Ogopogo the Chameleon

Lake Okanagan's resident lake monster has undergone many transformations over the centuries. Will the real Ogopogo please rise up?

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When Joe Nickell and I began our search for Ogopogo, the famous monster of Lake Okanagan, in British Columbia, Canada, I had an idea of what to look for: a creature thirty to seventy feet long, with dark skin and a characteristic series of humps. Though I went in search of one monster, in a way I found three. Ogopogo seems to have several distinct incarnations: as an Indian legend, as an elusive biological beast, and as a lovable local mascot.

N'ha-a-itk of Indian Myths

Because the evidence for lake monsters rests almost entirely on ambiguous sightings, fuzzy photographs, and a lakeful of supposition, native Indian tales have been used to suggest

Figure 1. Lake Okanagan's Rattlesnake Island (Monster Island), reputed home to the Ogopogo monster. Photos and illustrations by Benjamin Radford.

historical precedence for the creatures. Some lake monsters, such as Loch Ness's Nessie and Lake Champlain's Champ, are depicted as mysterious but fundamentally friendly beasties, playful and elusive. Not Ogopogo, or at least not the Indian stories upon which it is supposedly based: that of the fearsome N'ha-a-itk.[1] The N'ha-a-itk / Ogopogo link is firmly cemented in the creature's history and lore, more closely tied to native myths than any other lake monster. Virtually all writers on the subject lump the two together, and in fact most use the terms interchangeably. For example, "the Indian name for the animal was Naitaka," writes Peter Costello in his book *In Search of Lake Monsters* (Costello 1974, 222). Loren Coleman and Jerome Clark, in *Cryptozoology A to Z*, state that "The monsters . . . are known both as Ogopogo and by their native name, Naitaka," (Coleman and Clark 1999, 183) while the definitive book on Ogopogo, *In Search of Ogopogo*, by Arlene Gaal, is subtitled "Sacred creature of the Okanagan Waters" and has a chapter titled, "Native legends of the Ogopogo."

N'ha-a-itk, variously translated as "water demon" or "lake monster,"[2] would demand a toll from travelers for safe passage near its reputed home of Rattlesnake Island (also known as Monster Island), a small rocky clot in Lake Okanagan (see figure 1). The fee was not just a bit of gold or tobacco, but a sacrifice—a live sacrifice. Hundreds of years ago, whenever Indians would venture into the lake, they brought chickens or other small animals to drop into the water. The drowned fowl would sink into the lake's depths and assure its owners a protected journey. The island's rocky shore was said to be littered with the gory remnants of passersby who did not make the sacrifices.

Indian traditions speak of Timbasket, the chief of a visiting tribe who paid a terrible price for challenging N'ha-a-itk. Historian Frank Buckland tells the story:

> Timbasket, the Indian cynic . . . declared his disbelief in the existence of the lake demon. He was told that the Westbank Indians intended to sacrifice a live dog to the water god as they passed Squally Point, but he was quite unimpressed. He knew too much to concern himself with outmoded customs. . . . [Later when crossing the lake] Timbasket defiantly chose to travel close to the rocky headland. Suddenly, the lake demon arose from his lair and whipped up the surface of the lake with his long tail. Timbasket, his family and his canoe were sucked under by a great swirl of angry water (Quoted in Moon 1977, 25).

This was *modus operandi* for N'ha-a-itk: it would use its mighty tail to lash the lake's waters into a fierce storm that would drown its victims. The white settlers apparently followed the Indians' warnings. Yet white men also lapsed at times and had to be reminded of the wrath N'ha-a-itk could wreak. In 1854 or 1855, a settler named John MacDougall is said to have neglected the sacrifice. While crossing the lake with a team of horses, a great force sucked his steeds down with a tremendous slurp. MacDougall was terrified, but even more so when he realized that his canoe, lashed to the horses, was about to be pulled down to a watery doom as well. He grabbed a knife and cut the ropes, narrowly escaping with his life.

