

The Sasquatch: An Unwelcome and Premature Zoological Discovery?

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Abstract—Over 3000 North American reports of a large hair-covered bipedal animal resembling an upright gorilla have been recorded and reviewed. More importantly, over 100 different tracks attributed to such an animal have been cast and archived. At the same time, wildlife biologists and other zoologists continue to ignore this evidence and to reject papers on the subject submitted for presentation at professional conferences. This attitude of dismissal results from the ridicule and discredit heaped on the subject in the popular media coupled with the perceived unlikelihood of a large non-human primate occurring in North America. The discovery of the sasquatch may be ‘premature’ in at least three ways: the animal resembles a *bipedal* ape, an anomaly in a mammal group that is perceived to be exclusively quadrupedal; its tracks resemble large versions of human tracks; and it occurs on the North American continent where no other non-human primates are known to occur. The possibility of such an animal existing anywhere—but especially in North America—apparently appears so preposterous as to be an affront to scientists. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that the sasquatch is an upright North American great ape remains the best explanation of the available evidence.

Keywords: Sasquatch—discovery—zoological—premature

Introduction

In 1958 a northern California road construction crew reported the overnight appearance of a number of large footprints resembling those of a giant human. Subsequent newspaper coverage included a photograph of a highway foreman holding a plaster cast of one of the 16-inch-long footprints. ‘Bigfoot’ was first used in print as the nickname for the creature whose tracks, although shaped like those of a human, were superhuman in size. For most North Americans, this marked the beginning of an ongoing controversy regarding the possible existence of a large humanlike primate on this continent.¹

Historical Accounts: Sasquatch Reports or Merely Myths?

Although not widely known, accounts of a giant human-shaped creature, and of the tracks associated with it, already existed in historical and anthropological literature. The historical accounts are of interest because they provide early

examples of what are now regarded as sasquatch reports. Equally interesting are the expressions of doubt which continue to be associated with such reports today.

For example, as early as 1790, a Hudson's Bay Company trader commented on the belief of the North Saskatchewan River Indians in a giant humanlike creature known to them as the *windigo*. He remarked that "they frequently persuade themselves that they see his track in the moss or snow . . ." (Umfreville, 1790).

Both the aboriginal belief in such creatures and the non-native disbelief are recorded in another account, that of a Methodist missionary to the Cree and Salteaux Indians of Lake Winnipeg in the province of Manitoba. In this account, Young (1893), wrote that:

Among the many errors and superstitions into which they have fallen is the belief in the existence of . . . gigantic creatures half satanic and half human, whom they represent as being of great size. . . . We found the Saulteux Indians especially living in dread of these imaginary monsters.

Expressions of Ambivalence and Dismissal Regarding the Sasquatch as a Real Animal

Folklorist Carole Henderson interprets such 'monsters' as metaphorical in nature. While apparently agreeing with these authors in thinking that they are not real, Henderson (1976) nevertheless expresses some ambivalence:

The beasts represent the mystery, strength, and untamed nature of large parts of the Canadian west, especially British Columbia. . . . As this area moves fully into the twentieth century, becomes thoroughly 'civilized' and populated, the monsters may vanish. Then again, they may persist because they may really be there. . . .

After referring to accounts of common wildlife species recorded by Indians, she points out that:

Other animals, unknown to Europeans, have typically, though perhaps unjustifiably, been classified as mythical supernatural beings. It cannot be proven that the Indians themselves saw these creatures as mythical, but anthropologists and other scholars have generally considered them such. . . .

Marjorie Halpin, former director of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, is one example. Halpin notes that "... hallucinatory experiences" are "experiences accepted as real by the experiencer but not shared with others." She concludes that "as long as Sasquatch is a personal rather than a collectively-sanctioned experience it will remain hallucinatory as officially defined by Western culture" (Halpin, 1980: 211).

Referring to the apelike appearance of the sasquatch she writes that: "since . . . there is no category in Western culture for creatures who mediate the animal-human realms, scientists have no category for the Sasquatch to exist in" (Halpin, 1980: 226). This idea that sasquatches are creatures who "mediate the animal-human realms" is a commonly-held view among cultural anthropologists. For example, Robert A. Brightman, professor of anthropology at the University of

Wisconsin is quoted (Rath, 1985) as having studied reports of Bigfoot and as believing that these stories can be explained from a sociological standpoint:

Images like Bigfoot, images between humans and animals, seem to be common to people of all states of society. If it's not universal, it's close to universal. . . . [S]ociety may feel a need to separate itself from animals, so that we know we're different. Creatures that merge the characteristics of man and animal let us define ourselves more clearly. The closer the creature comes, the more specific we can make the rules for being human.

