readers to the Steve I know:

Steve and Terri Irwin pose with Jeff Lemm and a large white-throated monitor (*Varanus albigularis*) in San Diego, California.

Jeff Lemm (JL): Tell me about your mother and father, how Australia Zoo started, and what life was like growing up in a zoo.

Steve Irwin (SI): Well, my dad (Bob Irwin) is quite a globally recognized herpetologist who has since retired. He still keeps a really fond interest in wildlife in general, and he's got taipans and four species of goannas and all types of stuff in his backyard in the wild. During the '60s, he had a huge interest in conservation and wildlife which was shared by my mum (Lyn Irwin). Coming into the late '60s, he started developing on that. He had a very successful plumbing business in Melbourne and his interest in wildlife grew to be an overwhelming passion. And mum was really big on rehabilitation with native species back into the wild, so by 1970 they bought this block of land and built the Beerwah Reptile Park, which was 40 cents for adults and 20 cents for kids. And it just grew and grew from a menagerie that we had where I was born in Upper Fern Tree Gully up in the Dendenong Ranges, to the Beerwah Reptile Park which became the Queensland Reptile and Fauna Park, which is now Australia Zoo. Mum's forte was rehabilitation with wildlife, always has been, always will be, from koalas and wombats to tiger snakes. And Dad was ahead of his time in herpetology here in Australia in conservation and designed some brilliant conservation techniques and strategies which are in place both federally and statewide, as well. He's ahead of his time. I've always been involved in it, and ever since I can remember, I've been out in the scrub with Dad catching and looking at wildlife.

As an example, when I was very young, like 4 years of age, I captured my first brown snake by putting my foot on it. Dad came over and decked me out of the way-it's the second most venomous snake in the world. So he's like, "Get off it!" and I'm like, "I got it, Dad, I got it!" (laughs). By 9, he had me jumpin' my first croc, a freshwater croc. "Whack!" I jumped it, and I was barely able to hang onto it. But the strength of Dad's arm come up and pulled me and the croc into the boat.

So that's where it started. I have had an exceptional hands-on experience with native Australian wildlife from the womb. Mate, from when I could walk I've been in the Australian bush. Nowadays, it's still goin'. Nothing's changed except now I'm touring throughout the world doing what I've always loved doing-getting in close to wildlife. I've taken Mum and Dad's strategy of conservation through education, and I've taken the next step through our wildlife documentaries and through setting up Australia Zoo. We eat, sleep and live for education for conservation. And with our wildlife documentaries, all we want to do is get the cameras right fair smack in where it's happening. We want to get you in there. Same with Australia Zoo. You come to Australia Zoo and you will have an experience of wildlife rather than "look over there, there's a crocodile," or "there's a koala."

JL: What other interests did you have as a child? Everybody knows you were the total animal kid, but what else did you do? Tell me anything you did.

SI: I surfed. I was the maddest surfer. I still am very passionate about my surfing, although now I get very little time to surf. But there's no doubt about it that wildlife has been my total life.

JL: Did you play any sports?

SI: Yeah, mate, I played football.

JL: Australian Rules, no doubt.

SI: No, mate, I played Rugby League. I played a little bit of Australian Rules, but I wasn't that good at it. I wasn't real good at kickin'; I was better at chargin' into a big mob of people and bustin' 'em up.

JL: (laughs) That's the way it should be.

JL: Okay, you talked about the park and what you're doing here. But how about fieldwork and breeding? I know you've bred keithornei (the canopy goanna), and it was the first ever breeding. What type of fieldwork and breeding would you want to be known for?

SI: My scientific background has been rather focused on varanids, but we're stemming out a lot further than that. Australia Zoo will always have a big interest in varanids and we'll do our best, and we are currently involved in some rather large varanid projects like semiremex (the rusty monitor) and giganteus (perentie). They're two huge projects that have been going on for quite a few years and will probably go on for the next 10 years or more. We're starting to wind down on our keithornei project. We've been very successful there. Myself and my staff, particularly Wes Mannion, who's my right-hand man and has been my best friend virtually all of my life. He's now the director of the zoo, and he's an ugly bastard.

