

Conservationists should harness 'Hollywood effect' to help wildlife

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How did Finding Nemo affect clownfish? Was Jaws bad for sharks? Did the remake of the Jungle Book help pangolins?

Researchers from the University of Exeter say conservation scientists could work with filmmakers to harness the "Hollywood effect" to boost conservation.

Scientific advisors and product placement are already commonplace in films, and the researchers say similar methods could be used to raise awareness of endangered species and other [environmental issues](#).

The research - inspired by a viewing of the Jungle Book (2016) - also warns of unintended dangers such as mass tourism to the Thai island made famous by The Beach (2000), and the so-called "Nemo effect" which has reportedly led to a boom in clownfish captivity.

"Movies could be used by conservationists to highlight issues of concern, much as product placement is currently used for advertising," said Dr Matthew Silk, of the Environment and Sustainability Institute on the University of Exeter's Penryn Campus in Cornwall.

"Scientific advisors are also common and - given the effect films can have on public perceptions - conservation advisors could be used.

"More research is needed to understand how the 'Hollywood effect' impacts on wildlife, conservation and the environment.

"Films might inspire people to learn more about conservation and take action, but they might also misinform people and portray a simplified, romantic version of nature."

No detailed study has been done on Hollywood's impact on conservation, but the researchers believe the picture so far is mixed:

- Rio (2011) features the endangered Spix's macaw. Several plot points involve conservation, including the illegal trade in exotic birds and captive breeding of threatened species.
- Jon Favreau, director of the 2016 remake of the Jungle Book, has said Los Angeles Zoo staff suggested the inclusion of a pangolin - a [critically endangered species](#) which subsequently received widespread media coverage. Disney added a pangolin to its merchandise selection as a "commitment to raise awareness".
- Happy Feet (2006) carries strong messages about overfishing and plastic pollution. In one scene, a rockhopper penguin gets entangled in the plastic rings of a six-pack.
- Bambi (1942) is said to have made the public more concerned about hunting.
- Finding Nemo (2003) is widely believed to have led to increased demand for clownfish ownership - despite the film's story of Nemo being taken by a human and wanting to escape. However, the Exeter researchers say that documented evidence of this effect, though often quoted, is "virtually non-existent". Still, Disney Pixar took advice from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums on mitigating such effects for the sequel, Finding Dory (2016).
- Jaws (1975) increased awareness of sharks but gave many people an "exaggerated" idea of the risks they pose - with "likely consequences for shark conservation", the researchers say.
- Orca (1977), Free Willy (1993) and documentary Blackfish (2013) demonstrate the "complex and contradictory" way cinema

can influence attitudes - with killer whales depicted as both vicious and gentle, possibly making them popular attractions at aquariums but also raising concerns about both their captivity and conservation.

- Other environmental issues can also be affected. For example, disaster movie the Day After Tomorrow (2004) sparked debate on climate change but was also "noted for its scientific inaccuracy", according to the researchers.

Previous research has shown that films raise public interest in species and locations featured, but the new study says there is little evidence on whether such interest had positive or negative effects.

"If this comes across as a plea to Hollywood, we are not suggesting the movie industry become conservation campaigners," co-author Dr Sarah Crowley said.

"Instead, we are saying conservationists and researchers should work hard to understand and take advantage of the opportunities cinema offers to tell people about little-known species and key habitats. We think this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

The paper, published in the journal *Conservation Biology*, is entitled: "Considering connections between Hollywood and biodiversity [conservation](#)."

Provided by University of Exeter

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