It is not surprising that cultural anthropologists espouse a view of the sasquatch as supernatural. Such a view is consistent with their background and experience with myths and legends in which some mythical creatures (such as the Thunderbird) do indeed appear to be supernatural. John Green (1968) explains that when the term 'sasquatch' was introduced to the public in the 1920s in the writing of J. W. Burns, Burns quoted Indian stories which included supernatural elements, thus stigmatizing the sasquatch as an Indian legend. Green believes that this was unfortunate because "scientists in particular are inclined to dismiss the subjects of Indian legends as purely imaginary" (Suttles, 1972). While this might explain why scientists have uncritically accepted the supernatural as an explanation for some of the sighting reports, it does not excuse zoologists and other scientists from bringing their knowledge and experience to bear on the well-documented track evidence.

Professor Ian McTaggart Cowan, former dean of science at University of British Columbia, has also been described as the "father of wildlife management in British Columbia." Regarding the sasquatch he once told a journalist: "People believe in these things because they like to believe in them, and it keeps on going because people like it. And why not? It's a charming story. My attitude is just show me, that's all" (Watts, 1994).²

Professor Cowan and other zoologists who dismiss the sasquatch as an zoological anomaly, and therefore unworthy of study, would find some support for their position in the comments of Thomas Kuhn, author of a classic work in the philosophy of science. Kuhn, who understood the problems associated with an apparent anomaly, wrote that: ". . . it is for the normal, not the extraordinary, practice of science that professionals are trained. . . . The scientist who pauses to examine every anomaly he notes will seldom get significant work done." Nevertheless, it is surprising that only a few scientists have risen to the challenge embodied in his further comment: "We have to ask what it is that makes an anomaly seem worth concerted scrutiny" (Kuhn, 1996).

Nature of the Evidence for the Existence of the Sasquatch

There are five components of the substantial body of evidence that makes the "sasquatch anomaly" worthy of scrutiny:

- (1) The database of eyewitness reports of huge, hair-covered, upright, human-shaped large mammals, or its tracks—now numbering over 3000 reports and distributed over a period of over 150 years.

- (2) The remarkable consistency of the physical descriptions of this creature, including anatomical details (as shown in Figure 1).
- (3) The sincerity, credibility, and reliability of eyewitnesses, some of whom are law officers and experienced outdoor workers such as fisheries officers, combined with the reluctance of these eyewitnesses to be recognized or credited for their report.
- (4) The similarity of these descriptions to an upright, bipedal version of a well-known (possibly related) animal, the gorilla. Sasquatches are consistently described as huge, hair-covered, human-shaped animals with a short, thick neck. They differ from upright bears primarily in having a flat face and shoulders which are typically prominent or squarish rather than tapered or sloping.
- (5) The expanding collection of over 100 different track casts catalogued and archived at Idaho State University by anatomy professor Jeffrey Meldrum and available for examination (Figure 2).

The Great Ape Hypothesis

Anthropologist Halpin is correct when she notes that “scientists have no category for the sasquatch to exist in” but only if we restrict ourselves to North American mammal field guides. When limited to current field guides, a bear standing upright is indeed the closest image to the sasquatch, since the opportunity to compare the appearance of an upright bear with that of a sasquatch, as illustrated in Figure 2, is not generally available. As a result, most wildlife biologists continue to insist on misidentified bears as the most likely explanation for sasquatch reports despite its unbearlike appearance. The continued absence of the sasquatch from current mammal field guides constitutes an authoritative statement against the existence of this species in North America.

Had zoologists acknowledged the poor match between bears and sasquatch descriptions and been willing to consult a *global* mammal field guide or mammal list, they likely would have been struck by the resemblance of eyewitness descriptions and drawings of the sasquatch to those of an upright gorilla. This similarity has been alluded to by many eyewitnesses who described the creature they observed as an ‘ape-man’, ‘man-beast’, ‘giant monkey’, or simply an ‘ape’. The connection was made as long ago as 1978 by journalist John Green both in the text and title of a book entitled *Sasquatch: The Apes among Us* (Green, 1978). Anthropologist Grover Krantz developed the concept further in his book entitled *Big Footprints* (Krantz, 1992).

