The Anthropology of Bigfoot

By Robert Muckle

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All the purported evidence is circumstantial, which makes it difficult for anthropologists to accept its existence. No Bigfoot body has been produced for analysis. While many supporters accept the evidence of sightings, footprints and more, most anthropologists interested in Bigfoot would like physical evidence of a Bigfoot body that can then be tested or compared to humans and other animals. This evidence could come from dead or alive specimens and may include bones, teeth, or other body parts that have DNA. To date, no such evidence has been produced.

Besides the lack of physical evidence, there are other reasons why anthropologists tend to not accept the likelihood that Bigfoot really exists. One is that the existence of a large non-human primate is not supported by the fossil record of primates in North America. Although there have been some small creatures classified as primates that date to the 50-60 million yrs ago range, there is no evidence to support the evolution of any large primate in Canada or the United States over the past 50 million years. Monkeys have evolved in Central and South America for at least 30 million years, but nothing ape-like has been documented.

Another reason is that the purported evidence of Bigfoot behavior is not supported by studies of primate behavior and ecology, especially of the larger primates (humans and apes). There are a few nocturnal primates, but this is not consistent with large monkeys, apes, or humans. Many reports suggest Bigfoot captures and eats fairly large animals, such as deer, but besides humans, primates rarely eat meat. In those instances where non-human primates do eat meat, such as with chimpanzees, they typically hunt animals much smaller than themselves, and often hunt cooperatively. Most reports of Bigfoot suggest they are solitary. This also does not fit our understanding of primate behavior. Most primates are very social.

Another reason that many anthropologists remain skeptical is that stories of monsters, often human-like, are very common in cultures around the world. The fact that Bigfoot-like animals...
appear in native mythology and sculpture in stone and wood resembling apes have been discovered in native archaeological sites is not enough for anthropologists to accept Bigfoot exists.

For many supporters of Bigfoot, its ancestry lies in Asia in the form of Gigantopithecus. Known only from teeth and jaw bones, Gigantopithecus was the largest primate that has ever lived, spanning the time period from at least one million years ago to perhaps as recently as 100,000 years ago. Some supporters reason that Gigantopithecus migrated to North America across the North Pacific region when sea levels were lower and the continents of Asia and North America were connected by a land bridge around the present-day Bering Strait. While the teeth and jaw bones do suggest a primate the size of that reported for Bigfoot, anthropologists know little else about the anatomy of Gigantopithecus. Anthropologists have no idea, for example, if it was bipedal. Analysis of food particles found in Gigantopithecus teeth suggest it was subsisting primarily on bamboo, which is quite unlike the diet reported for Bigfoot.

Some Bigfoot supporters have suggested that no physical specimens have been found because they may bury their dead. What these supporters clearly fail to realize, however, is that if Bigfoot did bury their dead, it would increase the chances of finding skeletal evidence. Burial almost always leads to better preservation and burial sites can often be detected by archaeologists.

Although most anthropologists tend to be extremely skeptical of the purported evidence of Bigfoot, it doesn’t mean that anthropologists do not leave the possibility open that Bigfoot may exist. The current evidence just doesn’t support it. There is probably no segment of society that would be more excited than anthropologists if a Bigfoot, alive or dead, is discovered in North America. But anthropologists aren’t holding their breath waiting for this to happen. It would also pose an interesting issue for biological classification. If the evidence reported is validated, then there would really be no reason to not classify Bigfoot as belonging to the same biological family as humans, distinct from apes. As it currently stands, the distinguishing characteristic separating humans from apes is that humans habitually walk upright, and apes don’t.

Resources for Bigfoot Studies

The Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization is comprised of Bigfoot believers and maintains a web site documenting reports and providing links to film, sound recordings, and other resources. The web address is http://www.bfro.net/

Skeptical Inquirer is the official journal of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. It has published many articles debunking evidence of Bigfoot, many of which can be accessed on-line. The web site is www.csicop.org. Typing “Bigfoot” in the search box will provide links to many of the articles.

Few reports or discussion on Bigfoot appear in scholarly sources. One interesting article recently appeared in Annals of Science (Volume 66, no. 1, January, 2009, pp 83–102). The article, called “Entering Dubious Realms: Grover Krantz, Science, and Sasquatch” is interesting for (i) providing more than 100 footnotes, many of which include references to scholarly and non-scholarly media on Bigfoot, and (ii) for showing what happens when a professional scientist attempts to legitimize research largely undertaken by amateurs (ie. becoming marginalized by the academic community and receiving negative reactions from the amateurs).

Although it was published 30 years ago, Manlike Monsters on Trial: Early Records and Modern Evidence, edited by Marjorie Halpin and Michael M. Ames (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1980) remains a useful resource for Bigfoot studies. It includes more than 20 chapters authored by physical scientists, anthropologists, and other social scientists. Contributions focus on exploring the cultural role that notions of Bigfoot and other monsters have in society and investigations of the purported Bigfoot evidence.