

ACADEMIA UNIXPLORIA

Cryptozoology

A Brief Overview.



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Introduction

Cryptozoology is a subculture and pseudoscience that seeks out and studies unknown, legendary, or extinct animals whose existence is disputed or unsubstantiated. This includes creatures from folklore, such as Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, the Yeti, the chupacabra, the Jersey Devil, and the Mokele-mbembe. These entities are called cryptids, a term coined by the subculture. Mainstream science does not recognize cryptozoology as a branch of zoology or folklore studies because it does not follow the scientific method. The field was founded in the 1950s by zoologists Bernard Heuvelmans and Ivan T. Sanderson.

Researchers have observed that cryptozoologists often reject and express hostility towards mainstream scientific approaches. Scholars have examined cryptozoology's influence, including its association with Young Earth creationism. They have also noted similarities between cryptozoology and other pseudosciences like ghost hunting and Ufology. Furthermore, they have highlighted the uncritical propagation of cryptozoologist claims by the media.

Terminology and History

Cryptozoology as a field of study originates in the works of Bernard Heuvelmans, a Belgian zoologist, and Ivan T. Sanderson, a Scottish zoologist. Heuvelmans' book, "On the Track of Unknown Animals" (French title: "Sur la Piste des Bêtes Ignorées"), published in 1955, is considered a landmark work among cryptozoologists. Similarly, Sanderson's contributions to the field, including his book "Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life" (1961), helped establish the defining features of cryptozoology. Heuvelmans traced the roots of cryptozoology to the work of Anthonie Cornelis Oudemans, who hypothesized that a sizeable unidentified seal species was responsible for sea serpent sightings.

Cryptozoology is 'the study of hidden animals' (from Ancient Greek: κρυπτός, *kryptós* "hidden, secret"; Ancient Greek ζῷον, *zōion* "animal," and λόγος, *logos*, i.e. "knowledge, study"). The term dates from 1959 or before— Heuvelmans attributes the coinage of the term cryptozoology to Sanderson. Following cryptozoology, the term cryptid was coined in 1983 by cryptozoologist J. E. Wall in the summer issue of the International Society of Cryptozoology newsletter. According to Wall, it has been " [...] suggested that new terms be coined to replace sensational and often misleading terms like 'monster.' My suggestion is 'cryptid,' meaning a living thing having the quality of being hidden or unknown ... describing those creatures which are (or maybe) subjects of cryptozoological investigation."

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the noun cryptid as "an animal whose existence or survival to the present day is disputed or unsubstantiated; any animal of interest to a cryptozoologist." While used by most cryptozoologists, the term cryptid is not used by academic zoologists. In a textbook aimed at undergraduates, academics Caleb W. Lack and Jacques Rousseau note that the subculture's focus on what it deems to be "cryptids" is a pseudoscientific extension of older belief in monsters and other similar entities from the folkloric record, yet with a "new, more scientific-sounding name: cryptids."

While biologists regularly identify new species, cryptozoologists often focus on creatures from the folkloric record. Most famously, these include the Loch Ness Monster, Bigfoot, the chupacabra, and other "imposing beasts that could be labeled as monsters."

Cryptozoologists may employ motion-sensitive cameras, night-vision equipment, and audio-recording equipment to search for these entities. While there have been attempts to codify cryptozoological approaches, unlike biologists, zoologists, botanists, and other academic disciplines, "there are no accepted, uniform, or successful methods for pursuing cryptids." Some scholars have identified precursors to modern cryptozoology in specific medieval approaches to the folkloric record, and the psychology behind the cryptozoology approach has been the subject of academic study.

Cryptozoology is a field that studies and searches for animals whose existence has not yet been proven by science. However, few cryptozoologists have a formal education in science, and even fewer have a background directly relevant to cryptozoology. It is common for adherents to misrepresent the academic backgrounds of cryptozoologists. For instance, they often claim that "Professor Roy Mackal, Ph.D.," is a leading figure with a legitimate doctorate in biology. However, they don't mention that he had no relevant training to undertake competent research on exotic animals. This raises the issue of 'credential mongering,' where an individual or organization promotes someone's graduate degree as proof of expertise, even if their training is not specifically relevant to the field under consideration. Apart from Bernard Heuvelmans, Ivan Sanderson, and Roy Mackal, other notable cryptozoologists with academic backgrounds include Grover Krantz, Karl Shuker, and Richard Greenwell.