Indeed the long arms, the body covering of dark hair, and the short thick neck attributed to the sasquatch are all physical features characteristic of the great apes of Africa and Asia: the gorilla, chimpanzee, bonobo, and orangutan. Of these consistently reported physical features, the long arms are especially noteworthy. One mammal field guide lists “arms longer than legs” as a field mark of

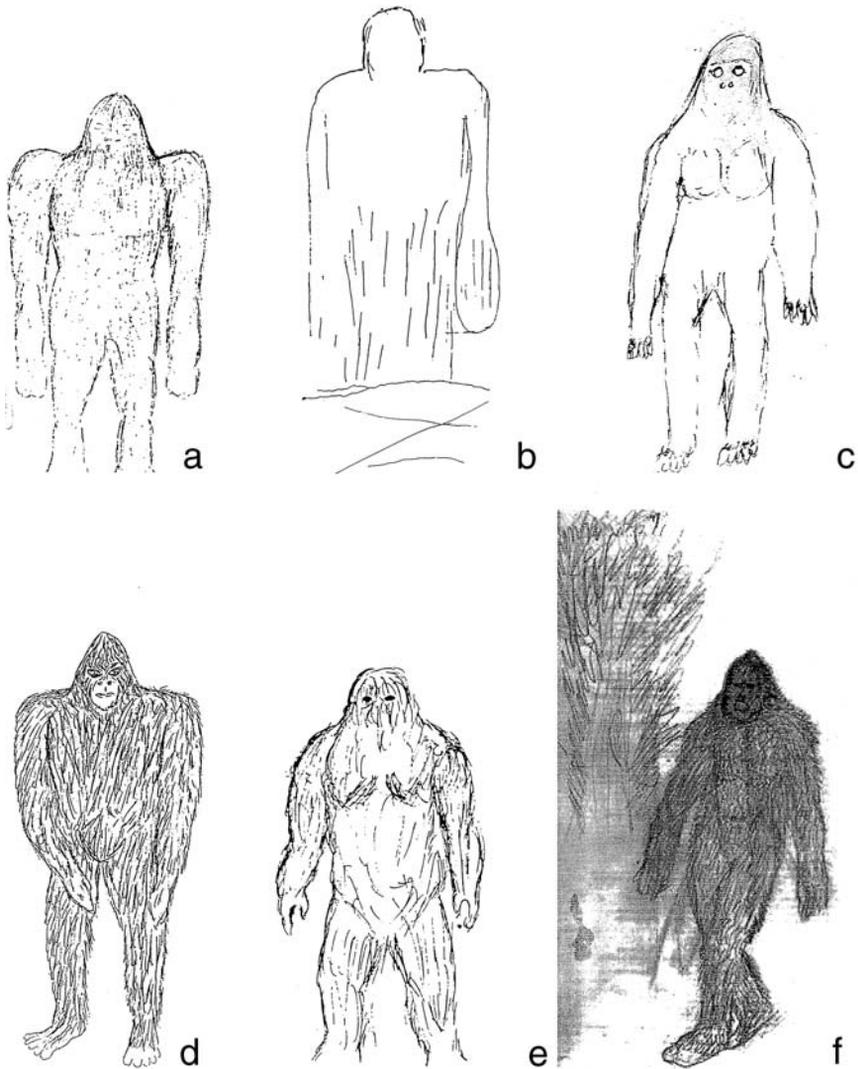


Fig. 1. Eyewitness drawings of sasquatches. 1a. Oregon, 1971; 1b. British Columbia, 1965; 1c. Ontario, 1993; 1d. Washington State, 1991; 1e. Ohio, 1980; and 1f. New Mexico, 2002. Credits for eyewitness drawings: 1a. *Mysterious Creatures*, 1988, Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, Vol. 114; 1b. unnamed prospector, courtesy of John Green; 1c. Desmond Warren, courtesy of Tim Yearington; 1d. Darin Richardson, courtesy of Ray Crowe; 1e. Charles Fulton, courtesy of Joedy Cook; 1f. Bigfoot Research Organization (BFRO), courtesy of Reid Nelson.

the chimpanzee, and similarly, “exceptionally long forelimbs” as a field mark of the gorilla (Clutton-Brock, 2002). Indeed, arms which are longer than legs are considered a unique physical characteristic of great apes, whereas arms shorter than the legs are considered a human character (Dixon, 1981). The long arms

