

Greening the blues: What business can learn from Avatar

March 20 2013

Norm Borin of California Polytechnic State University and Arline Savage of the School of Business at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, argue that the fictitious mining company in the 2009 James Cameron movie, Avatar, makes a perfect case study for how not to be a sustainable company and offers lesson to more down to earth corporations hoping to gain green credentials as opposed to the blues. We hear a lot about indigenous peoples (the Na'vi in the movie) whose health and lives are all but destroyed by invading corporations such as Resources Development Administration (RDA) in the movie. The researchers draw a parallel between the problems faced by the Na'vi and the pollution and deforestation, facing people from Alberta to Ecuador, from Kenya to the Philippines and beyond.

Fundamentally, the fictional plot hinges on RDA seeking to procure a valuable resource for profit while ignoring and violating the social and cultural needs and desires of those who live where the resource is located and at the same time destroying many of the unique environmental characteristics of their environment. The researchers suggest that it is unlikely that James Cameron developed the movie with the objective that it would be used as a case example for business sustainability, but it is likely that he was well aware that Avatar represents an allegory for the [malignancy](#) of corporate greed and certainly has some valuable lessons for corporations, the team says.

The team provides some useful approaches to show how a company might improve its [corporate responsibility](#) as it ventures into new areas

of the planet. These include a consideration of prioritizing the three p's in this order - (1) planet, (2) people, (3) profits. They also suggest expanding stakeholder groups to include at the base of the pyramid the inhabitants and hiring managers with knowledge and an interest in ethics and environmental resource allocation. Finally, they believe that building accountability feedback systems from the company board to the indigenous groups is important for sustainability.

"There have been repeated examples of successful sustainable ventures by companies," the team concludes, "but they require implementation of these ideas to avoid failure on the Avatar scale." Borin adds that, "We believe it does cover an important topic that impacts any business dealing with indigenous populations."

More information: "The sustainable corporation: lessons from Avatar", Int. J. Sustainable Strategic Management, vol 3, 294-313

Provided by Inderscience Publishers

Citation: Greening the blues: What business can learn from Avatar (2013, March 20) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-03-greening-blues-business-avatar.html>

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