



Cane Toads: The Conquest Discussion Guide

Director: Mark Lewis

Year: 2010

Time: 85 min

You might know this director from:

The Natural History of the Chicken (2000)

FILM SUMMARY

Director Lewis has a thing for the outcasts of the animal world. From chickens and rats to cane toad, he delves head-first into territory other nature documentarians avoid like the plague. And with the “deadly cane toad” reaching plague proportions in his native Australia, he depicts their story not once but twice, with the 1988 short “Cane Toads: An Unnatural History” and the 2010 full-length 3D follow-up, CANE TOADS: THE CONQUEST.

These warty amphibians were never meant to be in Australia. CANE TOADS begins with the tale of their transport from Hawaii via their South American homeland in order to decimate the loathed cane beetle that was destroying the lucrative Queensland sugar cane crop. Through comic twists and turns, and a whole cast of quirky characters, Lewis educates us on the trail of “*Rhinella marina*” in its alien territory, from the arrival of two suitcases of toads in 1935 to the estimated 1.5 billion croaking creatures of contemporary day.

“I hate them in every respect,” cries sugarcane farmer Tip Byrne. Doll-faced Monica Kraus begs to differ, cuddling pot-bellied Dairy Queen, her beloved pet toad, close. As the debate divides those down under and the facts surrounding the cane toad’s true threat remain unclear, athletic male toads continue leaping west as female toads lay up to 60,000 eggs a year. Stiff competition for the established natives.

Australians take matters into their own hands. The anti-camp wields poisons, spears, and flattens toad upon toad out on the open road, as others use the toad to their advantage, harvesting venom for medicinals, even stuffing the public pariahs and placing them in a traveling circus. Regardless, the cane toad appears fit to remain, leaving Lewis to call into question the overpowering invasive nature of humanity. A human suitcase transported the innocent toad so far from home in the first place. Could we be the most invasive species of all?

FILM THEMES

Problem in the sugar fields? Cane toads offered a quick, simple solution too good to pass up. Without delivering the intended results, the toad conquered its new home, sparking a wildly ugly debate in its wake.

DOLLAR ABOVE SENSE

In the 1930s, the sugarcane fields of eastern Australia were being destroyed by the cane beetle, threatening the livelihood of farmers throughout the territory. The reaction was to find a solution, and fast. When word hit Australian shores of the majestic cane toad, apparently working wonders on the Hawaiian Islands, the order was quickly sent out to bring this creature to fix the problem and positively impact the bottom line. Yet basic facts, like the beetle's preference for cane flower nectar high up on the stalk, and the frog's inability to hop so high, make the cane toads ineffectiveness laughingly apparent. However, when money talks it seems to shout louder than common sense. And the repercussions, as with the cane toad, are far-reaching and long-lasting.

NATIVE VS. INVASIVE SPECIES

The cane toad was never meant for Australia. Native to the Americas, human interaction brought them to a land far from their natural habitat. Having reached plague proportions in a matter of a few swift decades, the toads proved their resilience and demanded that the same people who brought them to solve a problem stand up and pay attention to their newfound presence. Once they had posed a real threat to the native wildlife of Australia—killing crocodiles, snakes, even domestic pets—and managed to survive in, procreate, even conquer the landscape better than these natives, the cane toads hit the news. Does one species have more of a right to life than the other? The cane toad shakes a continent, and those native to the landscape either adapt or die.

AN UGLY REPUTATION

The jury is still out on the impact the cane toad has on the Australian landscape and people. With proven toxins, cane toads kill wildlife and domestic pets, but only when threatened. They also clear out insect pests, sing a graceful melody, and provide medicinal benefits through their excretions. Why are they such a hated species then? Why is war so vehemently waged upon these creatures? "Poor little cane toad, he's ugly," stated farmer McLaughlin. A predisposition to despise the unattractive in the world lies at the heart of the cane toad dilemma. The warted, dirt-colored, awkward toad makes for excellent outcast material.

