

New wave of TV cartoons urge children to save seas

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Jim Henson Company CEO, Lisa Henson, pictured in 2012, is backing the animated children's series "Splash and Bubbles"

Coral reefs may be dying off at an alarming rate and pollution and overfishing emptying the seas. But fear not. Help is at hand in the form of a new wave of cartoon superheroes determined to save the oceans.

While Disney blockbusters "Finding Nemo" and "Finding Dory" have been attacked for sparking a spike in the poaching of tropical fish, Muppets creators the Jim Henson Company said Sunday that their new animated children's series "Splash and Bubbles" would help mobilise a new generation to save the undersea world.

The big-budget 40-episode series, which will screen on PBS in the United States next year, aims to "turn the tide of our world to save the planet".

Boss Lisa Henson, daughter of Jim Henson, the puppetry genius behind "The Muppets" and "Sesame Street", said the series, which was premiered at the MIPJUNIOR festival in the French resort of Cannes, comes at a vital time.

While four to seven-year-olds may not be able to do much now to tackle the millions of tonnes of plastic waste that have created the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch", she said it is "their generation who will be left to solve" such problems.

The series comes in the wake of the huge success of "The Octonauts", the most watched cartoon by pre-school children in Britain, Ireland and Australia.

'Star Trek' meets Jacques Cousteau

The "edutainment" show has a team of animated animals rescuing sea creatures from their base in the Octopod.

With its catchphrase slogans of "Explore! Rescue! Protect!" it has been described as "Star Trek" meets Jacques Cousteau.

And now film-makers are working with the Monaco oceanographic

museum which the legendary French marine explorer ran for decades to create another series about child heroes fighting for marine conservation.

"Pirates of the Abyss" will feature four friends who go off on aquatic adventures in an old submarine to right the wrongs of pollution and the overexploitation of the oceans.

Producer Aymeric Castaing told AFP that the series—aimed at slightly older kids—would tap into their anger and impotence at what is happening to the environment.

"The world we live in will soon be in the hands of these kids. It is they who will have to save the oceans," he added.

Castaing said the children begin their quest after chancing upon on a laboratory left behind by "some of the greatest brains of the past" including Jules Verne, the inventor Nikola Tesla, Gustave Eiffel and Prince Albert I of Monaco, an early marine researcher.

"These geniuses from the past are in a way helping them save the future," said Castaing, co-founder of the Bordeaux-based I Can Fly studio.

'Good values'

Henson said like "Sesame Street", "Splash and Bubbles" was also all about teaching children good values in a fun way.

"You would not believe how diverse the ocean floor is... There are seahorse single dads with 499 children," she joked. "And it is the seahorse dads who give birth. There is so much weird stuff there."

She said although the show took its mission to education seriously, with

"today's Jacques Cousteau marine biologist Dr Sylvia Earle" among its advisors, she insisted it was "not preachy".

"We are opening up the weird and wonderful world" of marine science and conservation through fun adventures and music.

"And we are showing the oceans amazing diversity and interconnectedness," she added.

Nevertheless, each 11-minute episode will be cut with a humorous documentary segment called "Get Your Feet Wet", where children will "find out for instance that octopuses have no bones".

Henson's distribution boss Richard Goldsmith said it was in the "studio's DNA" to promote "good and solid values" and that "Jim Henson was thinking about ecology and diversity long before it was cool".

Far from overwhelming children with the planet's problems, he said the show's purpose was to empower them to confront them.

"One of (lead character) Splash's favourite sayings is, 'There is only one way to get over the fear of the unknown and that is to go there and find out about it'," Goldsmith added.

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