



Irwin (in the field with cameraman Justin Lyons in 2003) "had a sixth sense with animals," Lyons tells WHO.

In the last day of his life, Steve Irwin rose early on a boat moored off the Great Barrier Reef, had a breakfast of bacon and eggs and coffee, then grabbed a spear gun and snorkel and splashed into the sparkling blue water. His object? To catch fresh fish as bait to lure tiger sharks for a documentary. "It was good fun," recalls Irwin's long-time cameraman Justin Lyons, who was by his side on the fish hunt. "Boy's Own adventure stuff. Trying to see who could get the most."

That honour went to the Crocodile Hunter, who caught 12 of the 20-odd haul of bait fish, which the men then secured around the boat. When they lured no predators, "Steve said he'd had enough," recalls Lyons, then an employee of Best Picture Show, the production company that made Irwin's *Crocodile Hunter* series and other documentaries. "He said, 'I'm going for a burl.' So I said, 'Wait for me.' I threw the camera in and off we went in a little inflatable."

It would be the last journey Steve Irwin would take. On Sept. 4, 2006, off Batt Reef, some 30km from the coast of Queensland's Port Douglas, the zookeeper and Animal Planet TV star was attacked by a stingray. Stabbed in the heart by the animal's barb, he died as his crew tried to save him. The 44-year-old left behind his wife, Terri, daughter Bindi, then 8, son Robert, then 2½—and a legacy of animal awareness and conservation.

A decade on from the tragedy that sent shock waves around the world, his friend and colleague honours his memory: Lyons, 44, now a producer at Brisbane company PlayTV and the father of three girls, shares with WHO the last happy hours he spent with Irwin, the desperate attempt to save his life and what working with the Crocodile Hunter meant to him.

"He was a larger than life kid," says Lyons of Irwin (as the star of Animal Planet's *Crocodile Hunter*).



I had been working for Best Picture Show since 1990. It was run by couple John Stainton and Judy Bailey and they gave me my first job after studying communications at university in Toowoomba. The company wasn't really into documentaries then, it was more about producing TV commercials.

I first met Steve doing a Power's Beer commercial. Steve was the stuntman. He was hilarious. He hadn't done any TV work. He was full of energy, wide-eyed, loved being on-set, was having a ball.

During the shoot, Irwin revealed to Stainton he had footage of himself catching crocodiles. After seeing the footage, Stainton began filming him professionally and the *"Crocodile Hunter"* was born. For a decade, BPS produced the *"Crocodile Hunter"* series and other documentaries, with Lyons as cameraman.

I was literally on Steve's very first and his very last doco. We clicked, we got on like a house on fire.

In September 2006, we were working on a documentary called *Ocean's Deadliest* for Animal Planet, looking at the 13 deadliest creatures in the oceans around Australia. Onboard Steve's boat, *Croc One*, we went out into the ocean. The shoot was incredibly laid-back. We had a crew, they cooked us bacon and eggs, we'd sit around and have

coffee, chatting about what we were hoping to do for the day. Steve was in a great mood, really enjoying the company of the other guys on the boat, including scientists from James Cook University and the documentary's co-host, Philippe Cousteau, grandson of famous diver Jacques Cousteau.

"It wasn't long before we came across this stingray"

So we got to an area where tiger sharks were and put fish carcasses in the water that we hoped would attract tiger sharks. Nothing showed up. The following morning (Sept. 4), after their attempts at using fresh fish still failed to attract

sharks, Irwin and Lyons decided to look for something else.

We had two other Australia Zoo staff with us, Brian and Kate Coulter, a husband-and-wife team who worked onboard the boat and looked after us. So the four of

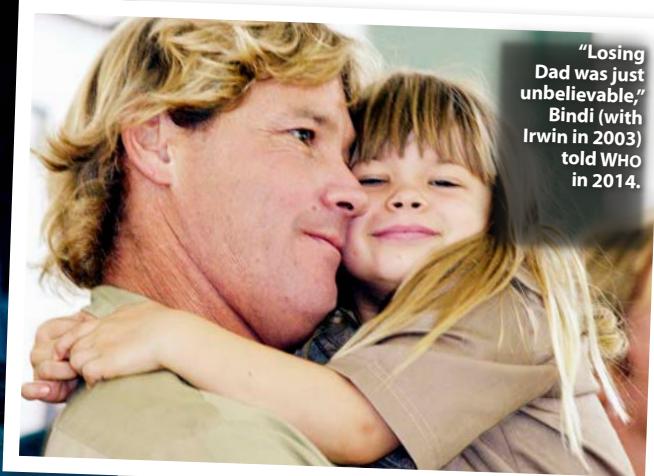


## Irwin's last footage

On the day before Irwin died, cameraman Justin Lyons filmed the TV star with a sea snake. "It was the last thing we filmed that made it to his final documentary, *Ocean's Deadliest*," says Lyons, "and it was the biggest sea snake you could ever imagine. So Steve was on a high from that the next day."



