

As we enter the 100th year of The Walt Disney Company, and with the 50th anniversary of Walt Disney World in the rearview mirror, it's time to focus on another Disney milestone – the 25th anniversary of Disney's Animal Kingdom. It has grown, matured, and morphed but has remained true to its original themes: the intrinsic value of nature, a psychological transformation through adventure, and a personal call to action. As we look back at how the Animal Kingdom came to be, we'll paraphrase Walt Disney, "I only hope that we never lose sight of one thing – that it all started with a tiger." Pardon me. A tiger? I think "mouse" is the correct answer. More on that tiger later.

The genius behind the creation and evolution of Disney's Animal Kingdom is recently retired Imagineer Joe Rohde, whose career with WED Industries, later renamed to Walt Disney Imagineering, spanned forty years.

His contributions to Disney are beyond impressive. His keen storytelling ability and his broad knowledge of art history, anthropology, and ethnography, combined with his talents with a pen and sketchbook, allowed him to breathe life into fundamental concepts and to create fully realized, themed environments that tell a story on multiple levels, hitting all the senses.

Rohde was born on September 10, 1955, in Sacramento, California. His parents, both native Hawaiians, were in the entertainment business. They moved the family back to Hawaii when Joe was just two years old. His mother was an actress and drama teacher, and his father was a cinematographer.

After graduating from high school, Rohde enrolled at Occidental College in Los Angeles in 1977, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with a major in art history. He aspired to work in the film industry, but his first formal job was teaching theatrical set design at his high school alma mater, Chaminade College Preparatory School in Northridge, California. As luck – and fate – would have it, two of Rohde's students were the sons of Disney's Vice President of Engineering, John Zovich. Despite the school's modest budget, Rohde's work convinced Zovich that he had a higher calling. Rohde recalls, "So Zovich comes into my office saying, 'You're wasting your time here, kid. You should be working for Walt Disney Imagineering.'" Rohde knew nothing about Imagineering and was skeptical about his ability to be hired by Disney. He was a self-described 'hippie with long hair.' But he took Zovich up on the offer, and in 1980, he joined the swelling ranks of Imagineers who were busy designing EPCOT Center, the second gate for Walt Disney World.

He was first assigned to the model shop, working on scale models for the Mexico Pavilion. Rohde admits that he was not particularly good at this task and knew he needed to find something he could do better. Within Imagineering, he transitioned to two-dimensional work, then concept illustration, and finally, concept development. "This is where I can contribute," he noted, adding that "real opportunities (in Imagineering) started to emerge."

Rohde would be involved in several large-scale projects in the mid-1980s, including the refurbishment of Fantasyland in Disneyland in 1983, Captain EO in 3D, which debuted in September 1986, and EPCOT's Norway pavilion, which opened in June 1988.

As the 1980s rolled over into a new decade, new CEO Michael Eisner, who had rejuvenated the Disney company at the box office and theme parks, was ready to embark on what he dubbed "The Disney Decade," in which major new resorts, the Disney Vacation Club, and EuroDisney (now Disneyland Paris) would be built. But these weren't the only ideas percolating in Eisner's mind.

### Designing a Kingdom

Eisner had long been fascinated with the concept of a park that featured animals. However, all of the company experts quickly reminded Eisner that zoos operate at a deficit, and there's one in every major city. Why should a Disney "zoo" be any different? This sentiment curiously echoed the pushback that Walt received when he proposed and eventually built Disneyland. "Walt's Folly," it was dubbed, but Walt had the last laugh as his first park proved to be an instant success.

In a speech delivered to Cast Members on the Animal Kingdom's opening day, Rohde shared his experience in the park's development. "I have always had a natural inclination towards natural history. Not simply zoology but ethnology and anthropology as well. I'm an avid learner of that sort of thing. So I sort of made it known that I was interested in this [animal] project . . . [in] November 1989. . . Marty Sklar, who's the President of Imagineering, sat me down and said, 'OK, after the Christmas season is over, you're gonna start work on this animal thing that Michael Eisner wants to work on.'"

In January 1990, Rohde traveled to Burbank to meet with Eisner about the project. In a short meeting, Eisner said, "You know, we have the Magic Kingdom. We should have Disney's Animal Kingdom." And thus, the park had a name. Eisner then challenged Rohde to develop the concept for a park that would create a sense of excitement about live animals.

# From Tigers to Yeti: **JOE ROHDE**

Adventures in  
Imagineering

by Jamie Hecker





Reflecting on this challenge, Rohde said, "I work in a very literary pattern, so I'm starting with thematic ideas. What do we want these animals to even be about? What ideas do we want you to take away from the encounter with these animals, and where would that send us? We know one of the obligations is to get people to understand that animals equal land. That when you see a wild animal, it's evidence of the existence of hundreds of square acres or even miles of land. There's a link between the animal and the land. So, it begs the question - we know that the classic image of Africa is the big open grasslands of the Serengeti, and we know we cannot replicate that because we don't have hundreds of square miles, we're going to have some number of acres. So we need to figure out how to scale the African experience to something manageable."