Cryptozoologists have a history of identifying cases that they believe have "irrefutable evidence" supporting particular cryptids' existence. However, some of these instances were later revealed to result from a hoax. This discovery can happen when experts look closely at the evidence or the hoaxer confesses.

Young Earth creationism

A subset of cryptozoology promotes the pseudoscience of Young Earth creationism, rejecting conventional science in favor of a Biblical interpretation and promoting concepts such as "living dinosaurs." Science writer Sharon A. Hill observes that the Young Earth creationist segment of cryptozoology is "well-funded and able to conduct expeditions to find a living dinosaur that they think would invalidate evolution."

Anthropologist Jeb J. Card says, "creationists have embraced cryptozoology, and some cryptozoological expeditions are funded by and conducted by creationists hoping to disprove evolution." In a 2013 interview, paleontologist Donald Prothero notes an uptick in creationist cryptozoologists. He observes that "people who actively search for Loch Ness monsters or Mokele Mbembe do it entirely as creationist ministers. They think finding a dinosaur in the

Congo would overturn all of evolution. It wouldn't. It would just be a late-occurring dinosaur, but that's their mistaken notion of evolution."

Citing a 2013 exhibit at the Petersburg, Kentucky-based Creation Museum, which claimed that dragons were once biological creatures who walked the earth alongside humanity and is broadly dedicated to Young Earth creationism, religious studies academic Justin Mullis notes that "cryptozoology has a long and curious history with Young Earth Creationism, with this new exhibit being just one of the most recent examples."

Academic Paul Thomas analyzed the influence and connections between cryptozoology in his 2020 study of the Creation Museum and the creationist theme park Ark Encounter. Thomas comments that "while the Creation Museum and the Ark Encounter are flirting with pseudoarchaeology, coquettishly whispering pseudoarchaeological rhetoric, they are each fully in bed with cryptozoology" and observes that "young-earth creationists and cryptozoologists make natural bedfellows. As with pseudoarchaeology, both young-earth creationists and cryptozoologists bristle at the rejection of mainstream secular science and lament a seeming conspiracy to prevent serious consideration of their claims."

Lack of Critical Media Coverage

Media outlets have frequently shared information from cryptozoologist sources without proper scrutiny. They sometimes report false claims by cryptozoologists or show them as "monster hunters" on TV shows. For instance, the American TV show *MonsterQuest*, which aired from 2007 to 2010, was known for showcasing cryptozoologists. Unfortunately, media coverage of "cryptids" often neglects more plausible explanations and gives undue attention to claims made by cryptozoologists.

Reception and Pseudoscience

Academics widely agree that cryptozoology is a pseudoscience. This subculture is frequently criticized for relying on anecdotal evidence instead of following the scientific method when investigating animals that most scientists believe to be unlikely to exist. No academic course or university degree program grants the status of cryptozoologist, and the subculture comprises individuals without training in the natural sciences.

Anthropologist Jeb J. Card summarizes cryptozoology in a survey of pseudoscience and pseudoarchaeology:

" Cryptozoology purports to be the study of previously unidentified animal species. At first glance, this would seem to differ little from zoology. New species are discovered by field and museum zoologists every year. Cryptozoologists cite these discoveries as justification for their search but often minimize or omit the fact that the discoverers do not identify as cryptozoologists and are academically trained zoologists working in an ecological paradigm

rather than organizing expeditions to seek out supposed examples of unusual and large creatures."

Card notes that "cryptozoologists often show their disdain and even hatred for professional scientists, including those who enthusiastically participated in cryptozoology," which he traces back to Heuvelmans's early "rage against critics of cryptozoology." He parallels cryptozoology and other pseudosciences, such as ghost hunting and Ufology. He compares the approach of cryptozoologists to colonial big-game hunters and aspects of European imperialism. According to Card, "most cryptids are framed as the subject of indigenous legends typically collected in the heyday of comparative Folklore, though such legends may be heavily modified or worse. Cryptozoology's complicated mix of sympathy, interest, and appropriation of indigenous culture (or non-indigenous construction of it) is also found in New Age circles and dubious "Indian burial grounds" and other legends [...] invoked in hauntings such as the "Amityville" hoax [...]"

