

# Opinion: 'Bambi' hoodwinked American environmentalists

By Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann

When "Bambi" was first released in 1942, the National Audubon Society, compared the Walt Disney cartoon film's consciousness-raising power for the environment to what "Uncle Tom's Cabin" did for the abolition of slavery.

"Bambi", about a deer, lost money then, but subsequent re-releases and video rentals brought in hundreds of millions of dollars, and made the film a rite of childhood. Over the years that "emotional groundwork," took hold in the form of "The Bambi Factor," a sentimental anthropomorphized view of wildlife, especially deer.

Seventy-four years, the Bambi Factor still animates debates over animal rights and environmentalism.

"Bambi" didn't start as an American environmental fable. Written for adults in 1928 by an Austrian with the pen name Felix Salten, "Bambi: A Forest Life", recounts the story of a fawn who grows up to be the prince of the forest alongside his royal father. But his rise to power comes only after the death of his mother and near loss of his mate Faline. While hunters are a problem for these deer, so are animals: In the forest, owls eat mice, crows eat a friendly rabbit, and a fox eats a duck. Early reviewers considered the book an anti-fascist fable and recent writers have speculated that the story was an allegory about the plight of Jews in Europe. Salter's work was banned in Nazi Germany.

But the simpler film version portrayed deer living in an idealized forest where predators and prey play together and fear only "Man," who is equipped with guns and fire. The emotional punch of Disney's "Bambi" is heightened by its

artistry, which combines gorgeous natural realism with cartoonish animals, their exceptionally large heads, small noses, and wide eyes resembling human children. Disney sent artists to sketch foliage in Maine's Baxter State Park and shipped two fawns to the studio as artist's models.

The film was controversial from the start., Outdoor Life editor Raymond J. Brown called the film "the worst insult ever offered in any form to American sportsmen," and asked Disney to correct slurs against hunters, according to Matthew Cartmill's "A View to a Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature Through History". Disney claimed sportsmen were not the targets because Salten's story was about German hunters.

One of the first people bitten by the Bambi Factor was, ironically, environmentalist Aldo Leopold. In 1943, Leopold encouraged Wisconsin to institute an antlerless deer season to allow hunters to thin the overpopulated herd. Leopold was interested in the good of all life as part of an ecosystem. But his Wisconsin proposal was shot down—the public, according to scholar Ralph H. Lutts, was outraged at the idea of culling any of Bambi's child-like creatures.

There's another environmental ideology hidden in "Bambi" that's at odds with reality. "Bambi's" underlying message is that "Man" and deer can't co-exist. A gunshot is the last we know of Bambi's mother. Other hunters go on a chilling rampage, wounding Bambi and causing a final eco-disaster when their campfire explodes into the woods and destroys the animals' home. In the film "Bambi", interactions with humans ends only in death or suffering, so the only real choice is a complete separation between the two worlds.

As academics, "Bambi's" worldview interested us: Did the "paradise" view of the forest precede the more modern idea of the ecosystem in popular culture? It didn't. A few months before "Bambi" came out, audiences went to see the Fleischer Brothers' animated feature "Mr. Bug Goes to Town" (1941).

Instead of contrasting conflicts between humans and idyllic nature, "Mr. Bug Goes to Town" demonstrates how lowland bugs and humans can live interdependently in a human couple's Manhattan garden. "Mr. Bug's" focus on interdependence connects with more realistic views about wildlife management and interconnected communities of plants, bugs, animals, and human animals. While "Mr. Bug" was modeled on sophisticated Hollywood comedies of the time, "Bambi" reflected Disney's focus on emotional yet traditional folktales for broad audiences.

Contrary to the Disney story, of course, deer are all too comfortable with "Man," "Woman," and "Cars," not to mention our delicious gardens, lawns, and infant trees. By 2015, predictably, protests against the Bambi Factor started to come from drivers and organic gardeners as the deer population grew dramatically. The National Traffic Safety Administration estimates that deer cause 1.5 million roadway accidents per year with 150 human fatalities and 10,000 personal injuries, as well as \$1 billion in property damage.

Bambi lovers want to protect the deer even when the deer are sick. As recently as 2012, naturalist Valerie Blaine blamed the Bambi Factor for the North Rutland Deer Alliance's opposition to killing deer even to test for chronic wasting disease. According to Blaine, the group felt any herd reduction would spoil their "deer watching experience" in Chicago's Northwest suburbs.

The Bambi Factor encourages sentimentalized views of wildlife that romanticize nature without accepting its messier aspects. Instead of looking for a paradise that separates us from wild nature, we need a new vision of living together, balancing habitat preservation with wildlife management. "Bambi" is, after all, just a movie.

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