**During her speech at Irwin's memorial service at Australia Zoo on Sept. 20, 2006, 8-year-old Bindi (with mum Terri and brother Robert) said, "I have the best daddy in the whole world and I will miss him every day."**



**"Losing Dad was just unbelievable," Bindi (with Irwin in 2003) told WHO in 2014.**

us set off in a little inflatable. It wasn't very long before we came across this bull ray [a large species of stingray]. Steve, wearing his usual khaki shorts and shirt, said: "Quick, quick, let's get in the water." Simple as that.

I knew exactly what he was going to do. He was going to try to get the stingray between me and him. And then I started filming. We were only in chest-deep water. The stingray was massive, but it was nothing to fear or worry about. We'd shot with plenty of stingrays in the past and we had never seen one be aggressive. We got a lot of great shots.

I was in a perfect position, only 6 feet [1.8m] in front, Steve in shot, and the stingray, it just started stabbing upwards with its tail. Steve, above it, was thrashing about with his hands. It was a flurry of bubbles. Fifteen seconds of mad struggle. The stingray then stopped and swam away and I actually panned with it as he swam away. And then I swung the camera back to Steve.

He stood up out of the water and started screaming at Brian to come over. He was screaming, "Get over here, it's punctured me lung." They were there in a matter of seconds. Brian put his arm underneath Steve's arms, armpits, and yanked him onboard. Kate floored it to our support vessel. I was down at Steve's feet. Brian was holding him, saying: "Hang on, Stevo, think of your kids ... hang in there ..."

*In seconds, they made it to Croc One. The crew were standing ready to take us. We all grabbed Steve out and put him on the duckboard [a small wooden deck on the back of the boat]. We knew the closest place we*

## **"Steve said, 'Quick, quick, let's get in the water'"**

could get emergency services was Low Isles [15km north-east of Port Douglas]. I started CPR—mouth-to-mouth and compressions. I had done a St John Ambulance course. Steve had already slumped into unconsciousness. *They arrived at Low Isles in 45 minutes.*

It took four of us to carry Steve up the beach. It's incredibly soft sand and we were sinking

as we were carrying him. We got him to a little tin shed out the back and they have a defibrillator on the island so I continued CPR while someone set that up. We knew a chopper was on its way from Cairns with paramedics onboard. While I was giving him mouth-to-mouth there was a moment where I was thinking that he was going to wake up spluttering and say, "Get off me, Justin!"

[After about 20 minutes], we heard the chopper arrive. At the time that was the greatest sound I'd ever heard. I felt this wave of relief wash over me. I thought, "Everything will be all right now. He will be fine."

Two guys jumped out of the chopper and raced in. Within 10 seconds they pronounced him dead. That was the world falling apart. I remember John Stanton coming up to me sobbing.

We went back onto *Croc One* and motored back to Port Douglas. I called my wife, Susie, and said, "Steve has just died ... and the world is going to go into meltdown."

We got to the police station, made our statements. They watched the video footage and they realised the magnitude of it, and the tape was put in an envelope and sealed.

We all went to the hotel, met for dinner. We all told Steve stories and

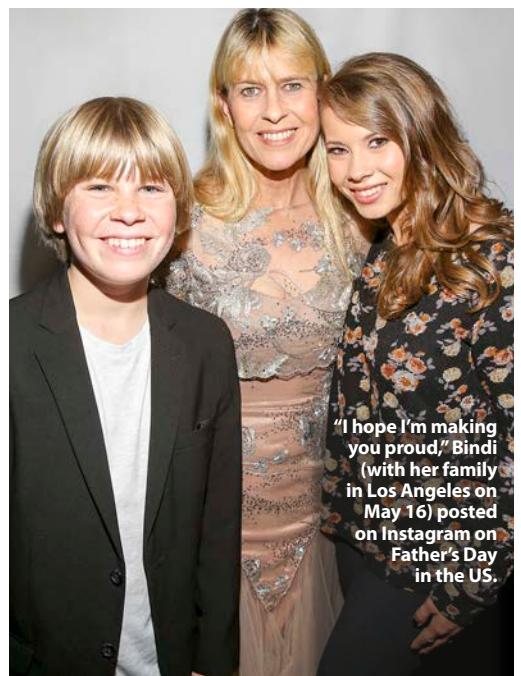
laughed and cried, stayed up until very late.

In the weeks afterwards, I had to tell Terri. I had to sit in the green room at Australia Zoo and give her my version of events. She had all her family around her and I had to basically retell the story, which was fairly intense.

Best Picture Show was hugely supportive at the time. I took some time off, a few weeks, and they said I should speak to a psychologist, who asked me how I felt. I told the story and said, "This is how I feel." [The psychologist] thought I was dealing with it incredibly well.

Steve was the best in his business. He was a legend and you can't use that term loosely. I miss [working with him] because I have incredibly fond memories of those days. There will never be anyone like him again. He turned the wildlife genre on its head. He made Animal Planet the fastest-growing network in US cable history. He would have gone on to be the next David Attenborough. And he was an amazing, genuine guy who looked out for friends. He adored his beautiful young kids. My heart bleeds for them. Anyone who knew him well and knew him right, knew the real Steve and loved him. He was a champion.

■ By Louise Talbot



**"I hope I'm making you proud," Bindi (with her family in Los Angeles on May 16) posted on Instagram on Father's Day in the US.**