

## Harriet the star

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**It's a long way from Charles Darwin to Steve Irwin, but Harriet has known both personally. This month she celebrates her 175th birthday.**

**By Ashley Hay**

It's a strange Wednesday when you find yourself lying on grass to interview the Earth's oldest living being, but Harriet and I are crouched down, beady eye to beady eye, and there are thousands of things she wants to tell me. If only I was more fluent in Geochelone-ese. We could talk about her strange status as the missing link between The Origin of Species' Charles Darwin and the Crocodile Hunter, Steve Irwin. We could talk about good times (travels, fame) and bad times (attacks by vandals, the indignity of being jacked up to have her sex determined). We could have that stereotypical conversation about what's changed - and stayed the same. I've brought her flowers (her favourite, red hibiscus), and she leans forward slowly, elegantly, to take them. And then she eats them and smiles.

Heading for her 175th birthday, Harriet is a star. She has a star's seductively deep, chocolate-velvet eyes. She has a star's grace, happy to move towards her public when they assemble to admire her (she receives more than 800,000 visitors a year at Irwin's Australia Zoo, on the Sunshine Coast, her latest home). And she's about to release a biography: Robin Stewart's children's book *Darwin's Tortoise* will be published by Black Inc on her birthday itself, November 15.

In 1835, the story goes, Darwin picked her up in the Galápagos Islands and added her to the Beagle's bounty of creatures and plants. Imagine being taken back to England by Darwin, being with him as he began to transform the things he'd seen - particularly those famous differences between the Galápagos' finches, mockingbirds, plants and tortoises - into that radical theory of natural selection. Imagine escaping London's bleak dirtiness with one of Darwin's shipmates for the warm, clean air and tropical floral snacks of 1842 Brisbane. Imagine living the years during which we've driven four of her fellow subspecies of Galápagos tortoise to extinction and rendered the remaining 11 endangered. Imagine the stories Harriet could tell.

Like all good stars, Harriet's history is contested. Did Darwin really take her - he writes about dining on tortoises, drinking their urine, and riding them, but did once deny bringing any home - or was it whalers who never got round to turning her into dinner? Did an ex-Beagle sailor bring her to Australia? Is she really our oldest animal? The Falklands claim to have a tortoise 13 years her senior. Even her DNA neither exactly confirms nor contradicts the Darwin story.

Whatever her story, she's certainly comfier than Tom, the tortoise she lived with in Brisbane's botanic gardens until the 1950s, who's now preserved in a tin tub of 70%-proof alcohol in the Queensland Museum. In fact, she seems content, swaying as you scratch the lichen-like trails on her shell, as you pat the cool soft skin like slightly scrunched tissue paper on her head.

Now, she's achieved the greatest celebrity validation: merchandising - herself recreated in shades of green fur (dressed in Steve Irwin khaki). To human eyes, this creature has some aesthetic and anatomical flaws; but to her head a little, then surges onto her enormous feet and moves towards her furry self. "That's top speed," says Richard Jackson, the Zoo's assistant curator. "She thinks it's another tortoise."

Having spent most of her life in captivity, Harriet is "imprinted" with humans: she likes them; they like her. "They're little people," says Jackson of his charges. "You relate to Harriet as an old lady."

Each time I pass her, someone's having a chat - a little boy wonders if she talks to herself inside her shell; an old lady wonders how often she's bathed. We all believe the Darwin story - if only to ponder what kind of evolution might start with Charles Darwin and run to Steve Irwin.

As I leave, a zoo worker crouches with Harriet. He murmurs; she gurgles back. The light is soft and warm, and on her domed shell, a lizard suns itself, eyes squinting. As Darwin wrote in *The Descent of Man*, "happiness is an essential part of the general good".