

Some Questions About The Sasquatch ¹

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During the 1920s the term 'sasquatch', an anglicization of a Coast Salish Indian word, was introduced to non-Indians across Canada and in the United States as the name of a huge, hairy, human-looking creature said to live in the Coast Mountains of British Columbia, where Indians occasionally encountered it. The writer who introduced the word was J. W. Burns, long a school teacher at the Chehalis Indian Reserve on the Harrison River west of the resort settlement of Harrison Hot Springs. The Harrison River flows out of Harrison Lake, which lies between high, wild mountain ranges and into the Fraser River just below the town of Agassiz and about sixty miles above its mouth near the city of Vancouver. The sasquatch image was adopted by Harrison Hot Springs as a advertising device and for a while there were local celebrations called 'Sasquatch Days'. Local interest then seems to have died down until 1957., when the resort town decided to stage a 'sasquatch hunt' as its centennial project for the B. C. centennial of 1958. At this point John Green, editor of the Agassiz weekly newspaper, entered the picture. Green says (1968:1-3) that he had regarded the whole business as a joke until the new publicity and search for newsworthy material uncovered earlier reports of encounters with the sasquatch and encouraged people who had before been reluctant to discuss their experiences to come out with them. Green then began collecting accounts of sightings and investigating tracks.

Meanwhile, reports of Yeti in Asia, 'apes' around Mount St. Helens in Washington, Bigfoot in northwestern California, and other such phenomena were in the news. In 1961 a popular writer on animals, Ivan Sanderson, published Abominable Snowman: Legend Come to Life, The Story of Sub-Humans on Five Continents from the Early Ice Age until Today a long, rambling book arguing that several non-human Hominids survive in mountain forests in both Eastern and Western Hemispheres. Among them is the Sasquatch.

Back at Agassiz in the Fraser Valley, John Green has published three reports on his growing files-- On the Track of the Sasquatch (1968), The Year of the Sasquatch (1970), and The Sasquatch File (1973). The 1973 report shows that sightings and tracks have been reported from all over North America but most frequently from British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and northwestern California, and with increasing frequency in the last few years. Also in 1973, Rene Dahinden, a sasquatch seeker of some twenty years' experience, collaborated with a journalist named Don Hunter on another history of the search, mainly in B. C., called simply Sasquatch. Like Green, Hunter and Dahinden believe that something is really there.

But is there really? To folklorists this may sound like a silly question. Bacil F. Kirtley may have spoked for folklorists generally in a paper, 'Unknown Hominids and New World Legends', in Western Folklore in 1964, when he showed that beliefs about and attributes ascribed to alleged hominids in Latin America can be found in Stith Thompson's Motif-Index and that these beings are believed to exist on Oceanic islands with no (other) mammalian fauna-- hardly the mountain

refuge areas of Sanderson's theory-- and concluded that the unknown hominids are simply myths. The witnesses are not lying, simply allowing their memories to translate baffling or disturbing experiences into a language provided by the heritage of their folklore (Kirtley 1964:87-89, my paraphrasing).

But does that explain the footprints? In recent years, an archeologist, Don Abbott (1969), a physical anthropologist, Grover Krantz (1971, 1972a, 1972b), and a primatologist, John Napier (1972), have asserted that this physical evidence cannot be explained away. Krantz is especially resolute in this stance. The foot and hand prints are too numerous, in too many remote and inaccessible places, and too true to what the prints of a giant hominid ought to look like to be a hoax. Creating them as a hoax, says Krantz, is beyond the technical skill, anatomical knowledge, and capacity for cooperation and secrecy of any imaginable hoaxers. It is easier to believe that they are real (Krantz 1972:103).

Partly, I believe, as a result of Krantz's work, another anthropologist, Roderick Sprague, who edits Northwest Anthropological Research Notes (NARN), decided to respond to a charge made by John Green. Green asserted that we cultural anthropologists have been ignoring-- and so in effect concealing-- data on the sasquatch because we have failed to recognize that our Indian informants have been talking about real rather than mythical (i.e., unreal) animals. In an editorial Sprague (1970) invited papers presenting and/or analyzing ethnographic, folkloristic, and linguistic data relevant to the sasquatch and presenting models for the study of sasquatch phenomena. So far, NARN has

published papers by Bruce Rigsby and me.

