

# Cryptozoology

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**Cryptozoology** is a pseudoscience and subculture that aims to prove the existence of entities from the folklore record, such as Bigfoot, the chupacabra, or Mokele-mbembe. Cryptozoologists refer to these entities as cryptids, a term coined by the subculture. Because it does not follow the scientific method, cryptozoology is considered a pseudoscience by the academic world: it is neither a branch of zoology nor folkloristics. It was originally founded in the 1950s by zoologists Bernard Heuvelmans and Ivan T. Sanderson.

Scholars have noted that the pseudoscience rejected mainstream approaches from an early date, and that adherents often express hostility to mainstream science. Scholars have studied cryptozoologists and their influence (including the pseudoscience's association with young Earth creationism), noted parallels in cryptozoology and other pseudosciences such as ghost hunting and ufology, and highlighted uncritical media propagation of cryptozoologist claims.

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## Terminology, history, and approach

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As a field, cryptozoology originates from the works of Bernard Heuvelmans, a Belgian zoologist, and Ivan T. Sanderson, a Scottish zoologist. Notably, Heuvelmans published *On the Track of Unknown Animals* (French *Sur la Piste des Bêtes Ignorées*) in 1955, a landmark work among cryptozoologists that was followed by numerous other like works. Similarly, Sanderson published a series of books that assisted in developing hallmarks of cryptozoology, including *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life* (1961).<sup>[1]</sup>

The term *cryptozoology* dates from 1959 or before – Heuvelmans attributes the coinage of the term *cryptozoology* ('the study of hidden animals') to Sanderson.<sup>[1][2]</sup> Patterned after *cryptozoology*, the term *cryptid* was coined in 1983 by cryptozoologist J. E. Wall in the summer issue of the International Society of Cryptozoology newsletter.<sup>[3]</sup> 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 may be) subjects of cryptozoological investigation."<sup>[4]</sup> 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".<sup>[5]</sup> While used by most cryptozoologists, the term *cryptid* is not used by academic zoologists.<sup>[6]</sup> 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 folklore record, yet with a "new, more scientific-sounding name: cryptids".<sup>[7]</sup>

While biologists regularly identify new species, cryptozoologists often focus on creatures from the folklore record. Most famously, these include the Loch Ness Monster, Bigfoot, the chupacabra, as well as other "imposing beasts that could be labeled as monsters". In their search for these entities, cryptozoologists may employ devices such as motion-sensitive cameras, night-vision equipment, and audio-recording equipment. While there have been attempts to codify cryptozoological approaches, unlike biologists, zoologists, botanists, and other academic disciplines, however, "there are no accepted, uniform, or successful methods for pursuing cryptids".<sup>[1]</sup> Some scholars have identified precursors to modern cryptozoology in certain medieval approaches to the folklore record, and the psychology behind the cryptozoology approach has been the subject of academic study.<sup>[1]</sup>

Few cryptozoologists have a formal science education, and fewer still have a science background directly relevant to cryptozoology. Adherents often misrepresent the academic backgrounds of cryptozoologists. According to writer Daniel Loxton and paleontologist Donald Prothero, "Cryptozoologists have often promoted 'Professor Roy Mackal, PhD.' as one of their leading figures and one of the few with a legitimate doctorate in biology. What is rarely mentioned, however, is that he had no training that would qualify him to undertake competent research on exotic animals. This raises the specter of 'credential mongering', by which an individual or organization feints a person's graduate degree as proof of expertise, even though his or her training is not specifically relevant to the field under consideration." Besides Heuvalmans, Sanderson, and Mackal, other notable cryptozoologists with academic backgrounds include Grover Krantz, Karl Shuker, and Richard Greenwell.<sup>[8]</sup>

Historically, notable cryptozoologists have often identified instances featuring "irrefutable evidence" (such as Sanderson and Krantz), only for the evidence to be revealed as the product of a hoax. This may occur during a closer examination by experts or upon confession of the hoaxer.<sup>[9]</sup>

## 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 with a goal of finding a living dinosaur that they think would invalidate evolution."<sup>[10]</sup> Anthropologist Jeb J. Card says that "Creationists have embraced cryptozoology and some cryptozoological expeditions are funded by and conducted by creationists hoping to disprove evolution."<sup>[11]</sup> In a 2013 interview, paleontologist Donald Prothero notes an uptick in creationist cryptozoologists. He observes that "[p]eople who actively search for Loch Ness monsters or Mokele Mbembe do it entirely as creationist ministers. They think that if they found a dinosaur in the Congo it would overturn all of evolution. It wouldn't. It would just be a late-occurring dinosaur, but that's their mistaken notion of evolution."<sup>[12]</sup>

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".<sup>[13]</sup>

## Lack of critical media coverage

Media outlets have often uncritically disseminated information from cryptozoologist sources, including newspapers that repeat false claims made by cryptozoologists or television shows that feature cryptozoologists as monster hunters (such as the popular and purportedly nonfiction American television show *MonsterQuest*, which aired from 2007-2010). Media coverage of purported "cryptids" often fails to provide more likely explanations, further propagating claims made by cryptozoologists.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Reception and pseudoscience

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The 2003 discovery of the fossil remains of *Homo floresiensis* was cited by paleontologist Henry Gee, a senior editor at the journal *Nature*, as possible evidence that "in geological terms, makes it more likely that stories of other mythical, human-like creatures such as yetis are founded on grains of truth." "Cryptozoology," Gee says, "can come in from the cold."<sup>[15]</sup>

