

Bob Irwin: 'I feel Steve

With his late son's spirit and passion spurring him on, Bob is sticking his neck out to save rare and endangered species of freshwater turtles

Crocodile hunter Steve Irwin might be lost to this world, but his dad Bob feels his spiritual guidance every day.

'Whether I'm tracking crocodiles or just wandering alone in the bush, I feel Steve by my side, guiding me along,' Bob, 69, says. 'It's something unique, very special and personal. I treasure it because Steve and I have always had a spiritual connection. It's real.'

So it's only fitting that coming up to Australia Day, Bob, a real-life Doctor Dolittle, is raising awareness of the plight of an animal close to his heart. And, no, he's not talking about crocs, but two species of freshwater cloacal-breathing turtles. And one of them is even named the Irwin's turtle, after Steve and Bob discovered the breed in north Queensland in 1990.

PLIGHT OF THE TURTLES

The existence of the Irwin's and the Mary River turtle – which both breathe underwater through gill-like organs – is being threatened by ongoing government plans to build new water supply dams and weirs in Queensland.

'It's a potential disaster,' Bob says.

Holding one of the unique Irwin's turtles, he recalls how he and Steve first spotted the freshwater turtles while catching crocodiles.

'We just saw these white heads sticking out of the water,' he says. 'It was really weird and totally unexpected. We were stunned.'

'We let the crocodiles do their thing while we jumped out of the boat and grabbed a few of them to examine more closely. We knew what we had found was pretty special.'

Bob explains that every animal needs protecting, whether it's a turtle or a koala.

'Unfortunately for the turtles, they're not furry or cuddly like the koala, so they slip under the radar and never get any publicity,' he adds. 'But they're just as important because they're all part of the ecosystem.'

Turtle experts Craig and Gabrielle Latta couldn't agree more. Without any financial backing, they've undertaken a breeding program to protect the species.

'We're slowly releasing them back into the waterways,' says Craig, president of the Australian Freshwater Turtle Conservation & Research Association. 'It's not the solution as far as conservation goes, but more to protect

their habitat and let people know their numbers are dwindling and they face possible extinction.'

LIFETIME CRUSADE

For more than five decades, Bob, the founder of Australia Zoo on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, has dedicated his time to the protection of all creatures.

He happily let Steve lap up the public attention as the Crocodile Hunter, silently going about his passion without fanfare.

'Mate, I'll care for animals of all species until I'm 100,' he says. 'It's what I live for.'

Bob drove three hours from his wildlife retreat, Camp Chilli, near Kingaroy north-west of Brisbane, to raise awareness of the plight of the turtles with New Idea. But it wouldn't have made any difference to him if it were a 24-hour drive. His love for animals is extraordinary – and knowing Steve is with him makes it even more special.

For more information about saving the turtles, visit www.aftcra.org.au.

BY WARREN GIBBS
PICTURES: PAUL BROBEN



by my side'



“Steve and I have always had a spiritual connection. It’s real”

Bob's new crusade is to save the turtle that bears his and Steve's name. Left: Joining him are turtle breeders Craig and Gabrielle Latta.

