

OCEAN COMMOTION

2016 LOUISIANA SEA GRANT COLLEGE PROGRAM
AT LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY® IN BATON ROUGE



OCEAN FOLKLORE

Ocean Lore and Louisiana Legends

Legends, myths and lore have captured the human imagination around the world for thousands of years. From mermaids to sea serpents to swamp monsters, these stories have helped explain the world around us, often blending fact and fiction. The study of these mythical creatures and monsters of lore is called cryptozoology. Whether lurking in the ocean's depths or creeping through coastal wetlands, these stories are an important part of human culture, history and sometimes scientific discovery.

Mermaids

Initial thoughts of mermaids conjure images from the 1989 Disney film *The Little Mermaid*, adapted from Hans Christian Andersen's 1837 book. Stories, myths and legends of mermaids have been circulating for thousands of years, with the first tales coming from 7000 BCE Babylonia (present-day Iraq). Many Babylonian gods were depicted as half man, half fish such as the god Ea (later called Oannes by the Greeks), the god of Wisdom. A similar story dates back to 1000 BCE in Assyria (present-day Syria) when a goddess, Atargatis, went into the ocean with hopes of becoming a fish, but she never fully transformed because the ocean could not hide her beauty. Her story traveled from Assyria to Greece, where she became the inspiration for the Greek goddess Aphrodite born from sea foam, emerging from the waves and known for her beauty. When the myth of Aphrodite reached the Roman culture, she then became Venus and the inspiration for the famous Boticelli painting, the *Birth of Venus*.



Ancient god Oannes, perhaps first representation of a merman. Ashton, John. Curious Creatures in Zoology. 1890. <http://biodiversitylibrary.org/page/23574964>.

In Ancient Greece and Rome, mermaids and sirens (island dwelling bird-woman hybrids) lured sailors with their music and beauty, causing shipwrecks on rocky shores. In England, mermaids were considered bad luck for similar reasons. The Chinese, however, thought mermaids brought good fortune and believed the most beautiful pearls in the sea were created by mermaid tears. The Irish also saw them as good luck, singing songs of love to sailors. Christopher Columbus reported swimming creatures he called sirens on his travels to the Americas in 1492. But Columbus, unlike others, was not impressed by their beauty.

Although mermaids have been shown to be myth, there have been many attempts to explain reported sightings. Various "remains" and "eye witness accounts" have been reported around the world in many coastal countries, especially those in Asia and Africa. However, there is no evidence that supports the existence of mermaids. Many believe that so-called mermaid sightings were those of marine mammals like manatees, seals, sharks or rays. Egg cases of some sharks, rays or skates (called Elasmobranchs) are called "mermaids' purses" due to their shape.



A skate egg casing or "mermaid's purse" from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egg_case_\(Chondrichthyes\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egg_case_(Chondrichthyes))

The Kraken

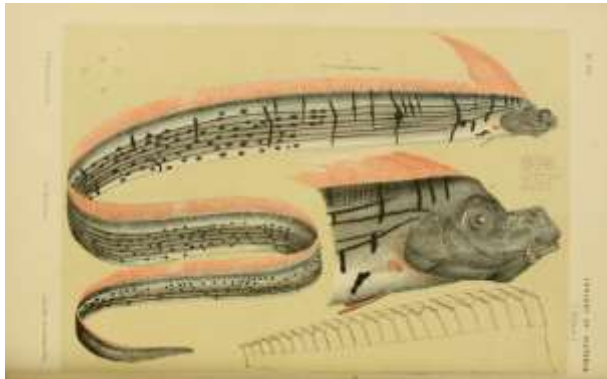
Tales of the Kraken have circulated amongst sailors for centuries. Some accounts described the creature as over a mile long. The witnesses in these instances may have mistaken the animal for a small island. Early stories of the Kraken originated in the 13th century from the Icelandic saga *Ovarr Odrr* involving two large sea monsters. The legend of the Kraken was so influential that it was included in scientific surveys through the 18th century and was even included in the first edition of Carl Linnaeus' 1735 "Systema Naturae" among cephalopods like squid and the octopus. Sightings are thought to be mistaken identifications of giant squids, a smaller animal that closely resembles the description of the Kraken. The giant squid (*Architeuthis dux*) is a deep sea cephalopod that can reach over 40 feet long and weigh almost 2,000 pounds. They are so elusive, the first giant squid was not caught on camera until 2006.



A colossal octopus by Pierre Dénys de Montfort, 1801 From
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kraken>

Sea Serpents

Sea Serpents are also common ocean lore. Virgil's poem "The Aeneid" in 30 BC is thought to be the first mention of these popular mythic creatures. In the mid-1800s, a supposed sea serpent fossil called *Hydrarchos sillimani* toured the world with the charismatic entrepreneur Albert Koch. But this fabrication was actually created from multiple fossils of an ancient, extinct whale called a basilosaurus.



"Oarfish." Natural History of Victoria. See Photo Attribution below.

Another extinct organism, this one actually a marine reptile called a plesiosaur, has been thought to fit the descriptions of sea serpents. There have been many real-life sea serpent suspects, including the strange oarfish, a bony, deep sea fish that can reach over 20 feet in length. Squids and octopi, which their long tentacles, have also been mistaken as sea serpents. In 1977, a corpse of a strange creature was pulled from the depths off of New Zealand's coast. What was thought to be proof of a sea serpent's existence was actually a decaying basking shark.

