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Documentaries' Message: Use Our Earth Wisely

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Whether we're watching "Star Wars," "The Lord of the Rings" or two new eco-documentaries about breaking our dependency on fossil fuels, the dramatic situation is essentially the same. The forces of evil are gathering. Only a coalition of the good, the resolute and the pure of heart can save us from perpetual darkness.

Of course, the battleground in "Fuel" and "Earth Days" -- both opening Friday -- is not Middle Earth or some distant galaxy. It's the real world. And the forces of good are citizens who measure the hero's call to action in ecological terms. For them, the Holy Grail is sustainable living -- free of the black, viscous stuff that has prompted wars, polluted the atmosphere and made consumer gluttons of us all.

"America is addicted to oil," President George W. Bush says in both movies, his famous pronouncement serving as their collective dramatic linchpin. The implications are clear: The world in general -- and America in particular -- needs to kick its habit and transition to a methadone cocktail of wind power, solar energy and biofuels. It's time to pour veggie gloop into our Priuses and cruise past acres of soybean fields.

Yes, some viewers may find this utopian business -- especially in "Fuel" -- amusing, goofy or even annoying. After all, the central figure in that movie is Josh Tickell, a bright-eyed crusader whose bright-eyed zeal and in-your-face advocacy suggest a youthful Michael Moore. He's the one with the veggie gloop.

"Fuel," which Tickell directed and co-wrote, revisits his worldwide tour to promote biodiesels in his Veggie Van. The movie segues from his personal narrative (his mother who lived near oil refineries in Louisiana suffered nine miscarriages) to a citizen's clarion call for biofuels and other non-oil forms of energy. It is stylistically breezy but deeply sincere, as Tickell offers a thoughtful, well-researched argument for alternative energy.

At times, the movie suffers from that Moore-ish exuberance, which puts a distractingly partisan bent on the proceedings. (The Bush family dabbled in oil! Cheney met with corporate heads of oil companies just before 9/11! The oil industry bankrolls politicians to maintain the carbon-based status quo!) But there's something boyishly appealing about his spirit. And it's clear that Tickell has reaped results. Bill Clinton selected Tickell's Veggie Van Organization as part of his Global Initiative on Climate Change. And the movie, which won the audience award for documentary at last year's Sundance Film Festival, rolls out testimonials from celebrities he has galvanized, including Woody Harrelson, Sheryl Crow and Willie Nelson.

Where "Fuel" follows Moore's zippier, me-centric style, "Earth Days" treads a more traditional path. British-born documentary veteran Robert Stone outlines the birth, growth and development of the environmental movement with imaginatively culled archival footage of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The movie revisits many milestones in the saga, including the founding of Earth Day; President Richard Nixon's progressive legislation in the 1970s for clean air, water and endangered species; and the influence of books such as Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring."

But Stone offers more than a snappily edited history lesson. We are privy to rewarding conversations with nine individuals who were in some way influential and who charted their personal journeys of consciousness in the allegorical clash between industry and environmentalism. They include former interior secretary Stewart Udall, Earth Day co-chairman Pete McCloskey and biologist Paul Ehrlich, author of "The Population Bomb."

Like Tickell, they were young men and women determined to make a difference. And it's instructive to hear them speak of the changes they have seen, from the 1950s of mass production and suburban expansion, through the turbulence of the gasoline shortages of the 1970s, and into the present. Everyone has a different, yet connective story. McCloskey (R), a former congressman, and the late former senator Gaylord Nelson (D) recall how they came to co-chair Earth Day. Udall recounts how, as interior secretary, he opposed a bid to build dams in the Grand Canyon. And renewable-energy activist Denis Hayes speaks of how exploitation of fossil fuels has "violated the rules of ecology."

"Earth Days" feels like a prolonged campfire conversation, filled with weathered, measured talk about holistic thinking and finding a new perspective. It's time, they all essentially say, to redefine every component of contemporary ecology, from industrial production to consumer behavior. "Fuel" is more spring-loaded, a perkier, user-friendlier appeal to audiences.

Yet both movies have the same essential purpose: to create a mythological urgency about our moral purpose on the planet. They ask us to think differently about the way the world does business. They invite us -- no matter what our political perspective -- to listen to their commentary. To debate, disagree or applaud. But not to be indifferent. They have a point about getting us involved. Unlike those fictional sci-fi blockbusters, the potentially disastrous consequences won't go away with the closing credits.

Fuel (111 minutes at Landmark's E Street Cinema) is unrated and contains nothing objectionable.

Earth Days (102 minutes at Landmark's E Street Cinema) is unrated and contains passing nudity.