

2012 WPSA SERVENTY CONSERVATION MEDAL

Dr Clive Williams, Vice President of the Society and Chairman of the Judging Panel, announced the winner of the Serventy Conservation Medal for 2012 as Bob Irwin. Bob has devoted most of his adult life to the conservation of Australian wildlife and to educating people about its unique characteristics. He is well known for establishing the Beerwah Reptile Park (now Australia Zoo) in the 1970s and for working with his late son, Steve, to bring prominence to the contribution of the crocodile to our river systems. Bob was responsible for the discovery of a rare species of freshwater turtle in the Burdekin River system. This now bears his name, *Elsya irwini*. He has worked tirelessly to bring the plight of dugongs to public attention and achieved changes to the Native Title Act following improper hunting of dugongs and turtles by indigenous groups.

Since leaving Australia Zoo in 2008 Bob has thrown his support behind other conservation groups. He has given his support to wombat conservation in South Australia in an effort to achieve better protection for the southern hairy-nosed wombat and he has been a constant campaigner for the preservation of koala habitat. Following Cyclone Yasi in North Queensland Bob supported C4 (Community for Coastal and Cassowary Conservation) in their successful lobbying to Government agencies to provide feeding stations for the starving rainforest birds. Bob has also participated in scientific research involving radio tracking of crocodiles and koalas.

If there is a cause for endangered wildlife Bob will support it. He has recently set up the Bob Irwin Wildlife and Conservation Foundation to continue his work into the future.

Bob's lifetime dedication to the conservation of wildlife makes him a well deserved winner of the Serventy Medal.

Acceptance speech by Bob Irwin

I am delighted to receive the Serventy Conservation Medal for 2012. I admired Vincent Serventy and his lifetime dedication to the preservation of Australian wildlife.

I will now talk about two issues of conservation that are close to my own heart.

We are going to lose the dugongs in Queensland in the next four years or so if we continue to do what we are doing today.

The ocean's sea turtles will also suffer the same fate!

There are many threats to wildlife – land clearing, droughts, floods,



Noel Cislowski, Bob Irwin and Suzanne Medway

etc – but the area I am campaigning on is the threat to endangered and vulnerable wildlife by the local Indigenous people under the guise of traditional hunting. We believe no one has the right to continue any practice that will lead to a species becoming extinct, be they Indigenous or otherwise.

Although the formation of a coalition to call for an end to traditional hunting of endangered and vulnerable wildlife is specifically targeted at Indigenous people, the only one to call me a ‘racist’ was the federal minister for the environment, Tony Burke.

I have spent many days with local aboriginal people discussing these issues – some agree with me and some do not. It is hard to get consensus and some will hate me for my efforts to save these animals from extinction.

I recognise the importance of preserving traditional culture, but it is not traditional hunting when they use speed boats, rifles and shot guns!

Under the guise of traditional hunting, some people are now killing six to eight dugongs every day and the same number of turtles for their mates. They are not using them for their own food but selling them to others. They are only supposed to hunt for food for their families or for a ceremony. We have proof that the meat is sent to the market in Cairns. This hunting is occurring for commercial profit, yet, there have been no prosecutions to date!

Most people would agree that if you go on killing these animals, they will become extinct.

I should warn you while you are eating that what I am now about to say may be a bit hard to take: I have seen many turtles and seen what happens to them when they get caught –these are very large mature animals – one metre across. They are turned upside down, then one flipper is cut off, tomorrow they cut another flipper off, they continue until there are no more flippers! The animal is still alive but suffering abhorrent pain! This is an extremely cruel practice! I won’t tell you what happens when the carapace (shell) is cut off while the animal is still alive, but suffering.

The dugongs are also hunted and dragged out onto the beach and



Patrick Medway and Bob Irwin admiring a copy of *Australian Wildlife*

left stranded, to dry out and die on the sand. This is also terribly cruel, absolutely inhumane.

After three years, we finally had the Native Title Act changed and the RSPCA rules on animal cruelty now apply to everyone – everyone must now comply with the law.

Let me move on to SUSTAINABLE USE OF WILDLIFE – ‘sustainable’ has become a dirty word. It is used by people whose only concern is with money! Not wildlife!

Believe me, this is a lucky country but the one reason people talk about sustainable use of wildlife is if the animal is worth anything. No worth, no value – no one cares!

Look at the sustainable use of wildlife like the kangaroo. I used to live on a property outside of St George, Queensland. We had uninvited, licensed kangaroos shooters come on to our property night after night. They would cut the fences and leave the gates open. Next morning we would have to go around and have to ‘put down’ all the wounded and half dead animals that the licensed shooters had shot and left for dead.

I do not believe that the kangaroo industry is necessary in Australia.

I remember in the 1970s when they were shooting crocodiles. By 1974 the crocodiles were disappearing from the bush in the north – shot out by shooters. The Government had to put a stop to this shooting and killing or they would have become extinct. Thankfully, now crocodile populations are coming back in the north of the State.

But we do not need to go to the outback – cruelty to any animal is wrong – we should not let it happen to any animal.

Our society has become one ruled by greed and they are out to destroy the planet.

Humans are the most dominant and destructive species on this planet. Does that give us the moral and ethical right to use and abuse native wildlife as we see fit? Have we as a society reached a point where cruelty to native wildlife is acceptable?

Thank you again for this wonderful award – I had great affection for Vincent Serventy and am delighted to receive this Award named after him.