Louisiana Legends

Louisiana also has legends of creatures stalking our wetlands. One of the most famous is the "Rougarou". This legend has passed through the French heritage of our state, where it is still known to some by its French name "loup-garou". The Rougarou is a werewolf-like creature said to live in swamps. Legend states that the Rougarou would eat children that wandered outside at night. It was also used as a cautionary tale for those Christians who broke the rules during Lent. The Rougarou now has its own festival which celebrates south Louisiana folklore and raises funds for wetland education. The Honey Island Swamp Monster, is described as a reptile-like that inhabits the swamps and piney woods of the Honey Island Swamp in eastern Louisiana. This creature is also known by the Native Americans as "Letiche" – an abandoned child raised by alligators.

Lessons & Activities

Mythology Analysis by Raymond Huber: <http://www.raymondhuber.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/MythLessons.pdf>

Prehistoric Sea Monsters (Film, Kids Book, Lessons) by National Geographic
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/seamonsters/educators/index.html>

Little Mermaid Lesson Plans (K-4th): <http://www.filmeducation.org/pdf/film/LittleMermaid.pdf>

The Sea Serpent and Me Teacher Guide (See books)
<http://www.dashkaslater.com/documents/seaserpentguide.pdf>

Vermilionville Folklore Lessons (Secondary): <http://www.vermilionville.org/Lesson%20Plans/Folklore.pdf>

Vermilionville Cajun Folklore (Secondary, including many Louisiana Legends):
<http://www.vermilionville.org/Lesson%20Plans/Cajun%20Folklore.pdf>

In Search of the Giant Squid (Grades 5-8) by Smithsonian:
http://www.sites.si.edu/exhibitions/gaint_squid_curriculum_guide.pdf

Medieval Maps and Monsters (Grades 3-5) by Osher Map Library, University of Southern Maine:
<http://oshermaps.org/education/downloads/lesson-plans/lp-medieval>

Reading the Web: The Kraken Code (Grades 5-8) <https://mozilla.github.io/webmaker-curriculum/WebLiteracyBasics-I/session01-kraken.html>

Monsters are Real Pumpkin Carving Templates by Biodiversity Heritage Library
<https://www.pinterest.com/biodivlibrary/monsters-are-real/>

Media

Monsters are Real (historic monster illustrations and texts) by Biodiversity Heritage Library:
<https://m.flickr.com/#/photos/biodivlibrary/sets/72157648836714381/>

The Rougarou: Louisiana Swamp Monster: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxTkrRJ41K4>

History of the Kraken by Discovery: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTtHpO84pYk>

Prehistoric Sea Monsters (Film, Kids Book, Lessons) by National Geographic
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/seamonsters/educators/index.html>

Books

Mermaids: Myths, Legends and Lore by Skye Alexander

The Sea Serpent and Me By Dashka Slater (See Lessons section for Teaching Materials)

Chloe the Crawfish and the Rougarou by Mary Reason Theriot

Ocean Commotion 2016: Ocean Folklore, Lessons, Books and Media

Tentacles!: Tales of the Giant Squid by Shirley Raye Redmond

Giant Squid: Searching for a Sea Monster by Mary M Cerullo

Here There Be Monsters: The Legendary Kraken and the Giant Squid by HP Newquist

The Little Mermaid by Hans Christian Anderson

Resources

Monsters are Real Blog by Biodiversity Heritage Library from

<http://blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2014/10/monsters-are-real.html?m=1>

Giant Squid by Smithsonian Ocean Portal: <http://ocean.si.edu/giant-squid>

Are massive squid really the sea monsters of legend? By BBC:

<http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20141212-quest-for-the-real-life-kraken>

Kraken: The real-life origins of the legendary sea monster by Rodrigo Brincalpe Salvador, Independent News: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/kraken-the-real-life-origins-of-the-legendary-sea-monster-a6796241.html>

The Beautiful Monster: Mermaids by Biodiversity Heritage Library:

<http://blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2014/10/the-beautiful-monster-mermaids.html>

Mythical 'Sea Serpent' Comes into the Light by National Geographic:

<http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/2014/08/06/mythical-sea-serpent-comes-into-the-light/>

Top 5 Real Sea Serpents. Sort Of. By National Wildlife Federation: <http://blog.nwf.org/2011/08/top-5-real-sea-serpents-sort-of/>

Honey Island Swamp Monster by Animal Planet: <http://www.animalplanet.com/tv-shows/lost-tapes/creatures/swamp-creature/>

The Honey Island Swamp Monster: Bayou Bigfoot by Exmple: <https://exmple.com/cryptids/The-Honey-Island-Swamp-Monster-Bayou-Bigfoot>

Honey Island Swamp Monster Legend by Pearl River Eco-tours:

<http://www.pearlrivercotours.com/legends>

Columbus mistakes manatees for mermaids by The History Channel: <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/columbus-mistakes-manatees-for-mermaids>

From Mermaids to Manatees: the Myth and the Reality by Smithsonian Ocean Portal:

<https://ocean.si.edu/ocean-news/mermaids-manatees-myth-and-reality>

Photo Attributions

Ancient god Oannes, perhaps first representation of a merman. Original art by Ashton, John. *Curious Creatures in Zoology*. 1890. Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Digitized by University of California Libraries. From <http://biodiversitylibrary.org/page/23574964>.

A skate egg casing or "mermaids purse" By Xtylee (Own work) [CC BY 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

A colossal octopus By en:Pierre Denys de Montfort († 1820) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

"Oarfish." *Natural History of Victoria*. Decades 11-15. 1890. Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Digitized by MBLWHOI Library. From <http://biodiversitylibrary.org/page/3828708>.