

Crocodile lover: Learning from Steve Irwin

by [Tripp York](#) in the [October 3, 2006](#) issue

Though fans and nonfans of internationally known wildlife enthusiast Steve Irwin had been predicting his demise for quite some time (how long can one tempt the leviathan without a bit of bad luck?), his death on September 4 came as a shock. Especially shocking was the way he was killed: impaled by a stingray, a generally nonaggressive creature. There is nothing amusing in such an irony.

I know nothing of Irwin's faith commitments. I do know that he mentioned God on more than one occasion on *The Crocodile Hunter*, his show on the Animal Planet network. And I know from watching his show and following his work as a conservationist and director of the Australia Zoo that he had a genuine love for God's creation.

Irwin, known for creeping dangerously close to crocodiles, was once asked what he wanted to be most remembered for. He replied, "Passion and enthusiasm." Anyone who paid more than 30 seconds of attention to Irwin knows that he was never short on either. His love for his work often made him appear borderline weird.

He once said that he felt he was put on this earth with a specific mission—the preservation of wildlife. This was his calling, his vocation, and he attacked it with the kind of fervor that made the most apathetic viewer less so. Irwin's passion made me question how much passion I have for my own work, and whether I show my love for my work in how I work.

Work is what most of us spend the majority of our lives engaged in. The way we perform our work reveals to others what we think about our calling in life and how it does or does not reflect the goodness of God. As Christians, a body of people charged with the mission of making Jesus visible, do our lives reflect one of the central claims of Christianity: that creation, despite its fallenness, is good and, because of its fallenness, continues to groan for completion (Rom. 8:22-23)?

In this regard, I see Irwin's life to be (intentionally or not) an eschatological witness—a witness to the way the world was created, was meant to be and will one day be again. He did not treat animals the way many animal rights advocates desire; that is, he did not leave them to their own devices or think: if they become extinct, then so be it. He took a more biblical approach: he recognized them not only as our kin but as our covenant partners (in terms of the Noahic covenant). He did not simply let creatures be; he intervened on their behalf because he recognized the beauty, the goodness and the mystery found within all of creation. He saw animals as fellow creatures that, precisely because they are under our domain, require our care.

What kind of Christian could ever be indifferent to the possible eradication of any species? Creation is good or it is not good, and if it is good, then it cannot be good for any part of creation to become extinct.

I do not want to underwrite any sentimentality about animals. Irwin never did. He never imagined that if one spent enough time caring for a crocodile, it would become a pet. He never assumed that creatures would thank him or love him. He loved creatures simply because they were creatures. He loved them, especially the ones that many people regard as vile, because they reflect the mystery of creation. I never questioned the sincerity of his constant labeling of them as beautiful (he often called snakes, crocs, spiders and many other dangerous creatures “beauts”).

Many times as I watched *The Crocodile Hunter* I recalled Isaiah 11:6: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” When one watched the crocodile hunter in action, it was easy to get the idea that he was just a child. He looked at creation with the eyes of a child—one who could play over the “hole of the asp” and put his “hand on the adder’s den” (Isa. 11:8).

Irwin was killed by one of the very creatures that he loved. The fact that a stingray (a bull ray, to be precise) plunged its spine into his chest while he was filming a documentary should not be lost on us. We live in a post-lapsarian world. No one understood this better than Irwin. All of creation is fallen and awaits redemption. We all pine for that moment when “nothing harmful will take place on the Lord’s holy mountain” (Isa. 11:9). Until then, all we have are glimpses of God’s peaceable kingdom. Steve Irwin provided such a glimpse.