Mary Moon, author of *Ogopogo* (1977), cautions those seeking retribution: "Anyone thinking of killing Ogopogo had better ponder the fate of the Lambton family. . . . During the first half of the fifteenth century, Sir John de Lambton killed a 'wyrm.' As a result of killing the monster, the Lambton family fell under a witch's curse: for nine generations no Lambton would die in his bed. None did. Some say the curse has pursued the Lambtons down to the 1970s." Thus black magic enters the Ogopogo story. According to Moon, "The Indians . . . looked on it as a superhuman [supernatural] entity" (Moon, 32). Other writers agree, including W. Haden Blackman, who points out that the Sushwap and Okanakane Indians "believed that it was an evil supernatural entity with great power and ill intent" (Blackman 1998, 71).

N'ha-a-itk's paranormal connection to the elements is perhaps the strongest of any lake monster. Not only does N'ha-a-itk seem to have supernatural control over the lake's waters, it also commands aerial forces as well: "the Indians said no boat could possibly land [on Rattlesnake Island], for the monster would cause a strong wind to blow and baffle the attempt. . . . the monster was something more than an amphibian. It was always in some way connected with high winds. . . ." (Moon 1977, 32).

What manner of monster is this? The power to summon storms and create whirlpools? Witch curses? (Frankly, not dying in one's own bed doesn't seem like that terrifying a fate.) Such stories and descriptions suggest that N'ha-a-itk is a legendary disincarnate force of nature, not a corporeal creature actually living and eating, breathing and breeding, in the cold waters of Lake Okanagan.

One must be very careful about accepting native stories and legends as true accounts of actual creatures. Just because a given culture has a name for (or tells stories about) a strange or mysterious beast—be it Sasquatch or Ogopogo, dragon or leprechaun—doesn't necessarily mean that those names or stories were meant to reflect reality. This highlights a problem that folklorist Michel Meurger points out in his groundbreaking book *Lake Monster Traditions*. Meurger suggests that claiming native evidence for unknown creatures is an "old gimmick of portraying the sighter as a kind of 'noble savage,'" a process he aptly names "the scientification of folklore" (Meurger 1988, 13).

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Figure 2. "The Dungeon," a sea serpent lair in northeastern Newfoundland near Bonavista.

According to some traditions, Ogopogo's history dates to even before it was known as N'ha-a-itk. In fact, N'ha-a-itk was actually a murderer named Kel-Oni-Won. According to Dave Parker, a traditional First Nations storyteller, Kel-Oni-Won murdered a vulnerable old man with a club. The gods decided that the killer's punishment "was to change Kel-Oni-Won into a lake serpent, a restless creature who would forever be at the scene of the crime where he would suffer continued remorse. He was left in the custody of the beautiful Indian lake goddess and was known to the tribesmen as N'ha-a-itk; the remorseful one who must live in the lake with the company of other animals. It is said that the only animal who would tolerate his company was the rattlesnake" (Quoted in Gaal 2001, 122).

This folkloric motif—the unending punishment for the unforgivable crime—is common in many myths. The later ritual of making sacrifices (a warning to heed elders' traditions and rituals) has an analogy in other lake monster legends. For example, children living around many reputedly monster-inhabited lakes are told by their parents that if they don't behave and obey, they will be thrown into the lake, where the monster would eat them. This "boogeyman" method of social control is a common but largely unrecognized function of lake monster traditions. The origin of N'ha-a-itk, and by extension Ogopogo, is rooted in morality tales, not eyewitness descriptions of real creatures.

Celeste Ganassin, curator of education at British Columbia's Kelowna Museum, explained that for many First Nations peoples the distinction between reality and myth in their traditions was not particularly important, because the stories held a culturally specific significance that renders objective truth somewhat arbitrary. Native Indians' stories are not the White man's literal, empirical reality. In the same way that one misses the significance of an urban legend by focusing on whether it corresponds to reality (Ellis 2001, 144), one misses the importance of N'ha-a-itk by treating it as simply Ogopogo or its predecessor. The beliefs and stories served important functions, Ganassin said, and divorcing the N'ha-a-itk myths from their cultural context strips them of their value. "People pick and choose parts of the First Nations myths to fit their needs, to support whatever argument they are trying to make. They take what they want and use it to support their ideas" (Ganassin 2005). Almost invariably it is white writers, not native people, who insist that N'ha-a-itk and Ogopogo are one in the same.

