

Fallen 'crocodile hunter' still has lessons to teach about wildlife

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The tragic death of "Crocodile Hunter" Steve Irwin, from a stingray's defensive attack, underscores a problem with many wildlife films and television programs: They send the wrong message about wildlife, people and the relationships between them.

Mr. Irwin's fate reminded me of the gruesome deaths three years ago of amateur filmmaker Timothy Treadwell and his girlfriend, Amie Huguenard, who were consumed by grizzly bears in Alaska's Katmai National Park. Mr. Treadwell's death quickly gained notoriety and horrified the public, and was the subject of the 2005 documentary *Grizzly Man*.

But it was no surprise to those of us who knew him; for years he had treated bears as pets, singing to and even touching them.

Mr. Irwin and Mr. Treadwell got too close to the wildlife they loved and paid the ultimate price. But so did the animals they worked so hard to promote and protect: Park rangers killed two bears after Mr. Treadwell died. Who knows how many other bears in other parks were shot unnecessarily by people who were frightened after the publicity surrounding Mr. Treadwell's death?

We need wildlife shows on television to stimulate public support for conservation; animals need to be protected from exploitation by humans. These shows should be entertaining and win audiences, but never at the expense of wildlife that is harassed or even endangered during filmmaking. Mr. Irwin's show crossed that line - although there are far worse examples.

MTV's *Wildboyz* is a textbook case of irresponsible wildlife programming - and wildlife pornography. The hosts have grabbed crocodiles, chased cheetahs, stuck their tongues in a giraffe's mouth, deliberately let scorpions sting their bare buttocks, put blood from a recently killed wildebeest on their faces and placed antelope droppings in their mouths to see who can spit them the farthest. *Wildboyz* is about power, violence and gratifying the desires of an audience at the expense of the animals' well-being.

Television doesn't have to be this way. Wildlife programming can be entertaining, safe and informative when it sticks to just three principles: First, TV performers should never do anything that might harm an animal. Second, performers should never do anything that misinforms or deceives viewers. Finally, a host should never demean an animal by making it into a sensationalized object.

Animals in the wild need their space. As Mr. Irwin's death shows, even experts can get hurt. Programs that deliberately provoke attacks are a disservice to all who love wildlife; they perpetuate inflated fears about the dangers posed by animals.

But even those with the best of intentions can end up doing harm. By getting too close, charming, charismatic television hosts such as Steve Irwin provoke animals, hurting the wildlife they love and, most tragically, themselves.

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