

Idaho professor stirs debate with serious research on Bigfoot

JESSE HARLAN ALDERMAN - The Associated Press
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POCATELLO, Idaho -- The professors talking over coffee in the life sciences building at Idaho State University don't include Jeffrey Meldrum. As usual, the scientist is alone in his laboratory, weaving past jars of yellow liquid and plaster molds of giant, dinosaur-like footprints.

He opens a thin, metal filing drawer.

"These are the first ones I collected," he says, "of Bigfoot."

In the muddy Blue Mountains near Walla Walla, Wash., the footprints lay about 35 or 40 in a row, each about 15 inches long.

He thought he'd dismiss them as a hoax. But Meldrum, a primatologist and anatomist, noticed locked joints and a narrow arch -- traits he would argue in the following 10 years of research that only could belong to Bigfoot.

"That's what set the hook," said Meldrum. "I resolved at this point, this was a question I'd get to the bottom of."

Meldrum has collected more than 200 Bigfoot prints. He says he believes in the principles of science and in Bigfoot. His colleagues at Idaho State University are hostile, some even calling for the school to revoke his tenure. One physics professor, D.P. Wells, wondered if Meldrum also planned to research Santa Claus.

If Meldrum's right, he's a lonely visionary. If he's wrong, he's a rogue scientist on the fringe of academia. Still, Meldrum has added the scholarly research of a tenured Ph.D. to the murky catalog of Bigfoot sham videos and supermarket tabloid cover stories.

"It used to be you went to a bookstore and asked for a book on Bigfoot and you'd be directed to the 'occult section,' right between the Bermuda Triangle and UFOs," Meldrum said. "Now you can find some in the natural science section."

The Bigfoot legend dates back centuries. American Indian folklore in the Pacific Northwest includes murmurs of a man-ape beast that roams the hidden hollows. Sasquatch, as Bigfoot is often known, is a Salish Indian name meaning woodland wildman.

Newspapers began recording the first Bigfoot sightings in the 1920s, as several backcountry reports surfaced. Just as quickly, skeptics arose to challenge the accounts and practical jokers staged elaborate hoaxes.

Without a fossil record or a confirmed sighting, Bigfoot entered the realm of fantasy until Grover Krantz, an eccentric professor at Washington State University, began supplementing his traditional research with papers on the sasquatch.

In many ways, Meldrum is a disciple of Krantz. The anthropology professor first linked footprints to the existence of Bigfoot and traveled around the Northwest with a spotlight and shotgun looking for remains.

Krantz never found any Bigfoot bones and after a long career he donated his own bones to the Smithsonian Museum when he died of cancer in 2002.

Krantz was an author of anatomy textbooks and a collector of Irish wolfhound bones. In much the same way, Meldrum's office reflects that mix. It's half sterile laboratory and half rural roadside attraction.

The dimly lit rooms are stacked with research manuals from floor to ceiling, but also plastic Bigfoot wind-up toys, ape dolls and postcards from northwestern California's Bigfoot Scenic Byway.

That Meldrum blends myth and math, fable and forensics, is what puts off so many of his colleagues. A scientist should not be a believer, said Martin Hackworth, a senior lecturer in the physics department at Idaho State University.

On campus, where students order from Bigfoot Pizza and Meldrum was the keynote speaker at a Bigfoot gathering this August, many scientists are ashamed of what they call Meldrum's "psuedo-academic" pursuits.

They bristle at Meldrum's appearances on the Discovery Channel, National Geographic Channel and his new book "Sasquatch: Legend Meets Science," released in September by Forge Books, an offshoot of a science fiction novel publisher.

Hackworth called Meldrum's research a joke and said some 30 professors signed a letter scolding the university for hosting Meldrum's Bigfoot gathering on campus.

"Do I cringe when I see the Discovery Channel and I see Idaho State University, Jeff Meldrum? Yes, I do," Hackworth said. "He believes he's taken up the cause of people who have been shut out by the scientific community. He's lionized there. He's worshipped. He walks on water. It's embarrassing."

However, the university backs Meldrum. "He's a bona fide scientist," said John Kijinski, dean of the school's College of Arts and Sciences.

Meldrum has other substantial supporters, including Jane Goodall, the pioneering primate specialist whose 45-year study on chimpanzees in Africa has won awards from the United Nations, the British government and Harvard University.

Her review on the jacket of Meldrum's new book lauds him for bringing "a much-needed level of scientific analysis to the sasquatch - or Bigfoot - debate."

Goodall believes in the legend. She said tribal elders throughout the world have recounted their sightings.

"As a scientist, she's very curious and she keeps an open mind," said Goodall spokeswoman Nona Gandelman. "She's fascinated by it."

Despite the support from one of science's few celebrities, Meldrum finds himself a loner on Idaho State's wind-dried campus in the yellow hills of Pocatello.

He wears no lab coat, but a bristly mustache and a black T-shirt with a silhouette of a hunchbacked and lurking Bigfoot. He pays for his research with a \$30,000 donation from a Bigfoot believer.

Meldrum is drawn to the mystique of Bigfoot -- that there could be a species that man has not "plumbed and fathomed." The believer side of him has set up trap cameras in Washington's Olympic National Park and signed autographs for the Bigfoot-obsessed RV-drivers at amateur exhibits.

The other side of Meldrum is the scientist, who charts simulation models using advanced physics and tests hair and scat samples to trace an evolutionary lineage from Gigantopithecus, an extinct 10-foot-tall giant ape that lived 200,000 years ago, to Bigfoot.

He knows that most scientists dispute his research methods. They say he seeks to prove, rather than test, his theories. His frustration makes him wonder aloud how much longer he will be on the university faculty.

But it also feeds the urge to chase down each new footprint sighting in his Chevy Suburban. One day, he hopes to bring back a bone or a tooth or some skin and silence the "stuffy academics," he said.

"Is the theory of exploration dead?" he asked. "I'm not out to proselytize that Bigfoot exists. I place legend under scrutiny and my conclusion is, absolutely. Bigfoot exists."

On the Net:

Idaho State University: www.isu.edu

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