JL: He smells horrible, too!

SI: No doubt about that! (Both laugh, because Wes is in the room.) Back to it, though, we're working on Oxyuranus microlepidotus (the fierce snake), and we're also really heavily involved with the woma (Aspidites ramsayi). There's a Brigalow Belt population of woma which is really endangered here in Queensland, and is only found in Queensland. Wes and I have been studying this woma since we were kids, and we're getting there. We're making some major breakthroughs.

JL: Breakthroughs in that you're producing these animals in captivity?

SI: No, we're talking fieldwork-strictly fieldwork. We're doing more with captive varanids than with any other family. We've now got a huge interest in working with Brachylophus (Fijian iguanas). Myself and Terri, we went to an island in Fiji and discovered another population of iguanas that were once thought to be there.

JL: In Monoriki?

SI: Yeah. They're there all right, and they're very endangered, so we're working on that, too.

JL: Speaking of Terri, tell us how you met and how she's influenced you and the park through her mammal background, because I know you were strictly a herper before Terri came along!

SI: (laughs) You got the inside story, mate! Back in 1991, I was cruising along, heavily involved in the East Coast Crocodile Management Program. My entire life revolved around the conservation of crocodiles. I was in the field with my dog (Sui), backed by Wes and my dad, catching, removing and releasing large "problem" crocodiles that people wanted dead. We live for our crocodile conservation and are very passionate about it and so we were doing this really heavy work, and I was up there for a couple of months on end. So anyway, I came back here and I was doing a crocodile demonstration (at the park) with one of my favorite crocodiles, "Agro," a really naughty croc who hates my guts and wants me dead. So I'm in there and "Whack!" he takes this pig or chicken, or whatever it was out of my hand. I jump back and go, "Whoa! Isn't he beautiful?" and I looked over and here's this Sheila in the crowd, mate, and I swear I just went "Whew, happy day!" She's in the crowd! And our eyes met, and it was like a connection. It was a total connection-there and then-with first contact of our eyes. And I could feel myself drifting into this haze, and I look down and here's Agro coming up to kill my a\$@ and I was like "s* the first two docos was our honeymoon.

JL: Okay, well here's a question that you probably hear all the time, the favorite question of the interviewer: How has

stardom changed your life?

SI: It hasn't. It hasn't changed my life one iota. You know I'm not a movie star, I do television documentaries.

JL: You sure (jokingly)?

SI: Walk around and get a thousand different opinions, please. Honestly, it hasn't changed me at all. What you see on television I've been doin' since I was a boy. My earliest childhood memories, as far back as my tiny little memory can go, I've been doin' this stuff, still am. So as far as the adventures are concerned, nothing's changed. As far as the stardom and how big my head's gotten, or how big my ego's gotten, I'd like to think I haven't changed one iota. What it (television) has done is it's given me a stepping stone to get to some other countries and really wild destinations throughout this world, which perhaps I would have had to struggle to get to. Through wildlife documentaries, now I'm able to go to Africa right smack into the Nile crocodile territory in a canoe and get attacked by hippos! Just what I've always wanted to do (grinning)!

So that's how it's changed my life, and I'll tell you what, I'm lovin' it! Imagine how proud myself, Terri, our families, our staff, our colleagues are to see how well our shows are doing in the U.S. When you look at television or any media in this world, the U.S. is the biggest, it is the greatest phenomena in media on the face of this Earth, and it brings us the greatest amount of pride and honor to work over there and have people come up and get our autograph-want to have our photo taken and all that kind of stuff.

We're not movie stars, we're wildlife documentary people, so we can see that our wildlife message is now going to over 130 different countries across the world. We've got a viewership of over 500 million people! Whew! Talk about pride! Here is the greatest conservation message the world can see. It's going everywhere! What's our life revolve around? Wildlife. And so conservation of wildlife, that is our gift to this world. I don't care what anyone says, man, it's one word-habitat. And we can see how we're helping to save habitat, and we are lovin' it!

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