Rigsby (1971) presents linguistic data from the southern Plateau (Sahaptin and Molale terms) and from the northern Northwest Coast (Kwakiutlan, Bella Coola, and Tsimshian terms) indicating the borrowing of terms or coining of loan translations across language family boundaries. (See handout.)

My paper (Suttles 1972) presents various data from the Coast Salish peoples of southwestern British Columbia and western Washington. It was, among other things, an attempt to respond to Green's view of the reality of the sasquatch to the Indians. My review of the evidence for Coast Salish beliefs in human-looking beings living in the forests and mountains around them showed that most Coast Salish peoples acknowledge the existence of several such creatures, ranging in size from dwarves to giants and varying considerably in resemblance to humanity. Of all these creatures, only the Basket Ogress appears in narratives that the Coast Salish would classify as 'myths'. The evidence for belief in the others-- the tree-fellers, earth-dwelling dwarves, wild men, and sasquatch-like mountain giants-- consists mainly of brief statements describing the creatures and narratives telling of encounters with them. These statements and narratives do not seem different in kind from statements and narratives about other creatures the Coast Salish know about, including those well known to Western zoologists, like beavers and grizzlies, and others unknown to them, like giant two-headed serpents and thunderbirds. Thus the being whose native name got anglicized 'sasquatch' exists less in native mythology than in native zoology, though in a zoology that includes creatures we Europeans

would call 'mythical' or 'supernatural'. Nor does the appearance of the Basket Ogress in 'myths' imply that she or her kind are unreal, any more than the appearance of Mink or Raven in 'myths' precludes the existence of minks or ravens in the real world. So if we have (as Green suggests we have) put the sasquatch into a category 'mythical (i.e., unreal) being', we have erred (and he is right). But if on that basis we must seriously consider the possibility that the sasquatch is real, then to be consistent we must also consider that possibility for the tree-striker, the two-headed serpent, and the thunderbird. Of course only Indians have reported encounters with tree-strikers, two-headed serpents, and thunderbirds, while both Indians and non-Indians have reported encounters with the sasquatch. But using that as an argument for its reality would be begging the question.

It also appeared from my survey that there was not merely 'a sasquatch' but there are several names (see handout) for sasquatch-like creatures that are given a number of attributes some of which contradict each other and are unlike the attributes ascribed to the sasquatch by non-Indians. For this reason I concluded that the cultural evidence did not add up to a case for the existence of a real animal.

Meanwhile people continue to see what they think are sasquatches and to find the tracks of what they think are sasquatches. And I am not utterly convinced that there cannot be an unknown animal. Moreover I think we do have an obligation to make our disciplines relevant to things that many good people want to know about. So I propose to devote the remainder of this paper to what might be the kind of model,

not for a complete study of sasquatch phenomena, but for answering the question: Do the ethnographic, folkloristic, and linguistic data that have been elicited from the native peoples strengthen, weaken, or have any bearing on the case for a giant hominid living in the forests and mountains of the Northwest?

I suggest we start by postulating what good cultural (ethnographic, folkloristic, and linguistic) evidence for the existence of any animal would consist of and then try to discover whether the cultural data on what sounds like our hypothetical animal fit the model. As a model I offer the following:

A real animal that lives over a fairly wide area and has lived there for as long as the human inhabitants have lived there ought to be:

1. described by the human inhabitants fairly consistently throughout its range (that is, they should all know roughly the same kinds of things about it),
2. called by terms that are old in the languages of the area, and
3. integrated into the mythologies, rituals, or whatever symbolic systems exist in the area.