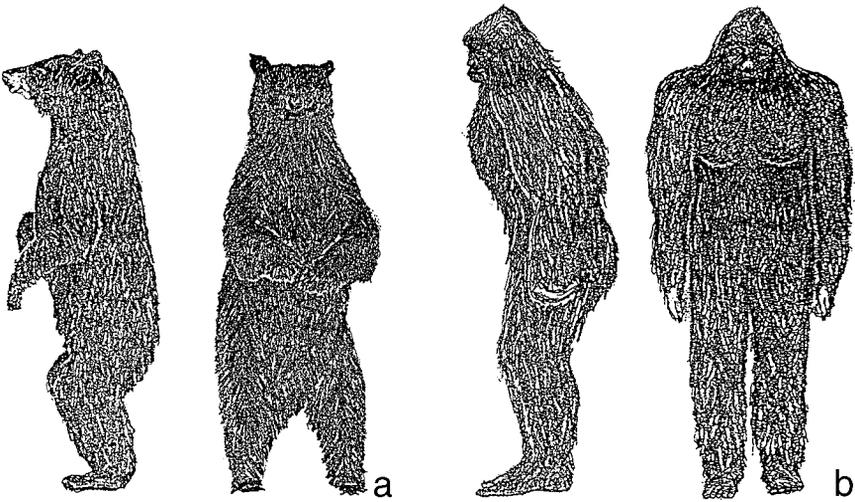


Fig. 2. Field guide drawings of an 2a. upright black bear and 2b. sasquatch. (drawings by Wendy Dyck, figures 3 and 4 in Bindernagel, 1998).

(approximately 115 percent of leg length) which are consistently attributed to the sasquatch suggest an ape rather than human affinity.

In addition to these gross morphological similarities between the sasquatch and an upright gorilla, a number of anatomical details attributed to the sasquatch in eyewitness descriptions and drawings also occur in the great apes. One of these is a pointedness to the head, which at least two observers have included in eyewitness drawings (Figure 1d and f).

In gorillas and orangutans this pointedness is the outward manifestation of the sagittal crest, a ridge of bone located medially on the top of the skull in an anterior–posterior direction. Zoologist George Schaller, who undertook the first field studies of the mountain gorilla, described the sagittal crest of gorillas as variable in size. He noted that in two silverback males, the “sagittal crests were so large that they resembled hairy miters.” Schaller also noted that “low sagittal crests” may occur in large females.” (Schaller, 1963).

Another anatomical feature observed and recorded by eyewitnesses is deep sunk eyes.

In April 1973, a 9-foot-tall creature “walking on two legs” stepped out in front of Alan Skrumeda’s car near Easterville in west-central Manitoba. “Looking at us was this thing that had the appearance of man, although it was three times the size of the average man. . . . It turned to face us, staring into the headlights. . . . It was covered with hair and there was a flat-profiled face. . . . The most striking feature was the creature’s eyes. They were really sunk in.” (McAnulty, 1974).

More recently (1993), Desmond Warren observed an 8-foot-tall creature in Ontario’s Ottawa Valley which walked away on two legs. He described it as



Fig. 3. Casts of sasquatch tracks. 3a. Vancouver Island, BC, 1988 (15 inches long, 6 inches wide); 3b. Washington State, 1982 (15.5 inches long, 6 inches wide); 3c. Washington State, cast of juvenile sasquatch track (7 inches long, 5 inches wide; note slightly abducted big toe).

being “at least three feet wide,” having “a chest like a body builder and not too much of a neck. . . . It had deep sunk eyes” and “where we would have eyebrows it had a ridge that stuck out a fair piece” (Yearington, 1998). The eyewitness drawing made by Desmond Warren is shown in Figure 1c.

Reference to almost any book illustrating the great apes will confirm that deep sunk eyes are an obvious feature of the face of great apes, especially gorillas. Significantly, deep sunk eyes are also a physical feature emphasized in a number of accounts of the hairy giants in aboriginal myths and legends. Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss noted that “the myths of British Columbia’s Fraser River aboriginal groups included a character called the sasquatch or Tsanaq who was characterized as a black giantess with bushy eyebrows [and] eyes deeply sunk the in the orbits” (Levi-Strauss, 1982).

In a collection of stories entitled *Kwakiutl Legends*, Kwakwaka’wakw Chief James Wallas of northern Vancouver Island, British Columbia, relates a number of tales about a creature referred to as the ‘Giant of the Woods’ or ‘Woods Giant’. In several of these, deeply sunk eyes predominate in the description of the face of the giant. At the end of one story, the woods giant made an offer to a father and his sons: “You may use us on your totem poles and face mask. . . . You can make the mask just like our face.” The story concludes with the father and his sons accepting the giant’s offer. “No one else had a mask like theirs. It was a frightening mask with the eyes sunk deep in the head” (Wallas, 1981).

