Irwin's death strikes a chord
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By David Williams
CNN

(CNN) -- "Crocodile Hunter" Steve Irwin is being remembered for a personality that was larger than life, much like the giant posters outside of his Australia Zoo, where a steady stream of fans have left hand-written notes, flowers and stuffed animals since hearing news of his death.

Irwin's willingness to swim with sharks, grab deadly and often cranky snakes by the tail and wrestle with crocodiles -- armed only with a goofy grin, khaki shorts and a pair of well-worn work boots -- won him an international following.

Media expert Robert Thompson said he was a little surprised by the media's focus on Irwin -- especially given the glut of long-anticipated celebrity news, such as Katie Couric's debut anchoring the "CBS Evening News," Rosie O'Donnell's arrival on "The View" and the first photographs of Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes' daughter, Suri. (Watch how fans reacted to Irwin's death -- 1:34)

"I think of the many great television personalities, and they die and we hear an obituary. And for about 12 hours there are reports and acknowledgements, and you see clips of their shows and all the rest," said Thompson, the director of Syracuse University's Center for the Study of Popular Television. "This broke on Monday, and it's already Wednesday and there's no sign of it stopping."

Thompson said that part of the interest comes from the "extraordinarily dramatic" nature of Irwin's death.

"Anybody who knew of him, knew him as a guy who did things that while you were sitting at home watching him you thought, 'Wow, he's going to have to be careful; he's going to be getting himself killed one day,' " he said. "And when we said that, we never really expected it to happen."

He described Irwin as a cross between Jacques Cousteau and a late-night comedian, who created nature programs that kids and their parents could enjoy. (Watch Irwin's dad describe losing his best mate -- 2:24)

"This was also a big deal because a lot of kids watched it and really, really liked it, and a lot of parents had to break the news [to them]," Thompson said. "It wasn't a show like Barney, where you let your kids watch it but you cringed every time it was on. This was a show that kids liked to watch, and parents had no problem looking at either."

More than 10,000 CNN.com readers worldwide have sent e-mails praising Irwin for his enthusiasm and his obvious passion for animals. Hundreds more sent photos and videos. (Gallery: Your photos)

Many said they felt as if they'd lost a friend or family member, even though most had never met him.

"His Discovery Channel show aired the year after I was born, and I've watched him for as long as I can remember," wrote Joseph Langer of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. "I've planned on going to college and then traveling to the Australia Zoo to give them all a visit. ... His enthusiasm and passion was inspiring to me."

Corinna Ott-Webber of Caracas, Venezuela, said she didn't always know exactly what Irwin was saying, because English is not her native language.

"Nevertheless, I always understood every single message he wanted me to understand because of the passion that emanated from his frantic body language," she said. "He had the warmest way to express how people should love and respect every living creature on this world and I believe that this will be the way most of us are going to remember him: as a man of sincere and genuine love for life who made us smile while learning."

Australian Prime Minister Paul Howard praised Irwin as a "passionate environmentalist." Queensland Premier Peter Beattie offered to honor him with a state funeral -- an honor Irwin's family declined.

"The state funeral would be refused ... because he's an ordinary guy, he's just an ordinary bloke," his father, Bob Irwin, told reporters. "He wants to be remembered as an ordinary bloke."

Thompson said Irwin's regular-guy image played very well in the electronic barrier of what a television is and really feel like they're...
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