

Herald Sun Sunday

DECEMBER 16, 2007

Weather: Early rain. Max: 21. Page 86

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NEWSAGENT TOKEN Page 4



Court claim rocks widow Terri



IRWIN AND THE MYSTERY MILLIONS



GRIEVING Terri Irwin and Australia Zoo are being sued for \$2.5 million over two mysterious business transactions.

Barely a year after wildlife warrior Steve Irwin died, his widow faces a Victorian County Court showdown over baffling contracts she says she knows nothing about.

The two legal actions involve a complex web of companies — including some linked to former first assistant tax commissioner Nick Petroulias.

A *Sunday Herald Sun* investigation has found the lawsuits revolve around a busi-

Exclusive

FIONA HUDSON

ness based on an island tax haven, another raided by tax inspectors in 2006 and an offshore investment bank.

Terri Irwin claims to have no knowledge of the lawsuits or the alleged transactions that triggered them.

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SHS 16-DEC-2007 PAGE 1 THIRD

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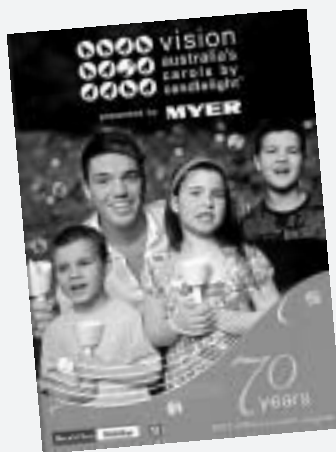
AUSTRALIA'S CLIMATE WIN

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SHARK HOOKS NEW LOVE

PAGE 3

Picture: AARON FRANCIS



Free carols songbook

'TIS the season for the *Sunday Herald Sun* to get into the Christmas spirit.

Don't miss your free songbook for the 70th Carols by Candlelight on Christmas Eve.

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Sunday

Workers win \$22m

A WORKPLACE syndicate in Geelong was still celebrating yesterday after winning \$22 million in Thursday's Powerball.

The 10 winners — who had been punting on the Saturday Tattslotto for 15 years together — did not learn of the Powerball win until after work on Friday.

None of the syndicate members, except for the organiser, knew of the ticket in the draw.

"Normally I buy the

ELENI HALE and SHANNON DEERY

weekly Saturday Tattslotto ticket for us, but as we won \$107 in Tattslotto the weekend before, I decided to have a go at Powerball," the organiser said.

"I don't know what we will all do with our \$2.2 million, but it will be really useful."

The win is one of the biggest for the year.

Million-dollar jolt for Terri

Lawsuits over mystery deals

FIONA HUDSON

TERRI Irwin and Australia Zoo are being sued for \$2.5 million over two mysterious business transactions.

A year after crocodile hunter Steve Irwin died, his widow faces dual court actions over contracts she says she knows nothing about.

The legal actions involve an intricate web of companies — including some linked to former first assistant tax commissioner Nick Petroulias.

A *Sunday Herald Sun* investigation has found the lawsuits relate to a business based on an island tax haven, another raided by tax inspectors in 2006 and an off-shore investment bank.

Terri Irwin claims to have no knowledge of the lawsuits or the alleged transactions that triggered them.

Her manager John Stainton — who was also Steve Irwin's business partner — said he had "no bloody idea" about the lawsuits.

Told of the writs, he said: "S-t, what are they? What are they about?"

After making inquiries, he told the *Sunday Herald Sun* they remained a mystery.

"When I mentioned it to Terri, she didn't know what I was talking about," he said. "I asked the zoo and they have no knowledge of it."

A firm called Alyssa Treasury Services Limited lodged the first writ at the Victorian County Court on November 22 demanding \$2.5 million from Australia Zoo and the Steve Irwin Family Trust.

Lawyers for the firm — which operates in Melbourne from a post office box — lodged another writ on December 7 seeking \$60,000 from Terri Irwin.

'When I mentioned it to Terri, she didn't know what I was talking about'

TERRI IRWIN'S MANAGER JOHN STANTON

The writs against Mrs Irwin and Australia Zoo stem from two contracts allegedly signed on their behalf promising to pay money to other firms.

The documents are dated March 30 and August 15 this year — well after Steve Irwin was fatally wounded by a stingray in September, 2006.

Firms mentioned on the



Confused: Terri Irwin with children Bob and Bindi at Australia Zoo, left, and former ATO first assistant commissioner Nick Petroulias, above.

court documents are HQZ Argentum Ltd, Australasian Custodians Limited, Providential Trustees Limited and Avowal Administrative Attorneys Ltd.

Australasian Custodians Limited is owned by a group based in Labuan, an island tax haven off the coast of Borneo.

Company searches reveal Providential Trustees Limited was struck off the New Zealand register on October 12 this year.

Avowal Administrative Attorneys Ltd was at the centre of raids by tax investigators in November, 2006. An unrelated Queensland Supreme Court action in May heard Avowal was associated with former Australian Tax Office high flyer Mr Petroulias.

The court heard the sole director of Avowal was a secretary, Amanda Chisnall, who could not remember who appointed her.

A NSW Supreme Court jury last week retired to consider its verdict in a separate case involving Mr Petroulias.

The former ATO first assistant commissioner has pleaded not guilty to three charges, including bribery and tax fraud.

The trial began in June. It is the third time Mr Petroulias has been tried on the charges, which date back to 2000.

The fourth company mentioned in the writs against Mrs Irwin and Australia Zoo is HQZ Argentum.

On its website, HQZ Argentum claims to be a Singapore-based investment bank offering "state-of-the-art services and solutions never before offered to small and medium-sized enterprises".

The person who answered the phone at the Melbourne address listed on the writ said the bank had moved on.

"They didn't leave a forwarding address," she said.

The writs against Mrs Irwin and Australia Zoo are among about 50 apparently similar actions launched by Alyssa Treasury Services Limited against various small businesses and individuals, most based in Queensland.

A lawyer for one of the other defendants said yesterday his client's writ stemmed from a tax minimisation scheme turned sour.

He claimed his client had been "duded".

"I would strongly advise other people issued with these writs to get in touch with the police," he said.

The Australian Taxation Office is believed to have been monitoring some of the people allegedly involved. Another target of one of the writs admitted he had signed up for a tax minimisation scheme.

"My accountant advised me to go into it. We researched it a little bit. I wish I'd never heard of them now," he said.

'I would strongly advise other people issued with these writs to get in touch with the police'

A QUEENSLAND LAWYER

A third man named in one of the lawsuits told the *Sunday Herald Sun*: "I'm not aware I owe anyone any money. There's something strange going on."

Lawyer Morris Milder, who lodged the writ against Australia Zoo on behalf of Alyssa Treasury Services, declined to answer questions yesterday.

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