

Save Our Species: A Stop-motion Animation Film with Nature

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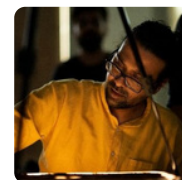


Figure 1. Official Poster for Save Our Species

Save Our Species is a stop-motion animation film that explores the harm inflicted on the planet's species through human activities such as poaching, pollution, deforestation, and industrialisation. Figure 1 shows a poster of the film. The film was conceived not only as an environmental narrative but also as an experiment in sustainable animation practice. The species depicted in the film were intentionally designed using elements from nature, while discarded and human-made materials were used to represent the industrial environments and threats surrounding them. In doing so, the materials blending into the storytelling. This project also emerged from an educational experiment in which animation was introduced to first-year Bachelor of Design (BDes) students who had no prior experience in animation. Rather than teaching animation exclusively through software and conventional production methods, the project encouraged students to explore movement, storytelling, materiality, and sustainability through a hands-on sustainable stop-motion production process.

Stop-Motion Animation as a Material Practice

Animation today is frequently associated with digital technologies. A typical 3D animation workflow may involve modelling characters and environments, texturing, rigging digital characters, setting up virtual cameras and lighting, animating movement, rendering, and finally compositing and editing the footage. Such workflows offer enormous creative possibilities, but at times, these processes can create an emotional distance between the designer and the material being created. Stop-motion animation offers a very different experience. It is one of the classical forms of animation in which physical objects, puppets, sets, and materials are moved incrementally and photographed one frame at a time to create an entire film. At a standard frame rate of 24 frames per second, 24 individual photographs are required to create just one second of animation. Therefore, a single minute of animation requires 1,440 individual frames/photographs/drawings.

In stop-motion animation, each frame represents a small physical adjustment made to a character or object before the next photograph is taken. This process makes stop-motion inherently tactile. The animator physically interacts with the character, environment, light, camera, and materials. The imperfections that emerge from this process can become part of the visual language of the film. Movement, texture, scale, lighting, and materiality are therefore not simply technical considerations; they contribute directly to the storytelling. It was this material quality of stop-motion that made it particularly appropriate for the objectives of Save Our Species.

From Classroom to Film Studio

Save Our Species was an experiment to explore stop-motion animation as a creative and pedagogical practice. However, unlike a conventional animation production, the film was not created in a dedicated animation studio equipped with professional facilities such as specialised lighting systems, animation rigs, prop storage, shooting tables, and controlled production environments. Instead, the film was created in a regular classroom, C-LH8 in the Mechanical Engineering Building at IIT Hyderabad. The transformation of an ordinary classroom into a temporary animation studio was an important part of the experiment. Tables, chairs, walls, available surfaces, lighting equipment, and discarded materials were incorporated into the production process. Figure 2 demonstrates the classroom, which would normally serve as a space for lectures and discussions, became a space for experimentation, construction, photography, direction, and animation.



Figure 2. Students working on the film, Save Our Species.

The project was developed as part of a design pedagogy experiment for first-year BDes students. Most of the students had never animated before. Rather than introducing animation solely as a software-based discipline, the project provided them with an opportunity to understand animation through physical experimentation. This approach was also intended to challenge some of the assumptions surrounding filmmaking. Film production is often perceived as an expensive and resource-intensive activity involving elaborate sets, specialised equipment, large crews, and substantial budgets. While these resources can certainly support ambitious productions, the absence of such resources does not necessarily prevent creative filmmaking. In the case of *Save Our Species*, the budget was extremely limited. It would, however, be inaccurate to describe the film as having absolutely no budget. A DSLR camera, basic lighting equipment, and subscription-based editing software were used during production. Nevertheless, the expenditure was negligible when compared with conventional film production. This limitation led to an important question that became central to the experiment: Can innovation emerge from constraints rather than despite them?

Learning Animation Through Practice

The students were initially introduced to the fundamental principles of animation through a classroom lecture and discussions. These sessions were intended to establish an understanding that animation is fundamentally an art of movement and expression, rather than simply the process of moving drawings, objects, puppets, or digital models from one position to another. Understanding principles such as timing, spacing, anticipation, exaggeration, squash and stretch, and staging is essential to creating convincing animated movement. However, these principles can often remain abstract when taught only through lectures or software demonstrations. The students therefore needed an opportunity to experience them physically. A fundamental philosophy within design education is “learning by doing.” Design students develop an understanding of materials, processes, and problem-solving not only through theoretical instruction but also through experimentation and making. This stop-motion project provided an opportunity to apply this philosophy directly. The structure of the design curriculum also supported this approach. Design courses are often organised in a modular manner, allowing students to become deeply immersed in a particular subject for a concentrated period. This made it possible to introduce the fundamentals of animation and then immediately apply them to a collaborative film project. As a design practitioner and educator, the project also provided me with the opportunity to direct and animate a film alongside the students. Rather than positioning the educator only as a lecturer, the production became a shared process of experimentation in which teaching, directing, designing, making, and problem-solving occurred simultaneously.

Designing Characters from Nature



Figure 3. Elephant created from various stones.