We must also start by giving our hypothetical animal a minimal description. In this case we are talking about a giant forest/mountain-dwelling hominid and so we might describe it minimally as forest- and/or mountain-dwelling, larger than human in size, human in form, but not human in behavior. Then we must establish the fact that the native peoples of our area do indeed acknowledge the existence of

something answering to that minimal description. I think it is safe to say that the Coast Salish do and that the peoples Rigsby elicited names from do. I am not sure how far beyond this area people do so I shall stay within this area.

Now let's look at what the data ought to be like and how good the fit is.

1. Consistent descriptions I must admit that I am merely assuming it to be true that, for example, descriptions of the black bear, wolf, cougar, etc., elicited over the Coast Salish area would be fairly consistent. Unfortunately not enough work has been done on the ethnozoology of the area to test the assumption, but I see it as a reasonable one.

How consistent are the Coast Salish descriptions of the creatures that fit the minimal description of the hypothetical hominid? As I have already indicated, they are not very consistent. Nocturnal habits are mentioned most often and where not mentioned it could be an accidental omission. Hair covering the body is not consistently mentioned and some descriptions seem to imply a more human covering. About half the descriptions mention the habit of stealing food, less than half the stealing of women and children. In some they speak but in others they cannot speak but whistle. They may travel through water or avoid water. In one area they have unbending legs that allow them to run downhill only. In another they have spikes on their toes for kicking people. Some of them seem to have the rudiments of culture, others do not.

The Kwakiutl $b\acute{a}k^{w}\acute{a}s$ (woodman), as described by Boas in Kwakiutl Culture as Reflected in Mythology (Boas 1935:146), seems to be a rather different sort of creature again. He is nocturnal but travels by canoe, is cold as ice, and takes away drowned people. Boas likens him to the land-otter spirits of the northern peoples. The Kwakiutl $dz\acute{o}noq^{w}a$ might make a somewhat better candidate for giant hominid status. This creature is described (Boas 1935:144-46, 178) as a race of beings who live inland or on mountains, are twice the size of a man, with hairy hands, wide but deep-set eyes, black bodies, and peculiarities of speech. The female has large, hanging breasts; she comes to villages and steals fish and children; she is the Basket Ogress of the Kwakiutl versions of stories told as far south as the Chinook. But unlike the Salish Basket Ogress, who appears only in stories, the Kwakiutl $dz\acute{o}noq^{w}a$ has been encountered in historic times.

The descriptions of the more northerly candidates are not detailed enough for comparison.

2. Old Terms Generally, unanalysable terms, unless they can be identified as loan words, are presumed to be older in a language than terms that can be easily analysed (see Sapir 1916 for the classic discussion). But clearer proof of age would be the presence of cognates in related languages, especially if a form could be reconstructed in the proto-language of the family or of its branch within the area.

For known ('real') animals in the Coast Salish area we are a little better off in what we have of their names than in what we have of descriptive data. Most of the larger mammals are known by terms that appear in cognate sets within the Salishan family. (I have

been collecting and tabulating these for some time.) 'Cougar' is a good example of the kind of distributions we find. In at least two languages this animal is called by a term that can be easily analysed as 'long-tail', probably a recently coined word and possibly coined in order to replace an earlier word or words that had become taboo. But in several widely separated languages, Coast and Interior, the animal is called by a short, unanalysable word and these can be identified as cognates. From this cognate set we may be able to reconstruct a Proto-Salish word for 'cougar', which would imply that the speakers of Proto-Salish knew the animal. (No such Proto-Salish words have yet been reconstructed, since comparative work on the Salishan languages has not progressed that far.) Cognates for 'deer' occur in two rather widely separated Coast Salish languages, evidently reflexes of some old word. 'Black bear' occurs in two sets of cognates distributed in leap-frog fashion in the Coast area, both sets evidently going back to old words. 'Wolf' and 'grizzly', however, seem to have a different pattern of distribution. Present data suggest that these two animals are each called by compound terms (not yet but probably eventually analysable) all of local distribution. It may not be possible to reconstruct Proto-Salish forms for 'wolf' and 'grizzly'; possibly taboos have eliminated all earlier terms.²

The native names for sasquatch-like beings appear on the handout. In the Coast Salish area there are several words, each appearing over a contiguous area, and most if not all phonologically complex enough to be compounds though not yet analysable. This situation looks more like that for 'wolf' and 'grizzly' than like that for most other mammals.