SURVIVAL ABOVE ALL ELSE

When tragedy hits, a built-in survival mechanism is activated in every living creature; call it creative, imaginative, or ingenious. All organisms, from the tiniest to the most mammoth, fight for life, as magnificently displayed by the cane toad, which swiftly adapted to its new surroundings and made history through its proactive resilience. With a bit of the clumsy and a dose of the stubborn, humans embrace the same survival instinct when faced with the toad, enlisting imagination, cruelty, and vigilance, all in the name of not being dominated.

“Toads are public enemy number one... They’re like a commando, an invading army.”

Dr. Chris Burns

“Despite all the fantastic activities that can be undertaken by the human race, the magnificent pieces of equipment that are being developed, our capacity in space, we still haven’t come to find a way to control the cane toad.”

Professor Mike Tyler

FILM FACTS:

- Director Mark Lewis released “Cane Toads: An Unnatural History” in 1988, a 47-minute documentary detailing the spread of the cane toad throughout Australia. Nominated for a BAFTA, the film is commonly shown in Australian schools in the subjects of biology, ecology, environmental science, anthropology, geography, and communication. Having continued to follow the spread of the cane toad since the first film, Lewis released CANE TOADS: THE CONQUEST in 2010, which is said to be the first Australian 3D-digital film, and was shot over a 22-week period.
- Known for his approach of featuring outcast animals in his films (chickens, rats, cane toads), Lewis has carved out a unique name for himself in the documentary world. Asked for his thoughts on the cane toads, he said, “I’m more than a champion of the cane toad, because I think one needs to retaliate against all the stupidity that goes on. In the end I don’t think it’s as dangerous or destructive as people try to make out.”
- As of 2014, it was estimated that Australian cane frogs migrate at a rate of 35 miles per year.
- Australia is the world’s third largest raw sugar supplier, grossing 2 billion Australian dollars annually, with 4,000 cane farm businesses and 24 mills crushing 10,000 tons of cane daily.
- In 1926, an Argentinian moth was introduced to Australia to control the prickly pear cactus.
- Indigenous Australians have inhabited the continent for the past 40,000 years. The first Europeans to reach Australia were the Dutch in 1606, and in 1770 Great Britain claimed the eastern portion of the country. In 1788, Australia was established as a penal colony, with convicts being sent from Europe to serve out their jail time. In 1901 the six individual territories of Australia federated formed the Commonwealth of Australia. The country is still a part of the British Commonwealth, and the 2011 population came in at 21.5 million.
- The cane toad, or “*Bufo marinus*,” is native to Central and South America. Cane toad remains have been found from the Miocene period, 23 million years ago. The average life span of a cane toad in the wild is 10 to 15 years, with one kept in captivity living to the age of 35. The adult cane toad lives entirely on land, only venturing into the water to breed, when the female can lay up to 30,000 eggs at a single time.
- The cane toad was also brought to islands in the Caribbean and Oceania to control sugar crops.
- An invasive species is a plant or animal not native to a certain location, and one that causes damage to the environment, economy, or human health. The earliest mammal invasions occurred 9,000 years ago, when humans introduced wild boars to Sicily and shrews to Cyprus.
- Cane toads were brought to Florida in 1936.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Make** sure not to carry plants, fruits, or vegetables that could harbor potential invasive species when traveling.
2. **Support** the [Invasive Species Specialist Group](#), a branch of the [International Union for the Conservation of Nature](#) that “aims to reduce threats to natural ecosystems and the native species they contain by increasing awareness of invasive alien species.”
3. **Donate** to the [Foundation for Australia’s Most Endangered Species \(FAME\)](#) that is working with Sydney University and a number of scientists to stop the spread of the cane toad.
4. **Give** to the [National Wildlife Federation’s](#) active campaign to stop invasive species—both plants and wildlife—from threatening the local environment in the U.S.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.