It's not hard to imagine why native groups might create or perpetuate traditions about the lake. The area around Rattlesnake Island can be a cold, desolate, foreboding area. Nearby lies Squally Point, so named for the violent squalls that can quickly arise and menace boaters. As Arlene Gaal notes regarding a rock bluff across from the city of Peachland, "When you look down into the water from there, there's no bottom whatsoever. The water goes out of sight. It looks eerie. Little waves hit the caves along the rocky shore, and they make sucking sounds. The combination of what you see and hear is kind of scary" (121). There are many "cursed places" around the world, where local legend warns off savvy travelers, and where monsters are said to dwell. I encountered one such area on the coast of Newfoundland: a huge, dark, unusual sinkhole near a rocky cliff that had washed out two holes toward the ocean. It is called The Dungeon, and is said to be home to sea monsters (see figure 2).

According to Ganassin, "you can't look at a First Nations group anywhere without finding a tradition of some sort of entity in a lake they had to respect or fear. Typically they believed that some sort of spirit inhabits it. Any body of water in First Nations culture can—and often did—generate these stories to explain natural phenomena such as storms, sudden winds, and so on." Indeed, the stories of N'ha-a-itk are virtually identical to those in many other North American lakes, including Ontario and Superior. Michel Meurger, for example, tells of an 1864 account by Indian captive Nicolas Perrot, who reported "That the [lake spirit] stays at a very deep level, and has a long tail which raises great winds when it moves to go to drink; but if it wags its tail energetically it brings about violent tempests." As at Okanagan, the Indians would make live sacrifices to appease the water spirit. (For a fuller discussion, see chapter 3 in Meurger's *Lake Monster Traditions*.)

If the N'ha-a-itk story is going to be seriously suggested as supporting evidence of Ogopogo, one has to explain not only what the link is but why all the other lakes with similar traditions—not only throughout Canada but throughout the world—also supposedly have lake monsters that no one has found.[3]

Though most writers gloss over the tenuousness of the link between N'ha-a-itk stories and Ogopogo, others acknowledge it but claim that ancient Indian petroglyphs, or rock art, depict the lake monsters. Peter Costello, in his book *In Search of Lake Monsters*, writes that "The Indians have left crude drawings on stone of what is thought to be Naitaka" (Costello 1974, 220). Another researcher, Roy Mackal, states that "There are at least three crude pictographs on rocks around the lake, now in an