Rohde and his team then made several field trips to Africa to identify what the African landscape, both man-made and natural, looked and felt like. According to Rohde, "Pretty quickly we realized we have to go see sites... We need to take trips... to help visualize the natural landscape of Africa and how it could be replicated on a smaller, controlled scale of a theme park. How do we create boundaries? If we see what's real, then we can better understand how to create the environment with practical needs [such as berms and separations]. That gave us enough fuel to get the idea up, and then we can send the rock guys to study the rocks for how to recreate them. They are really different than what you think."

To keep the Disney corporate executives on board, Rohde and his team focused on what Imagineers do best. "We started by designing the fantasy part of the park that was to be called Beastly Kingdom because we knew how to do fantasy and fantasy creatures like dragons." The remainder of the park design proved to be more challenging. "In the course of that (first) year, none of us had ever designed a zoological exhibit before, nor did we presume that we would be able to design a zoological exhibit. What we know is stagecraft and storytelling. We don't know enough about the husbandry and management of animals to make any assumptions about what this is going to be, so we need some advice from people who do know."

Rohde's team did extensive research at 40 zoological facilities. "We did not consult charts and graphs and analyses and bell curves of any form. We just observed and absorbed." It was at this time that Rick Barongi, an expert in the field of zoology, was recommended to Rohde. At the time, Barongi

worked for the San Diego Zoo, so he traveled to Glendale for consultations. These discussions led to the development of an Advisory Board, which consisted of about 25 people, all experts on zoology. Rohde recalled, "It was a large group of people culled from zoological institutions and conservation institutions around the country. And we would take these four-day long marathon sessions and go blow-by-blow, animal-by-animal, moat-by-moat, tree-by-tree, exhibit-by-exhibit, asking questions. Getting answers. Taking advice. Making notes, writing all this stuff down on these papers, and trying to incorporate it into our designs."

There was another major takeaway from Rohde's work with the Advisory Board. "Quite early on we realized that we could not proceed with this project without a very, very real conservation aspect to it. It simply would not work. It wouldn't work on a variety of levels. One was the issue of legitimacy. And, you know, one simply could not get into this business without doing something beneficial out of being in it. [Another] was the issue of access to animals and the fact that we planned to be here for the long term, maybe fifty or sixty years." This is the genesis of the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund, established in 1993. It's now known as the Disney Conservation Fund.

### **Now, What About That Tiger?**

As the project proceeded, Rohde and his team were putting together a more concrete version of the park. Eventually, Rohde was called to Burbank to provide updates to Eisner and other key Disney executives. Several early meetings left the Disney management uninspired, but Rohde and his team were still authorized to keep refining the idea and presenting their updates. Sensing defeat at the next corporate presentation, Rohde opted for a non-traditional approach to help sell the concept of Disney's Animal Kingdom and keep the project alive.

As the presentation got underway, Rohde began, "We know that there are concerns about whether animals are, in and of themselves, dramatic. The heart of the Animal Kingdom park is animals, and our Guests' encounters with them. We have gone to great lengths to make sure that the animals will be displayed in a way that will bring them and people together as never before."

The door to the room then opened and a 400-pound female Bengal tiger, restrained by only a slender chain, stalked in. Rohde ignored the huge cat as she prowled the room, coming within inches of Disney's key executives. The

effect on everyone was palpable. Disney President Frank Wells edged his chair closer to the table. Eisner stared. Walt Disney Imagineering President Marty Sklar, kept in the dark by his team, gasped and looked at Rohde. One of the Imagineers at the meeting recalled that it was “a definite role reversal. Eisner and Wells confronted something so much more powerful than they were. They immediately saw the point of what we were trying to do in the park.” Rohde concluded his presentation, “so you can see our position: proximity to animals – the illusion that they are right next to you – is essential.” According to Sklar, “The day that Joe brought that animal into the meeting made all the difference in the world.”

Did the Bengal tiger seal the deal? Not entirely. But it did impress the Disney executives enough to provide Rohde and his team with another year of development funding. Momentum was building.

### **The Animal Kingdom Arrives**

Finally, in June 1995, Rohde was informed that the project was approved. But it would not be official until there was a public announcement, which occurred on June 20. Rohde commented that “there were about ten pretty crazy days leading up to (the announcement)...Up to that moment there was never a single clue that the company would actually build this.”

Rohde and his team had pulled off the improbable. In five years, they developed an animal-centric theme park that would be well within the realm of Disney storytelling. Ground breaking began on August 4, 1995, with the park opening on Earth Day in 1998, April 22, a mere 992 days later. When it opened, Disney's Animal Kingdom had five unique lands. As Guests entered the park they found themselves in the Oasis, leading to Discovery Island and the park's icon, the Tree of Life. From here, different paths led to DinoLand U.S.A., Africa, and Camp Minnie Mickey. A sixth land, Asia, was in the mix but wasn't part of the opening day events.

