

**THE HOME FORUM, KID SPACE**  
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## Legends of the Sea

**Kristina Lanier**

SEA serpents, unicorns, fairies, mermaids. It sounds like a casting call for a storybook, doesn't it?

But centuries ago, people really believed there might be fairies in their backyards and fearsome monsters at sea. If Jack Frost didn't paint those icy patterns on winter windows, who did? If that huge splash and half-seen giant thing wasn't a sea monster, what was it?

With today's microscopes and cameras, we know how water crystallizes as it freezes and what whales are. But it's fun to imagine that weird things exist. In fact, stories of mysterious creatures persist - "sea monster" legends especially.

If you believe the stories, prehistoric animals live in nearly every lake, river, and ocean in the world, says Jason Cressey. He's the director of POD (People, Oceans, Dolphins), a whale and dolphin educational group in Vancouver, British Columbia.

You've probably heard of the most famous modern-day sea legend - the Loch Ness Monster. Many people think "Nessie" lives in the murky waters of Loch Ness in northern Scotland. ("Loch" is Scottish for "lake.")

In this country, there's "Tessie" in Lake Tahoe, Calif., and "Champy" in Lake Champlain, N.Y.

There are so many of the legends, in fact, there's even a group of scientists who study them and search for the animals. The researchers are called "cryptozoologists" (CRIP-toh-zoh-AHL-uh-jists).

How do such stories get started in the first place? Most of the time, it's simply a misinterpretation of the facts, says Stuart Vyse. He's a professor of psychology at Connecticut College in New London.

Take sea monsters, for example.

Imagine that you're an uneducated sailor aboard a creaking wooden sailing ship in mid-ocean. You're on watch when, suddenly - what's that!? Off the starboard bow, you see a huge thing leap into the air and crash back into the water. You've never seen a whale breach before. You're startled and scared. How do you describe what you saw? It's easy to understand how such a sight could grow into a tale about a monster.

Scientists think that the bowhead whale was behind a lot of "sea monster" sightings. The whale grows to be 60 feet long. Its strangely shaped mouth has hundreds of long, thin plates called baleen. (It uses the baleen to strain tiny animals out of the seawater for food.) As European sailors searched for a sea route across northern Canada, they encountered the Arctic-dwelling bowhead and mistook it for a monster.

"It's probably the least attractive of the whales," Dr. Cressey says. "Its head is asymmetrical, it has lots of barnacles, and it looks particularly fearsome."

A mythical land creature also had its origin in the sea. Unicorns are pictured with corkscrew horns growing out of their foreheads. The horn looks exactly like the tusk of a narwhal, a small whale that also lives in the Arctic. Sailors returning with the tusks began the tales.

"It's not quite clear how a sea-dwelling creature became a horse," Cressey says. "But it's almost certainly the origin of the unicorn."

Perhaps the best-known sea legend is that of the mermaid. Stories about half-human, half-fish beings date back to Greek mythology. Sailors may have expected to see mermaids. So when they spotted something from afar that fit the general description, they thought it must be a mermaid. They didn't dare get too close, either. Mermaids were thought to lure sailors to their doom.

Researchers point to the dugong as the most likely source of the mermaid myth. A relative of the manatee, the dugong lives in the coastal waters of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. It's slow-moving and gentle, with a rounded body and notched tail that resembles a "mermaid" tail.

But that's where the mermaid similarity ends and imagination begins. Imagination is how a whale became a monster and a dugong became a mermaid.

Humans are good at making things up, Dr. Vyse says. People like telling stories!

"It's a long time out on the ocean," Vyse says, "and when you want to see something exciting, you can convince yourself that the gray blotch out there is an animal or creature. They say 'seeing is believing,' but you can turn that around and say, 'if you believe, you see.'"

And not every legend evolved to explain something, Cressey says. Some myths were made up just to entertain.

As people learned more about animals, sea monsters and mermaids faded from popular thought.

But that still leaves us with modern-day legends like Nessie. Many people think Nessie is a pleiosaur, a long-extinct sea-dwelling reptile. Could a dinosaur survive in the 23-mile-long, 700-foot-deep Loch Ness?

"Eyewitnesses" describe Nessie as a reptilian creature about 30 feet long. But scientists say Loch Ness is too cold and food too scarce to support such a huge, cold-blooded animal.

"AMONG the current theories, the traditional one is that Nessie is a sturgeon," says Adrian Shine. He directs the Loch Ness Project in Drumnadrochit, Scotland, which studies the lake's ecology. Sturgeons are "fairly large and fairly reptilian, and it's conceivable they could have led to the belief." They also evolved during the Jurassic era.

But if you're a Nessie fan, don't give up hope. Mr. Shine doesn't completely discount the legend. "It doesn't mean there isn't a grain of truth in it," he says. Oceans cover about 70 percent of the globe. Of that, only about 5 percent has been explored. Who knows what wild, wacky, legendary beings ply its depths?

"The fact remains that there are creatures we don't know about," Cressey says. "Even in the world we think we do know about, we're discovering new things all the time."

\* Next Tuesday: Stranger than myth. Never-seen and newly discovered sea creatures that do exist.