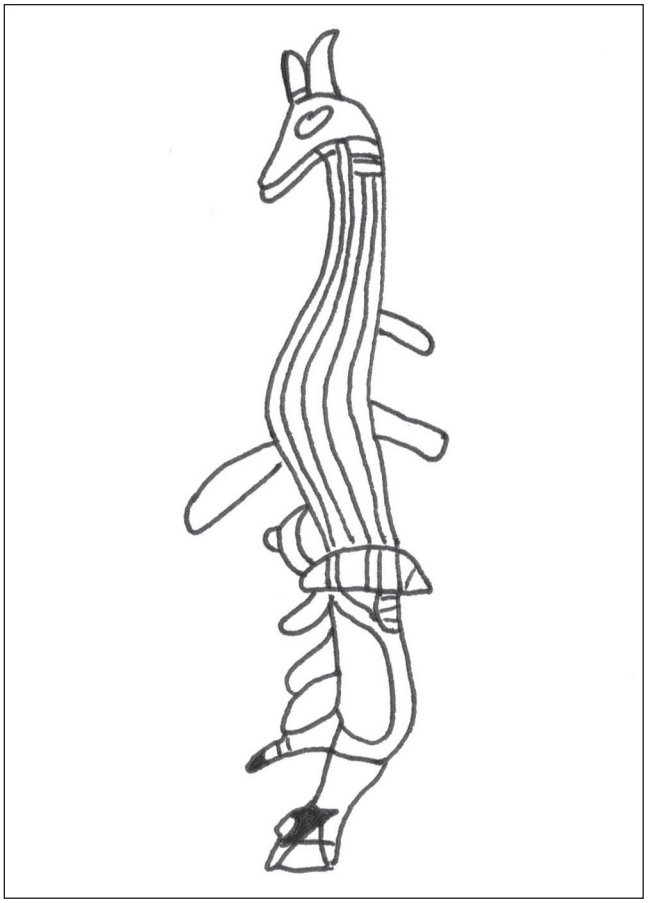

Figure 3. This Indian petroglyph, claimed to represent Lake Okanagan's Ogopogo, is actually located far from the Okanagan Valley on Vancouver Island.

extremely poor state of preservation, which may be related to an alleged lake monster" (Mackal 1980, 225).

Mackal suggests that "The relationship is tenuous and can be inferred only from the nature and location of the pictographs themselves." Yet the petroglyphs suggested as Ogopogo depictions are dubious for exactly these reasons. The petroglyph most often cited (figure 3) is in fact not from the Okanagan Valley at all, but instead from Sproat Lake, on Vancouver Island (Kirk 2005, Coles 1991). Another writer, Karl Shuker, suggests that petroglyphs dating from around 1700 B.C. might be evidence for lake monsters. One particular drawing, Shuker writes, "is a strikingly accurate depiction of the vertically undulating, elongate water monsters frequently reported from the lakes and seas of Canada—so much so that it could easily be taken to be a sketch made by one of these beasts' twentieth century eyewitnesses" (Shuker 1995, 112). Yet the petroglyph Shuker describes was found not on the shore of Lake Okanagan, nor in British Columbia, nor even in the western half of Canada, but instead over 2,000 miles away, near Peterborough, just outside of Toronto. It may still represent a monster, but its location does not suggest Ogopogo.

The criterion for inclusion seems so broad that nearly any ancient drawing found anywhere in North America—that, to anyone's eyes, might resemble some creature that could live in water—can be cited as evidence. Even desert-dwelling Indians (such as the Zuni and Pueblo) depicted horned serpents in their art and pottery. Writes Michel Meurger, "The Zunis of New Mexico have represented their serpent god of underground waters and of torrents, Kolowisi, as a horned reptile with many fins and gaping jaws." Thus there seems little basis for the reputed links between ancient art and modern monsters. "There is no true academic evidence that specifically states that First Nations people ever put down in petroglyphs the shape of N'ha-a-itk," Ganassin explains. "The pictures didn't come with captions."

Enter Ogopogo

N'ha-a-itk is clearly a supernatural entity; one writer states that "Naitaka . . . was part god, part demon." Yet Ogopogo, the lake monster we and others searched for in Lake Champlain, is presumably neither part god nor part demon; it is instead a zoological reality. This second incarnation of Ogopogo is crucial to investigators, as it moves the creatures from the mythological realm and into the zoological one.

Though the N'ha-a-itk of the Okanagan Valley Indians is long gone, it has been replaced by a decidedly less fearsome—and more biological—beast whose exact form is a matter of opinion and debate. Some writers (e.g., Jerome Clark) claim that the descriptions of Ogopogo are "strikingly similar"; Roy Mackal, in reviewing hundreds of descriptive reports, was "struck by repetitive consistency of the descriptions, almost to the point of boredom." Mackal continues: "The skin is described as dark green to green-black or brown to black and dark brown... [or] gray to blue-black or even a golden brown. Most often the skin is smooth with no scales, although the body must possess a few plates, scales, or similar structures observed by close-up viewers. . . . Most of the back is smooth, although a portion is saw-toothed, ragged-edged, or serrated. Sparse hair or hair-bristle structures are reported around the head, and in a few cases a mane or comblike structure has been observed at the back of the neck" (Mackal 1980, 231).

Furthermore, the head is said to look like that of a snake, or a sheep, or a horse, or an alligator. Or a bulldog. Sometimes it has ears or horns; other times it doesn't. A surprisingly large number of sighting simply refer to a featureless "log" that came alive, such as in the following descriptions: "They saw what they thought was a log, six feet long, floating in the water," and "It was like a great moving log, but alive, moving up and down a little in the water."

