

'Elephant,' 'Dolphin Reef' deliver beautiful imagery

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 24 April 2020 08:20



These two pictures are currently available to stream on Disney+.

Rating: ««« out of ««««

Running Time:

Elephant - 86 minutes, Dolphin Reef - 77 minutes

Disney has a lengthy history producing non-fiction films chronicling the lives of various animal species. Just over a decade ago, they founded Disney Nature, a specific branch made to develop these documentary projects. The distributor has made them available to stream on Disney+. The first title is largely set in the dry and unforgiving Kalahari Desert, while the second takes viewers under the water near the Polynesian Islands in the Pacific.

Elephant follows a herd on an arduous trek over many months across the sand and salt plains of the Kalahari. This is all for the species' annual migration to find water and nourishment. The central story focuses on elderly leader Gaia, her younger sister Shani, and Shani's one-year-old infant pachyderm, Jomo, a very cute and playful youngster who has never made the journey before.

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The footage has been cut together and narrated (in this case by Meghan Markle) to anthropomorphize the elephants. Obviously, relatable behaviors and similarities exist between us and these animals, but the script does get hokey at times, forcing the voice-over artist to act out and present human rationalization for their choices. To be fair, the material is delivered as well as it can be and there are some interesting facts about the species interjected, but the “story” as presented is definitely geared toward young viewers.

Thankfully, it’s gorgeous to behold. The filmmakers capture amazing close-up footage of the elephants interacting, so much so that you can see and practically feel every wrinkle on their skin. There are stunning vistas as well, with incredible shots of the desert and salt plains that consistently amaze. And for parents worried about the fates of the animals and the potential for serious harm, the filmmakers avoid showing the more chaotic and brutal side of nature. The only passing in the movie that occurs is presented gently, and comes as a result of natural causes.

Even though the setting is very different, *Dolphin Reef* is the same kind of picture in terms of style and approach. In this case, narrator Natalie Portman introduces us to Echo, a three-year-old Bottlenose Dolphin and his mother, Kumu. Kumu’s main concern appears to be teaching Echo how to catch food and take care of himself. The movie also introduces a humpback whale and her calf, and presents comic relief with a mantis shrimp given the personality of an obsessive compulsive neat-freak.

Once again, the makers avoid presenting any truly violent scenes or harm that might befall the lead characters. And once again, the movie looks fantastic, from the brightly colored fish to the beautiful coral reefs, which are even reflected in shots pointed upwards toward the surface of the water.

Yes, the narration in both of these features is corny. However, it’s not the fault of either performer, but rather the script. For many adults, the big takeaway will be that DisneyNature wants kids to always conform to the orders of their mom. Still, for nature buffs and families both of the films are worthy and provide some breathtaking scenery. And it’s admirable that the films also may excite youngsters and get them interested in the preservation of pachyderms and the underwater ecosystem. In the end, *Elephant* and *Dolphin Reef* aren’t perfect, but they’ll certainly entertain and relax families looking for something to watch together during this unusual time.

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