The Wallas story typifies the link between giant human-shaped creatures in aboriginal myths and legends and in modern reports, and may relate to the ‘kernel of truth’ on which most myths and legends are based.

The (Apparently) Humanlike Attributes of the Sasquatch: Reasons for Prematurity and Unwelcomeness?

Although most anatomical features of the sasquatch are consistent with those of the great apes, the bipedal gait of the sasquatch is often raised as inconsistent with the knuckle-walking quadrupedal gait of the great apes. That the great apes commonly walk bipedally in order to carry food items in their hands or arms is apparently not widely known.

This problem was addressed by geneticist Gunther Stent in an article entitled: *Prematurity and Uniqueness in Scientific Discovery* (Stent, 1972). Stent explained that a discovery is premature if “its implications cannot be connected by a series of simple logical steps to canonical, or generally-accepted, knowledge.”

Based on this definition, the ‘discovery’ of the sasquatch suffers from prematurity in at least three respects. First, it appears to be a bipedal ape in a group whose members are thought to be exclusively quadrupedal. Second, it has the appearance of a great ape on the North American continent where no other apes are known to exist. (Marjorie Halpin’s argument that “there is no category for the sasquatch” is another way of stating this.) A third problem is the shape of the foot, as documented in numerous photographs and casts. It is shaped more like a giant human foot than like that of any other mammal, thus suggesting a human, rather than great ape, origin for the creature (Figure 3). It is unfortunate that most North American biologists are unaware of the similarity between the human foot and the foot of a large ape such as the mountain gorilla. The primary difference is the divergent or abducted big toe of the gorilla foot compared with the adducted big toe in the human foot and sasquatch foot in which it lies alongside the other toes (Figure 3a and b). It is noteworthy that the sasquatch foot sometimes exhibits a degree of divergence or abduction of the big toe, rendering it less humanlike and more apelike in form (Figure 3c).

It is this apparent blend of human and great ape physical characteristics which may have contributed to the unwelcomeness of the sasquatch as a subject for unbiased consideration and study. The fear that the sasquatch may constitute a ‘missing link’ between humans and related ancestors has implications for human evolution, not all of which are welcome. The possibility that such an animal may still exist today—unacknowledged and virtually in our midst—may be taken as a professional affront by scientists.

Paleoanthropologists Alan Walker and Pat Shipman addressed the problem of ‘unwelcomeness’ of scientific discoveries when writing about paleoanthropological discoveries in Africa. They wrote that “. . . surprises about the identity or attributes of our . . . ancestors may be deeply unsettling and unwelcome. Even professionals, if they are not vigilant, are liable to fall into the trap of refusing to evaluate the evidence objectively . . .” (Walker & Shipman, 1996).

Rejection of Opportunities for Scientists to Examine Sasquatch Evidence

Although the shape of sasquatch tracks raises unwelcome evolutionary questions of origin and relatedness, it is nevertheless the casts of tracks which

provide the best answer to Thomas Kuhn's admonishment to evaluate what makes an anomaly seem worth concerted scrutiny. It is the track casts which constitute the much-needed tangible evidence. As noted above, over 100 of these casts have been catalogued, archived, and made available for scrutiny by zoologists. They should be of interest especially to wildlife biologists who routinely depend on tracks as a basis for mammal surveys. Wildlife biologists, more than any other professionals—excepting perhaps some experienced hunters and trappers—have the expertise and experience to competently scrutinize and evaluate the validity of track casts attributed to the sasquatch.

If the notable lack of interest in examining this evidence is puzzling, the continued rejection of conference papers illustrating such evidence and intended to stimulate discussion is even more problematic. In the absence of professional evaluation of tracks, there has arisen an almost universal dismissal of purported sasquatch tracks as the work of 'hoaxers'. The uncritical treatment in the popular media, often including an element of ridicule, has further estranged biologists from addressing the track cast evidence. In the absence of professional attention, what little investigation is being done is largely undertaken by dedicated but untrained amateurs.