This Ogopogo is supported not by Indian myths but by photographs, sonar readings, and eyewitness reports. A film taken in 1968 by a man named Arthur Folden is considered among the best evidence, and we examined and partially recreated the film during our investigation. (Joe Nickell is tackling this Ogopogo in his accompanying article on page 16.)

For cryptozoologists like John Kirk of the British Columbia Scientific Cryptozoology Club, Ogopogo is the most likely and best-documented of lake monsters, far more so than Loch Ness's denizen. Loch Ness is a high-profile money pit, swallowing hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours of effort

Figure 4. A statue of Ogopogo sits along Lake Okanagan near downtown Kelowna, British Columbia.

over the last three-quarters of a century, yet yielding precious little in return. According to Kirk, "The Ogopogo phenomenon preceded that of the Loch Ness mystery. In the 1920s Ogopogo appearances were commonplace and the animal was regarded as just another member of the local fauna and not a mystery. Its reality was so strong to Okanagan Lake residents that when they built ferries to take people form Kelowna to Westbank there concern that the ferry needed to be armed with 'monster repelling devices' to ensure passenger and crew safety." Furthermore, Kirk says, "The catalogue of films and video of Ogopogo are more numerous and of better quality than anything I have personally seen at Loch Ness and I believe that several of them are very persuasive that there is a large living unknown creature inhabiting the lake" (Kirk 2005). Jerome Clark and Nancy Pear, in their book *Strange and Unexplained Happenings*, also suggest that "Despite its silly name, Ogopogo is one of the most credible of the world's lake monsters" (Clark and Pear 1995, 440).

Ogie Surfaces

A third Ogopogo exists: The regional mascot and hero, a cuddly bringer of cheer and love. Long gone are the echoes of live sacrifices, drowning deaths, and bone-strewn beaches. This is N'ha-a-itk and Ogopogo updated for modern Canada and presented by a savvy public relations department. Nicknamed Ogie, this Ogopogo is sometimes dragon-like, complete with wings and scales and an elongated body formed into the distinctive series of humps. Countless tourist items feature Ogie, including T-shirts, coffee mugs, keychains, and bumper stickers. Downtown Kelowna sports a life-size (?) Ogopogo statue near the waterfront (see figure 4), and a half-dozen books on the beast can be found in bookstores around town. The City of Kelowna's coat of arms, adopted in 1955, even features a seahorse, which, according to a city brochure, "in heraldry is the closest approximation of our Ogopogo."

The public-friendly Ogopogo can be found peering down from shelves in tourist hovels, next to snow globes and plush beavers in little red Mounties uniforms adorned with maple leaves. This Ogopogo is devoid of nasty scales or slimy skin, sheathed instead in a fuzzy and lovable countenance (see figure 5). Ogie is cute and green, often childish, and, as often as not, sporting eyelashes and a disarming smile.

A 1982 children's book by Brock Tully is typical of the scrubbed-up, reformed beast. In the book *With Hope We Can All Find Ogopogo*, a "chubby, fuzzy, cuddly little ball of fluff with a big, warm and excited smile" named Hope becomes dismayed at the complex, alienating, and confusing world of adults. Seeking solace, he wanders to the shore of Lake Okanagan, where he suddenly "saw two of the biggest, warmest, lovingest eyes he had ever seen and he felt reassured. He was further soothed when

Figure 5. Cuddly and plush Ogopogo dolls are a far cry from the creature's legendarily bloody past.

the monster belonging to the eyes spoke so gently and softly and welcomed Hope to the cove." Hope and Ogopogo developed a deep friendship: "Ogy was the most loving, forgiving, and patient living creature possible. Ogy *was* love!!" The story ends with Hope running back to his home yelling, "We are all Ogopogo!" It is *this* Ogopogo—not the murderous and fearsome N'ha-a-itk, not the dark and blobby images in home videos and photographs—that is love incarnate.[4]

Reconciling the Ogopogos

Ogopogo means different things to different people. This does not automatically relegate the beast to myth, of course: Hindus imbue cows with significance that eludes McDonald's customers, and any cat fancier will affirm that felines are exalted among animals. But the differing versions do suggest that a real understanding of Ogopogo requires a broad view.

