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Disney’s Tree of Life

Disney’s Animal Kingdom was the last of the four Disney theme parks to have been built in Florida. The idea for a “wild” theme park began in 1989, and construction was completed in 1998 (Kober). The designers of the park strove to create opportunities for visitors to view animals in their natural habitats rather than in cages (Callum). The manmade Tree of Life serves as the focal point of Animal Kingdom, and it embodies the spirit of nature, focuses on animals, and is a unique structure. However, more than these characteristics, park visitors should not overlook the attention to detail that makes this manmade structure appear the result of Mother Nature rather than Disney engineers, and they should acknowledge the tree’s theme of nature.

The designers of The Tree of Life adhered to a high level of detail so that this manmade structure would appear as real as possible to visitors. Disney engineers had to construct several foam models of the tree, varying in shape, size, and color, before they got the right design (Callum). At the top of the tree, visitors can see its perfectly green, year-round leaves. The engineers hand-made approximately 103,000 leaves, varying in four different shapes and five different hues, for this 145-foot tree (“The Tree of Life”). In order to make the leaves more realistic, they made them out of a lightweight material that could blow in the breeze (“The Tree of Life”). Holding up the leaves are the tree’s 8000 branches (“The Tree of Life”), which were made out of steel pipes with joints, making it possible for them to move with the breeze (Callum). Below the branches lies the trunk of the tree, on which appears most of the 325 realistic animal carvings (“The Tree of Life”). For example, on the carving of the lion, visitors can view each individual claw and strand of hair in the lion’s mane; similarly, on the carving of the owl, each feather is easily discernible by visitors. “[Attaining such realism] was probably the most difficult part of sculpting the tree, to create the 325 animal figures that appear to be formed of bark and wood—finding the balance between the animal forms and the wood textures was a great challenge,” says Hormay, one of the three Native American artists brought into to design the figures (qtd. In Kober). Finally, at the bottom lies the tree’s root, 170 feet wide (“The Tree of Life”), which holds the structure together and is unseen by visitors. Nonetheless, Disney engineers used special material to create realistic roots, even adding root hairs similar to those that appear on the roots of live trees.

In addition to the much detail in the tree’s construction, Disney engineers created a manmade structure that emphasizes the central theme of nature. The Tree of Life symbolizes just that, life. For instance, the tree’s trunk and root are made of 325 animals (“The Tree of Life”). Several examples of the animals carved in the tree include dolphins, rhinoceroses, crocodiles, monkeys, birds ranging from flamingos to eagles, the mighty lion, and much more (Ospina). The carvings are not proportional to the real life animals because they were made to flow within the tree, each animal connecting to one another and symbolizing the circle of life (Kober). Disney engineers received this theme of life idea from a similar myth found in many diverse cultures. Essentially, according to this myth, the tree was the first thing to be made, and people and animals gathered around it as a source of food, water, and shelter (Callum). For that reason, the Tree of Life became the center of Animal Kingdom.

In conclusion, at Disney’s Animal Kingdom, visitors will find in the middle of the park a manmade structure called The Tree of Life. Ten years in the making, it is a unique manmade structure unlike any other. Due to its detail in design and its central theme of nature, it symbolizes the beauty of nature and an appreciation for detail that all visitors to the park acknowledge when they view it, if not consciously than at least subconsciously.

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