

COMMENTARY

Comics and nature

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THE movies these days are filled with characters from comic books, and they are raking in big audiences and big bucks. Besides the special effects, have you ever noticed the similarity between these characters and nature? I'm not saying that the creators of these characters or Hollywood took inspiration from nature, but let's take a look at some of the similarities between the flora and fauna and some comic book characters.

The most recent comic book character to hit the big screen is the Incredible Hulk. One defence mechanism employed by a variety of animals is to make themselves appear larger such as puffer fish or cats which arch their backs when they feel threatened. Besides being much larger than his alter ego Bruce Banner, the Hulk is totally different in appearance.

This is similar to another type of defence mechanism referred to as flash colouration. The grasshopper *Tropidacris cristata* found in the forests of Trinidad, exhibit this mechanism.

When threatened it will fly away exposing the bright red undersides of its wings, so the predator is now confused as to what it was chasing in the first place and will have to change its search image.

Also like the Incredible Hulk, some animals are able to cover large distances by hopping. The most obvious example that literally springs to mind is kangaroos.

But invertebrates such as crickets, grasshoppers and jumping spiders of the family Salticidae use this method to get around. What all of these animals have in common is modified legs, which for some are only a pair while in some species of salticid spiders, all are short and stout in built.

Then there are some characters that are based on the habits and lifestyles of animals and plants, take for instance those in the Batman comics, Batman himself, the Penguin, Cat Woman and Poison Ivy.

Spider-Man also has a set of enemies, which are based on animals, such as, Chameleon, The Vulture, Dr. Octopus and The Scorpion (a fellow arachnid).

For those familiar with the Spider-Man movies and comics, the latter is better known as Venom, which this character evolved into after encountering an alien symbiote.

This brings me to another main point in many comic characters - mutation.

To me the most well known of mutant comic characters are the X-men. Nature is littered with exam-

ples of mutants. It is also one of the methods that different species come about.

One of the most well known X-Men is Wolverine with blades made of Adamantium (a fictional metal alloy) that come out of his knuckles. How is he similar to an animal? Well obviously they mimic the retractable claws of a wolf. But other animals have similar defences like porcupines, which raise their quills that resemble needles when threatened.

I keep bringing up examples of humans mutating or borrowing certain aspects of nature as part of their super hero alter ego. But there are examples of it going the other way round, like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. These are turtles that mutated and obtained human abilities, such as walking on two legs. But they don't forget their animal side and their shell comes in as a handy shield.

Another famous comic character is Superman. But you may be thinking, he does not have any abilities that are similar to plants or animals, he is an alien.

Exactly. He is another species whose natural abilities have been enhanced by our environment. His abilities are similar to what an invasive species does as it thrives better in a new environment than those that are native to the area. It may do in a variety of ways; it may have better reproductive abilities, or food gathering abilities or can tolerate a varied diet or a variety of habitats.

The amount of characters, both good and bad in comics that have some relation to plants or animals are numerous as well as diverse. Besides mammals (both prehistoric and modern), reptiles, birds, insects, arachnids and a host of other invertebrates are represented. For example, Iron Man which is an ordinary man encased in a suit of iron (loaded with gadgets of course).

Insects can be thought of as tiny "Iron-men", where they have an exoskeleton.

Some you may not have heard of are in the arsenal of enemies of She-ra which was quite popular in the 1980s, such as, Mosquitor who got his power from draining his opponents blood, and the Leech. However, some characters rely on animals as their mode of transport, such as large cats, and horses.

So the link between comics and nature is very strong.

It just goes to show you what a symbol of power the animals and plants around us represent that is why these characters are regarded as superheroes or super-villains. The ability they gain or mimic from nature gives that edge.

So let's take a lesson and protect our environment, and inspiration for future comic book characters.