The conceptual development of the film began with endangered species. The students were introduced to a selection of endangered animals and asked to work in pairs. Each pair selected a species and developed a visual representation of that animal using materials found in nature. This restriction was deliberate. Instead of asking students to construct conventional puppets from clay, plastic, foam, or other commonly used animation materials, they were encouraged to look at their surroundings and consider how naturally occurring materials could communicate the physical characteristics of an animal. Stones, gravel, leaves, wood, soil, seeds and other natural elements became components of the characters and environments. The students therefore had to think beyond conventional character-design principles and consider the shape, texture, weight, colour, and surface quality of the materials available to them. For example, Figure 3 shows an elephant constructed using different forms of stones assembled against a discarded wooden backdrop. The stones provided a natural sense of weight and texture, while their individual shapes became part of the character design. Rather than attempting to conceal the material, the design embraced it.



Figure 4. Factories made from discarded material. Smoke created from gravel.

Similarly, Figure 4 depicts a factory environment constructed using discarded materials found around the classroom. Gravel was used to create the visual appearance of smoke. These choices transformed ordinary waste materials into elements of the visual narrative. Other endangered species including a sea turtle, rhinoceros, leopard, pangolin, and albatrosses were similarly constructed using natural materials. The material choices therefore served two purposes. First, they solved a practical production problem by providing inexpensive and readily available resources.

Second, they reinforced the central theme of the film. The animals were literally constructed from nature, while the threats to them were represented through discarded human-made and industrial materials.

Sustainability as Part of the Filmmaking Process

The primary objective of the experiment was to challenge the assumption that filmmaking and animation require large budgets and sophisticated production facilities. However, an equally important objective was to examine sustainability within the filmmaking process itself. Sustainability is frequently discussed in relation to product design, architecture, industrial design, and engineering. Designers are increasingly encouraged to consider material sourcing, manufacturing processes, lifecycle, reuse, and disposal. However, creative industries such as film and animation can also have a significant material footprint. Film productions may involve the construction of temporary sets, props, costumes, models, packaging, backdrops, and other physical elements. Once a production is completed, many of these materials may have little practical use and can become waste. Even when the final product communicates an environmental message, the production process itself may not necessarily reflect the same values. *Save Our Species* attempted to address this contradiction. The intention was not to claim that the production process was completely sustainable, but rather to make students aware of the relationship between creative production and material consumption. By repurposing discarded materials and using natural materials to create the film, sustainability became a practical design consideration rather than merely a subject discussed within the narrative.

The process also encouraged students to reconsider the value of materials. A discarded piece of wood could become a background. Gravel could become smoke. Stones could become an elephant, leaves an albatross, a coconut shell into a sea turtle and more. Materials that might otherwise be ignored or discarded could acquire a new visual and narrative function. In this sense, the project explored the idea that material constraints can become creative opportunities for innovation.

Impact on Student Learning

The educational outcome of the project extended beyond learning the technical process of stop-motion animation. Students were required to collaborate, conceptualise characters, develop storyboards, construct sets, experiment with materials, understand movement, operate a camera, and solve problems during production. The limitations of the classroom environment also encouraged improvisation. Unlike a professional studio where specific equipment may be readily available, the students had to work with what they had. This encouraged a problem-solving mindset that is particularly relevant to design education. A survey conducted later with the students who participated in the course indicated that the exercise increased their awareness of material consumption in their design projects.

The experience encouraged students to think more carefully about the materials they selected, how much material they consumed, and whether existing or discarded materials could be repurposed. This outcome was particularly significant because the lesson extended beyond animation. The students were introduced to an approach to design that could potentially be applied to other creative disciplines.

Recognition and Subsequent Films

Save Our Species eventually received 31 official selections at international film festivals and eight international awards. While this recognition was encouraging, the most significant outcome of the project was its influence on subsequent creative experiments. The approach developed during the making of *Save Our Species* became the foundation for several later films, including *Mitti*, *Something More*, and *Dharti*. These films continued to explore the possibilities of repurposing materials and using material experimentation as an integral part of the filmmaking process. The success of the project demonstrated that an educational exercise conducted in an ordinary classroom could evolve into a meaningful creative production with international recognition.

Conclusion

Save Our Species was more than an experiment in stop-motion animation. It was an exploration of the relationship between animation, design education, sustainability, material experimentation, and resource constraints. The project demonstrated that a conventional classroom could be transformed into a functional animation studio, that discarded materials could become meaningful components of a film, and that natural materials could be used to represent endangered species in a visually distinctive manner. The project challenged the perception that creative production requires abundant resources. The limitations of budget, space, equipment, and materials became opportunities for students to experiment and develop alternative solutions. The film also highlighted an important contradiction within environmental storytelling: a film may advocate for the protection of nature while its own production processes contribute to material waste. By consciously incorporating sustainability into the making of the film, *Save Our Species* attempted to align its production methodology with its environmental message. The experiment therefore suggests that sustainability in animation does not necessarily begin with expensive technology or specialised infrastructure. It can begin with a simple shift in attitude, looking at available materials differently, questioning consumption, repurposing what already exists, and allowing constraints to stimulate creativity. *Save Our Species* became an experiment not only in making animation, but also in rethinking how animation can be made.

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[1] Dr Delwyn Jude Remedios

Associate Professor, Department of Design
IIC Convenor, IITH