An inevitable result of the sasquatch being ignored by scientists and explained instead by non-scientists is the raising of wildly conjectural explanations as serious proposals. Such explanations occasionally include associations with UFOs, visitors from another dimension, and 'shape-shifters'. The tabloid and mainstream media have exploited these more bizarre explanations to further increase an atmosphere of levity and ridicule around the subject. As a result, scientists have (understandably) distanced themselves even further. This may explain the reasoning given by the chairperson of a national conference of an international society of wildlife biologists for rejecting a paper on the sasquatch. "Until there is 'hard' evidence of their existence the issue [of the sasquatch] will remain tabloid material and not part of the scientific community."³ A zoology professor recently rejected a proposed seminar presentation reviewing existing sasquatch evidence, reasoning that "if this creature exists, it would be the zoological discovery of the century," a possibility apparently too unthinkable to be presented to his colleagues and students for serious consideration.

Results of Rejection by Scientists

As mentioned above, the relegation of sasquatch research by scientists to well-meaning but untrained amateurs is fraught with problems. As pointed out by Michael Cremo, "Evidence found by non-scientists tends to be not valued and therefore not well-looked after and gets lost or thrown out. On the other hand, evidence which conforms to contemporary thinking is carefully catalogued and preserved" (Cremo, personal communication). Although the amateur investigators are not at fault, since they are merely filling a void left vacant by scientists, the result is inadequate documentation and treatment of evidence. It

must be emphasized that this is not a criticism of such investigators but is an inevitable outcome of the unwillingness of scientists to include the evidence for consideration in a professional context or forum.

Conclusions

In closing, it may be instructive to briefly examine current attitudes toward the sasquatch in the context of science according to the recent comments of Ian Tattersall, curator of anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History. Tattersall, writing under the headings *nature of science* and *falsifiability*, reminds us that “. . . scientists generally start from . . . established notions that seem to be becoming a little wobbly. These they test against new data . . . and observation . . .” (Tattersall, 2002: 10, 11).

In the case of the sasquatch none of the established “notions” entail a real animal. They include instead the supernatural, a metaphor, an invented being, misidentified bears, and human hoaxers. These notions have become increasingly “wobbly” as sasquatch tracks are documented and archived, and as detailed reports from reliable eyewitnesses are filed and reviewed. (More extreme notions put forward such as: visitor from another planet, visitor from a UFO, and “shape-shifter” are not considered to be “established,” in that they are more recent proposals and are only taken seriously by a few people.)

Tattersall noted that “New ideas . . . are proposed, and once these new ideas and observations are out there in the public arena, they can be tested” (Tattersall, 2002: 8–9). New ideas regarding the similarity of sasquatch anatomy, behavior, and ecology, and the reports and track casts on which they are based, have been proposed in books and media interviews for over 30 years. But rather than being tested or critiqued by relevant scientists, they have so far been either ignored or dismissed without scrutiny.

Tattersall may be presenting an idealized portrait of science when he states that “What matters is that science as a whole is a self-correcting mechanism in which both new and old notions are constantly under scrutiny . . . the edifice of science consists simply of a body of observations and ideas that have (so far) proven resistant to attack, and that are thus accepted as working hypotheses about nature” (Tattersall, 2002: 9).

In the case of the sasquatch the “body of . . . ideas that are . . . accepted as working hypotheses . . .” remains the notions listed earlier: supernatural, metaphor, invented being, misidentified bears, and human hoaxers. Rather than attacking or even questioning these notions or hypotheses, scientists appear to have passed judgment, apparently concluding that the subject is unworthy of their attention. If and when they decide to examine the existing evidence, or permit examples of it to be displayed and discussed in scientific forums, they will find that the existing notions are not so resistant at all. In the meantime, perhaps the repetition of Alan Walker’s and Pat Shipman’s warning is warranted: “Even professionals,

if they are not vigilant, are liable to fall into the trap of refusing to evaluate the evidence objectively. . . .”

Notes

- ¹ “New ‘Sasquatch’ found—it’s called Bigfoot.” AP wire service article, dateline Eureka, *Humbolt Times* of Eureka, California. Reprinted in *Vancouver Province*, Monday, October 6, 1958. The track was 16 inches long and 7 inches wide and sank into the soil to a depth of 2 inches.
- ² Professor Cowan’s invitation to “just show me” extended to the journalist and newspaper readers was not similarly extended to the few zoologists undertaking sasquatch research. A proposal to his successor in the zoology department at the University of British Columbia, offering to present a seminar on the subject, was declined.
- ³ This statement was part of an e-mail message from the chairperson of a recent national conference of The Wildlife Society (TWS). The message included a second comment intended to explain the rejection of the paper: “TWS is a very conservatively thinking group unfortunately, and as a society does not like to be associated with extreme viewpoints.”

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