"Ogopogo has mellowed with the passing of time," writes Arlene Gaal in her book *Ogopogo*. "Of recent years, he frolics in the water with almost impish delight, flips a flirtatious tail, and, with a sly wink, disappears into the froth to return from whence he came." This mellowing occurred rather suddenly in the 1920s. In 1924, songwriter Cumberland Clark wrote a very popular music hall song called "The Ogopogo: The Funny Fox-Trot" (Shuker 1995). The song (which whimsically claimed that Ogopogo's parentage was the result of an illicit union between an earwig and a whale) established the name of the creature. Shortly thereafter, Ogopogo sightings increased dramatically.[5] But, notes Hayden Blackman, "reported Ogopogo attacks had ceased completely, and the peoples living on the lake were beginning to view the monster in a much kinder light. As fear gave way to curiosity and excitement, accounts of encounters with 'the lake demon' became much more lighthearted" (Blackman 1998, 71).

Unless lake pollution over the past centuries has had a sedative effect on the beast, this marked change in its (their) behavior is very curious. No real-world animals exhibit such a temperamental about-face. It seems that the public's perception of Ogopogo—independent of its actions—influenced reports of the monster's behavior. Part of this transformation is surely an effort to capitalize on tourism; what tourists are going to fly in from across Canada and around the globe to seek out a murderous leviathan that may demand a blood tithe, or the family puppy?

As with N'ha-a-itk, the real question is not what Ogopogo means in some absolute or biological sense, but what Ogopogo means to the culture and age embracing it. The First Nations peoples have N'ha-a-itk; the cryptozoologists and eyewitnesses have Ogopogo; and the tourists and Okanagan Valley children have Ogie. N'ha-a-itk and Ogopogo are fundamentally amorphous, while with Ogie we finally have captured the beast, in its cultural, if not its actual, form. The creature's fame began with stories and songs of its exploits; years later those stories crystallized into (and influenced) modern reports of an actual beast; soon after that, stories and songs about the creature began to spread once again. Until and unless the beast is captured or identified, Ogopogo will surely live on: part god, part demon, and part chameleon.

Acknowledgements

I appreciate the assistance of many people—including Noel Dockstader, Arlene Gaal, Celeste Ganassin, and John Kirk—who helped with this investigation. Thanks also to my co-investigator Joe Nickell, who has been an invaluable source of inspiration and expertise over the years.

Notes

1. Though the spelling *Naitaka* is very common, I have chosen to use the more authentic spelling *N'ha-a-itk* throughout this piece, except in quotations.

2. While many writers prefer to emphasize translations of *N'ha-a-itk* that suit their agendas (such as "lake monster" and "snake in the lake"), other interpretations of the Indian word may be just as accurate but less amenable to conscription into lake monster mythos. Mary Moon gives other examples, such as "sacred creature of the water," "water god," and "lake demon."

3. For a parallel example of native stories in the Bigfoot milieu, see anthropologist Wayne Suttles' discussion in Dave Daegling's book *Bigfoot Exposed*.

4. In fact, there may be more children's books about Ogopogo than any other lake monster. Other titles include *Ogopogo: The Misunderstood Lake Monster*, by Don Levers (in which the beast heroically saves several buses of schoolchildren from drowning), and *The Legend of L'il Ogie* by Garfield Fromm.

5. Note that the increase in Ogopogo sightings was strongly linked to publicity and not other sightings. Unless the creatures frequented music halls, it is unlikely that they knew that their fame was being spread far and wide and thus decided to show themselves more often. The most likely explanation for the increased sightings is that people were more aware of the creature, were expecting to see it, and were interpreting ambiguous lake phenomena as Ogopogo even in the monster's absence. A similar spike occurred in 1981 at Lake Champlain following the publicity surrounding Sandra Mansi's photo of Champ.

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