In a 2011 foreword for *The American Biology Teacher*, the National Association of Biology Teachers president Dan Ward uses cryptozoology as an example of "technological pseudoscience" that may confuse students about the scientific method. Ward says that "Cryptozoology [...] is not valid or scientific. It is monster hunting." Historian of science Brian Regal includes an entry for cryptozoology in his *Pseudoscience: A Critical Encyclopedia* (2009). Regal says that "as an intellectual endeavor, cryptozoology has been studied as much as cryptozoologists have sought hidden animals."

In a 1992 issue of *Folklore*, folklorist Véronique Campion-Vincent says:

"Unexplained appearances of mystery animals are reported all over the world today. Beliefs in the existence of fabulous and supernatural animals are ubiquitous and timeless. In the continents discovered by Europe, indigenous beliefs and tales have strongly influenced the perceptions of the conquered confronted by a new natural environment. In parallel with the growing importance of the scientific approach, these traditional mythical tales have been endowed with sometimes highly artificial precision and have given birth to contemporary legends solidly entrenched in their territories. The belief self-perpetuates today through multiple observations enhanced by the media and encouraged (largely with the aim of gain for touristic promotion) by the local population, often genuinely convinced of the reality of this profitable phenomenon."

Campion-Vincent says that "four currents can be distinguished in the study of mysterious animal appearances":

"Fortean" ("compilers of anomalies" such as via publications like the *Fortean Times*), "occultists" (which she describes as related to "Fortean"), "folklorists," and "cryptozoologists." Regarding cryptozoologists, Campion-Vincent says that "this movement seems to deserve the appellation of parasience, like parapsychology: the same corpus is reviewed; many scientists participate, but for those who have an official status of university professor or researcher, the participation is a private hobby."

In her *Encyclopedia of American Folklore*, academic Linda Watts says that "folklore concerning unreal animals or beings, sometimes called monsters, is a popular field of

inquiry" and describes cryptozoology as an example of "American narrative traditions" that "feature many monsters."

In his analysis of cryptozoology, folklorist Peter Dendle says that "cryptozoology devotees consciously position themselves in defiance of mainstream science" and that:

"The psychological significance of cryptozoology in the modern world [...] serves to channel guilt over the decimation of species and destruction of the natural habitat; to recapture a sense of mysticism and danger in a world now perceived as fully charted and over-explored; and to articulate resentment of and defiance against a scientific community perceived as monopolizing the pool of culturally acceptable beliefs."

In a paper published in 2013, Dendle refers to cryptozoologists as "contemporary monster hunters" that "keep alive a sense of wonder in a world that has been very thoroughly charted, mapped, and tracked, and that is largely available for scrutiny on Google Earth and satellite imaging" and that "on the whole the devotion of substantial resources for this pursuit betrays a lack of awareness of the basis for scholarly consensus (largely ignoring, for instance, evidence of evolutionary biology and the fossil record)."

Historian Mike Dash suggests that thousands of unknown animals, mostly invertebrates, are waiting to be discovered by scientists. However, cryptozoologists are not interested in researching and cataloging newly discovered species of ants or beetles. Instead, they focus on finding more elusive creatures whose existence has proven challenging to confirm despite decades of research.

Paleontologist George Gaylord Simpson (1984) lists cryptozoology among examples of human gullibility, along with creationism:

Humans are the most inventive, deceptive, and susceptible of all animals. Only those characteristics can explain the belief of some humans in creationism, in the arrival of UFOs with extraterrestrial beings, or some aspects of cryptozoology. [...] In several respects, the discussion and practice of cryptozoology has sometimes, although not invariably, demonstrated deception and gullibility. An example merits the old Latin saying, 'I believe because it is incredible.' However, Tertullian, its author, applied it in a way more applicable to the present-day creationists.

Paleontologist Donald Prothero (2007) cites cryptozoology as an example of pseudoscience and categorizes it, along with Holocaust denial and UFO abductions claims, as aspects of American culture that are "clearly baloney."

In *Scientifical Americans: The Culture of Amateur Paranormal Researchers* (2017), Hill surveys the field and discusses aspects of the subculture, noting internal attempts at creating more scientific approaches, the involvement of Young Earth creationists, and the prevalence of hoaxes. She concludes that many cryptozoologists are "passionate and sincere in their belief that mystery animals exist.

As such, they give deference to every report of a sighting, often without critical questioning. As with the ghost seekers, cryptozoologists are convinced that they will be the ones to solve

the mystery and make history. With the lure of mystery and money undermining diligent and ethical research, the field of cryptozoology has serious credibility problems."