Rohde spoke of the purpose of The Oasis, the grotto-like entrance to the park. “You're surrounded by experiences. None of these experiences are presented to you as if you need to stop and look at them. It's really not even an animal exhibit, in one sense of the word. It's a physical adventure of space that is preparing you for the mentality we want you to have when you get to the middle (of the park).” The Oasis was deliberately designed to shift Guests' mental energy away from the 'outside world' to the cultivated environment

of Disney's Animal Kingdom.

The Africa section of the park, which showcased the park's premier attraction, Kilimanjaro Safaris, is home to Harambe. In Swahili, Harambe translates to 'let's pull together.' As Rohde explained, “Harambe is not anywhere. We deliberately created our own principality because we want to handle conservation themes in a rather hard-hitting way, [and a fictional town or country allows us the latitude to do that without real-world pushback]. So we have a principality that is of our own creation: the state of Harambe. We made every attempt to de-romanticize [Harambe] for a couple of reasons. One, we are handling very timely messages. They're not romantic, they're real, and they need to be set in a real context of real values. You need to recognize these people have telephones...These people have a satellite dish. They know about us and we know about them. We share this world, right? Two, my personal belief is that in our modern world, these images say 'adventure' more clearly. We want people to feel that it is real but just so unfamiliar. The other thing...with Harambe is that it is profoundly geometric. It is all cubic and square. There is virtually no landscaping in it. It is a box. It is a very compressive, tight box that we put you in because we're gonna send you out into the beauty of nature (on the Harambe Game Reserve). And how will you remember to appreciate the beauty of nature unless you're reminded what it's like to not have it?”

In summarizing the essence of Disney's Animal Kingdom, Rohde explained, “A theme park's job is transportation. It is to mentally transport you, to remove you, to sweep you away from here ...from everything that you think about in an everyday situation, from your worries, from your concerns, from your very perception that you are in the world that you are in. That is why people pay so much money to go to theme parks is to be swept away. That is why the ergonomics, the human factors of theme parks, are so important. Because everything inconvenient, everything mundane that could remind you that you're still back in the world, needs to be erased.”

### **Beyond Opening Day**

Rohde's career would bring him back to Animal Kingdom for two more additions. The first would address the dual conundrums that the park lacked a roller coaster thrill ride, and that (because Beastly Kingdom was never built) mythological animals were sparse. An attraction based in Asia featuring a runaway tea train and its encounter









with the Yeti would fit the bill for both. Expedition Everest – Legend of the Forbidden Mountain was announced in 2003 and opened to the public three years later. It has two unique elements that make the attraction stand out, albeit in different ways. First, it represents the most recent time that Imagineering has created a wholly unique attraction that wasn't based on an existing intellectual property. It harkens back to the era of Walt Disney when iconic Disney attractions such as The Haunted Mansion, Pirates of the Caribbean, and The Jungle Cruise were created. Second, it featured Imagineering's most complex Audio-Animatronic character at the time. The Yeti was designed to swoop down on passing trains. However, the overall weight and mechanics of the Yeti proved to be too strong for its foundation. To prevent a mechanical catastrophe, the Yeti has been in "B" mode for years, no longer able to rely on its massive sway. It stands idle, with strobe lights flashing to create the illusion of movement.

In 2011, Rohde made his next curtain call at Disney's Animal Kingdom when Disney announced a partnership with director James Cameron. The plan was to create a land based on Cameron's blockbuster film, *Avatar*, complete with attractions. Construction began in September 2014, and in May 2017, Pandora: The World of Avatar opened to the public.

Rohde made design decisions based on the fictional world of Pandora rather than on the specific characters or plot of the movie. He and his team masterfully recreated the floating mountains and the unique bioluminescent flora of the fictional world of Pandora. Two indoor attractions thrill and entertain Guests – Flight of Passage and the Na'vi River Journey, which features one of Disney's most sophisticated

Animatronic figures.

Rohde set the timeframe for the new land a generation after the movie, allowing for the notion of nature reclaiming what was taken from it. This can be observed in the smallest details, all supporting the overall narration. Take the Pandora entrance bridge, for example. Said Rohde, "In theater, there are principles, principles of design, and one of those principles is if something is on stage, it is on stage for a reason. There is no such thing as an accident." Here he's referring to the metal of the bridge, showing signs of rust as well as evidence of the alien flora and fauna taking over. The subtle message is that different cultures, species, and timeframes have a stake in this bridge. "There is no such thing as a coincidence because that misleads you in terms of the story," Rohde continued. "The detail does not exist to serve its own purposes. It only exists to serve narrative purposes."

Responding to criticism that the placement of Pandora within Animal Kingdom would generate cohesion and theming issues, Rohde said: "If you think about the intrinsic value of nature, transformation through adventure, and personal call to action — these are the values of Animal Kingdom. But if you say them again, those are the themes of the film *Avatar*. So, *Avatar* and Animal Kingdom will nest into each other very, very neatly."

After a four-decade career with Imagineering, Joe Rohde retired from Walt Disney Imagineering on January 4, 2021. He's currently working for Virgin Galactic as its "Experience Architect." When the day arrives that Rohde is named a Disney Legend, it will be the perfect completion of his outstanding Disney career.

