

Study reveals how Disney's conservation messages have kept us wild at heart

Loveable family entertainment they may be, but when it comes to environmental awareness, Disney films have rarely been seen as contributing much more than a clutch of cuddly talking animals to the cause.

Now a new book by a Cambridge University researcher is suggesting that, far from just cute, Disney icons like Bambi, Nemo and Baloo are the all-singing, unsung heroes of the green lobby.

According to academic David Whitley, Disney's screen fables have been helping successive generations of children to develop "a critical awareness of contested environmental issues" ever since Snow White in 1937.

Far from offering us sheer escapism, he says, they carry important messages about our relationship with the natural world. Conservation is so central to Bambi, for example, that the film is credited with having inspired many 1960s environmental activists at an early age. It also sparked protests from pro-hunting groups fearful of the "Bambi Factor" before it had even been released.

Snow White and Cinderella's eponymous heroines give children role models who protect wildlife and care about their natural surroundings, the book says. Later films, on the other hand, are more complex, in keeping with the mood of the era. Finding Nemo – a 2003 box office smash about a fish searching for his lost son – is described as "a fable for our time", which dramatises the contradictory attitudes and feelings inherent in our interaction with nature.

"Disney films have often been criticised as inauthentic and pandering to popular taste rather than developing the animation medium in a more thought-provoking way," Whitley said.

"In fact, these films have taught us variously about having a fundamental respect for nature. Some of them, such as Bambi, inspired conservation awareness and laid the emotional groundwork for environmental activism. For decades Disney films have been providing children with potent fantasies, enabling them to explore how they relate to the natural world."

The book, entitled *The Idea Of Nature In Disney Animation*, focuses on two periods in the corporation's history; 1937-'67 (when Walt Disney himself was at its helm) and the 1984-2005 "Disney revival" in which Michael Eisner was President and CEO.

Both "saw themselves as having a sustained and strong commitment to wild nature and the environment," the book explains, but in different ways. Disney projected a "folksy and homespun" relationship with nature in his films. Eisner, on the other hand, was a cosmopolitan city-dweller and co-founder of the Environmental Media Association, whose work is more politicised and self-conscious.

As a result, different films express a concern with the environment in different ways. Early productions like Snow White, Cinderella, Bambi and Sleeping Beauty are rooted in the tradition of classical pastoral, albeit in popularised forms, showing the natural world as an idyllic retreat, vulnerable to incursion from a debased and threatening civilisation.

Friendly animals ally themselves to the films' heroes and heroines. In keeping with the role of nature in other American folk tales, the wilderness is seen as a place of renewal where the central characters undergo a process of self-discovery. Young viewers at the time were being encouraged to side with nature and

protect it, like their role models in the films.

Later pictures, starting with *The Jungle Book* and stretching to *The Lion King* and *Finding Nemo* take the genre a step further. Often these have a more exotic setting – a “tropical dreamscape” in which a more harmonious relationship with the natural world could be imagined. Humans tend not to restore order to the natural world in these films; rather, they are a part of the order themselves.

Competing attitudes to the natural world are played out to a fuller extent in these films than in Disney’s early offerings and, in some cases, even left unresolved. In *The Jungle Book*, for example, the rivalry between Baloo and Bagheera echoes disputes over the consumption of natural resources which, at the time of the film’s making in 1967, also divided counter-cultural movements such as hippies from their more cautious elders.

“If you can accept their sentimentality, it becomes possible to see that these films are giving young audiences a cultural arena within which serious environmental issues can be rehearsed and explored,” Whitley added.

“Popular art often does more than we think to shape our feelings and our ideas about certain themes. Disney may well be telling us more about the environment and the way we relate to it than we tend to accept.”

The Idea Of Nature In Disney Animation is published by Ashgate.

Source: University of Cambridge

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