However, cryptozoology is widely criticised for an array of reasons and is rejected by the academic world. There is a broad consensus from academics that cryptozoology is a pseudoscience.<sup>[16][17][18][19]</sup> The field is regularly criticized for reliance on anecdotal information<sup>[20]</sup> and because in the course of investigating animals that most scientists believe are unlikely to have existed, cryptozoologists do not follow the scientific method.<sup>[21]</sup> Hill notes that "there is no academic course of study in cryptozoology or no university degree program that will bestow the title 'cryptozoologist'."<sup>[10]</sup>

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 of 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.<sup>[22]</sup>

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 finds parallels with cryptozoology and other pseudosciences, such as ghost hunting and ufology, and compares the approach of cryptozoologists to colonial big-game hunters, and to 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 ...".<sup>[23]</sup>

In a 2011 foreword for *The American Biology Teacher*, then 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 science or even science at all. It is monster hunting."<sup>[24]</sup> 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".<sup>[25]</sup>

In a 1992 issue of *Folklore*, folklorist Véronique Champion-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."<sup>[26]</sup>

Champion-Vincent says that "four currents can be distinguished in the study of mysterious animal appearances": "Fortean" ("compiler[s] of anomalies" such as via publications like the *Fortean Times*), "occultists" (which she describes as related to "Fortean"), "folklorists", and "cryptozoologists". Regarding cryptozoologists, Champion-Vincent says that "this movement seems to deserve the appellation of parascience, 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".<sup>[26]</sup>

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".<sup>[27]</sup>

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 monopolising the pool of culturally acceptable beliefs.<sup>[28]</sup>

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 close 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)."<sup>[29]</sup>

According to historian Mike Dash, few scientists doubt there are thousands of unknown animals, particularly invertebrates, awaiting discovery; however, cryptozoologists are largely uninterested in researching and cataloging newly discovered species of ants or beetles, instead focusing their efforts towards "more elusive" creatures that have often defied decades of work aimed at confirming their existence.<sup>[21]</sup>

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

Humans are the most inventive, deceptive, and gullible of all animals. Only those characteristics can explain the belief of some humans in creationism, in the arrival of UFOs with extraterrestrial beings, or in some aspects of cryptozoology. ... In several respects the discussion and practice of cryptozoology sometimes, although not invariably, has demonstrated both deception and gullibility. An example seems to merit the old Latin saying 'I believe because it is incredible,' although Tertullian, its author, applied it in a way more applicable to the present day creationists.<sup>[30]</sup>

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".<sup>[31]</sup>

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 and the involvement of Young Earth creationists and a 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."<sup>[32]</sup>

## Organizations

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There have been several organizations, of varying types, dedicated or related to cryptozoology. These include:

- Centre for Fortean Zoology - a non-profit organisation based in the United Kingdom
- International Fortean Organization - a network of professional Fortean researchers and writers based in the United States
- International Society of Cryptozoology - an American organisation that existed from 1982 to 1998
- Kosmopoisk - a Russian organisation whose interests include cryptozoology and Ufology

## See also

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- List of cryptozoologists, a list of notable cryptozoologists
- List of cryptids, a list of cryptids notable within cryptozoology
- Fearsome critters, fabulous beasts that were said to inhabit the timberlands of North America

## Notes and citations

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1. Regal (2011a:326-329).
2. Additionally, see discussion at "cryptozoology, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, September 2016. Web. 25 October 2016.
3. Regal (2011b:197-198).
4. Wall, J. E. (1983:10): "The Spring, 1983, issue featured an interview with Paul LeBlond and Forrest Wood, in which it was 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. As far as I know, this would be an entirely new word, describing those creatures which are (or may be) subjects of cryptozoological investigation."
5. "cryptid, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, September 2016. Web. 25 October 2016.
6. Paxton (2011:7-20).
7. Lack & Rousseau (2016:153, cf. p. 272).
8. Loxton & Prothero (2013:304-305).
9. Radford (2014:161-170).
10. Hill (2017:66).
11. Card (2016:32).
12. Shea (2013).
13. Mullis (2019:249).
14. Lack (2016:170, cf. 159-160).
15. Gee (2004).
16. Lee (2000:119).
17. Roesch & Moore (2002:71-78): "Pointing to this rampant speculation and ignorance of established scientific theories in cryptozoology, as well as the field's poor record of success and its reliance on unsystematic, anecdotal evidence, many scientists and skeptics classify cryptozoology as a pseudoscience."
18. Church (2009:251-252): "Cryptozoology has acquired a bad reputation as a pseudoscience... Until detailed, methodical research becomes standard practice among cryptozoologists, the field will remain disrespected by more traditional biologists and zoologists."
19. Lack & Rosseau (2016:153-174): "Cryptids are the focus of study in cryptozoology, a field most scientists label as pseudoscientific."
20. Shermer (2003:27).
21. Dash (2000).
22. Card (2016:23-32).
23. Card (2016:24-25).
24. Ward (2011:440).
25. Nagel (2009:50).
26. Champion-Vincent (1992:160–183).
27. Watts (2007: 271).

28. Dendle (2006:190-206).
29. Dendle (2013:439).
30. Simpson (1984:1-19).
31. Prothero (2007:13-15).
32. Hill (2017:56-69).

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## External links

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