One could therefore argue that our hypothetical hominid is simply so terrifying that, as with wolves and grizzlies, its original name has been everywhere replaced by what were originally euphemisms. But all that one can really say, at this time, is that the linguistic data, like the descriptive data, do not (yet?) support the case for a 'real' animal long known to the Salishan-speaking peoples.³

Outside the Salish area, as Riggsby pointed out, there is clear evidence of the borrowing of terms. To the north, we can even identify donor and receiver. The Kwakiutl term $bək^wəs$ is clearly identifiable as Kwakiutl in origin, being compounded of the stem $bək^w-$ man and the suffix $-ʷəs$ -woods, -ground (which glottalizes the preceding consonant). The term may be equally at home in the other Kwakiutlan languages, Heiltsuk and Haisla. But it is clearly a loan in Bella Coola. The Coast Tsimshian and Nass-Gitksan terms are phrases that seem to be loan translations from Kwakiutl or Kwakiutlan. All of this suggests the recent spread of knowledge of the 'woodman' or 'ape'.⁴

3. Integration into Symbolic Systems This is certainly the most difficult kind of material to use in testing the reality of a hypothetical animal. Clearly some 'real' animals and some 'unreal' animals play very important roles in myth and art, as guardian spirits, crests, etc. The fact that an animal does play an important role in these systems cannot be taken as evidence that it really exists, witness the two-headed serpent and the thunderbird. But do all animals real to our zoologists that approach the size and power of our hypothetical hominid play important roles in these systems? Bears and wolves may. But do

cougars? If cougars do not and can still be real, can the sasquatch also fail to play an important role and still be real? Is there anything about the distribution of the role played by an unreal animal that differs from that of a real animal?

Obviously I am asking more questions than I can answer. I can conclude only in the academic tradition of making a virtue of this fact of life. The approach I am suggesting indicates the need for not only the collection of accounts of encounters with sasquatch-like beings, but also of recording names in the native languages and discovering other associations. It also suggest another reason why we need more ethnographic, folkloristic, and linguistic data on the rest of the environment—real or imaginary. ⁵

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Notes

1. This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in Portland, Oregon, 1 November 1974.

The first six pages are almost exactly as read; the remainder has been reworked slightly.

2. When more data have been assembled more sense can be made out of them through the application of the method used by Dyen and Aberle in Lexical Reconstruction (1974), I am sure.

3. I am indebted to Dale Kinkade for Upper Chehalis terms and discussion of them.

4. To the south on the coast we have what may be evidence for the diffusion of the term without much of the concept. In Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest, Ellen Clark (1953:124-26) gives a story said to have been told on the Oregon Coast by a "Coquille" woman (Miluk Coos or Upper Coquille Athapaskan?), which features "Seatco, evil spirit of the ocean" and a human heroine with a dog named "Komax". The source of both of these names is probably Chinook Jargon. A Jargon dictionary published in Portland (Gill 1933:67) gives an entry "Se-at'-co (Ch) [Chehalis] A goblin or nocturnal demon, greatly feared by the Coast Indians.". So far as I know this is the only Chinook Jargon dictionary that gives this word as a Jargon word. It must go back to the term we find in Clallam, Puget, Twana, Quinault, and Upper Chehalis. The Jargon word for 'dog' is given by Hale (1890:44) as "Kamooks". I say this may be evidence for the diffusion of the term because I do not believe we can be sure that the Indian narrator used the term herself; it is possible that Clark introduced both names into the story. An accurate phonetic transcription of the term could have established its status as a genuine

native term.

5. There are two very important aspects to the whole problem of Sasquatch Folklore— What are the non-Indian images of the Sasquatch and what are their sources? And what influence have non-Indian images had on recent Indian images? I suspect that it has not been possible for some time to elicit descriptions of sasquatch-like beings from Indians free from the influence of non-Indian beliefs.

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