

## BOOK REVIEW

**The Discovery of the Sasquatch: Reconciling Culture, History, and Science in the Discovery Process** by John A. Bindernagel. Courtenay, BC, Canada: Beachcomber Books ([www.beachcomber.com](http://www.beachcomber.com)), 2010. 325 pp. \$49, paper. ISBN 978-0968288719.

This book's subtitle acknowledges the complexity of the task that anomalistics faces. Important aspects of the evidence come from times past, which makes it necessary to consider the reliability of the sources and how to interpret them *in light of the cultural environment* in the pertinent eras. The present and past states of science are obviously important, including why science has chosen not to look into what seems to us worth looking into; and that again calls for an understanding of how science affects and is affected by culture, in the present and in the past. All these things are discussed in relation to Sasquatch, in the body of the book and also in the substantial and insightful Foreword by Leila Hadj-Chikh.

The general phenomenon of resistance to genuine novelty is often remarked, but this book goes much further than the generality by rooting out quite specific reasons for mainstream science's resistance to the existence of Sasquatch; and by pointing to the unspoken assumptions that underlie those reasons. Perhaps the central issue is that popular culture takes Sasquatch to be a primitive relative of humans, *Homo*, whereas Bindernagel identifies Sasquatch as one of the great apes.

Critics will often claim that if Sasquatches existed, "we"—our science and our conventional wisdom—would have known it by now. Surely a hunter would have shot one, for instance. Hadj-Chikh points out, however, that the human-like appearance attributed to Sasquatch would make hunters hesitant to shoot one; and a shot Sasquatch would not necessarily die at once or in the vicinity; and moreover a hunter might well wish to hide the fact of an inadvertent shooting. Not many people approved of Grover Krantz's resolve to shoot a specimen if given the chance. Similarly with the critics' rhetorical query, why haven't "we" found traces: There are indeed reports of possible traces in addition to the footprints and tracks that gave Sasquatch the common name of Bigfoot.

Hadj-Chikh reminds us that Europe's Paleolithic cave paintings were at first taken to be hoaxes because the contemporary mainstream view of human evolution and history did not allow for such sophisticated art so long ago.

Just as with Nessies (the Loch Ness Monsters), there are seemingly excellent reasons why Sasquatch could not exist: It tends to be nocturnal whereas apes are diurnal; it is reported from temperate zones whereas the great apes live in the tropics and sub-tropics; there are no pertinent fossils in Sasquatch's reported habitats. But Hadj-Chikh reminds us here how very improbable we *Homo sapiens* are, deviating so greatly in so many respects from our hominoid cousins. If we, why not Sasquatch?

In Chapter 1, Bindernagel addresses the notion of Sasquatch as a cultural phenomenon based on legends and myths of wild men as well as the deliberate perpetration of modern hoaxes. The first point has not carried any weight with me after Dmitri Bayanov pointed out that if such creatures exist, there would certainly have grown up a wealth of folktales and the like about them. On the second point, hoaxes are in a sense irrelevant to the actual evidence: Hoaxers will do their thing quite independently of the existence of Sasquatch.

Chapter 2 surveys some literature about general issues in questioning established knowledge. Then Bindernagel turns to the evidence for Sasquatch: eyewitness reports (Chapter 3), historical reports (Chapter 4), and recent accounts (Chapter 5)—which raise the additional complication that wide publicity about Bigfoot is likely to bias what people now believe they have seen. Also addressed here is the relatively large number of reports from mid-western and eastern regions, which Bindernagel—following John Green's earlier work—suggests should not be automatically dismissed as too unlikely.

Chapter 6 takes up the issue of tracks, in considerable detail and with comparisons against human and ape anatomy. While critics sometimes assert that various casts of footprints show too much variation to be credible, Bindernagel cites Colin Groves: 19<sup>th</sup>-century classification of great apes had to deal with the fact of anatomical variability almost as great as in humans. Also dealt with here is other physical evidence: signs of foraging for ground squirrels; twisted saplings; possible beds; and possible scat. A very general basis for pooh-poohing cryptic beings is that the conventional wisdom actually knows very little about the enormous range of the natural behavior of animals; for example, that Baird's tapirs prefer to defecate in water, so a lack of obvious authentic Sasquatch scat is not necessarily decisively negative evidence.

Of course it is not the evidence itself but its interpretation that is crucial. In Chapters 7 and 8, Bindernagel points out that a great variety of reported Sasquatch characteristics—anatomical and behavioral—do not appear at all odd if they are compared with those of gorillas rather than humans. For me this is the single most persuasive point: The popular view of Bigfoot

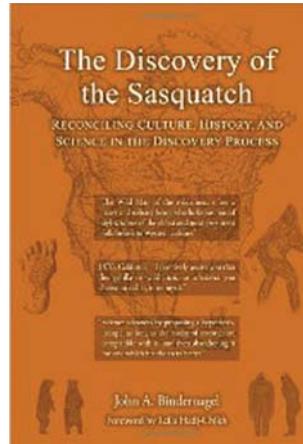
as a “wildman,” a close cousin of humans, is quite misguided; almost everything about Sasquatch appearance and behavior is quite plausible for a great ape. I think this adds considerable plausibility to the eyewitness reports: Despite the conventional wisdom’s prejudice that Bigfoot is a sort of humanoid, reported appearance and behavior have nevertheless been often described in terms that might well describe an ape—the eyewitnesses are *not* describing what they expected to see.

In Chapter 9, Bindernagel considers how the evidence supports or does not support not only the hypothesis that Sasquatch is a real great ape but also the hypothesis that it is a cultural phenomenon inspired by legend and sullied by hoaxing. Interesting is that after the discovery of gorillas, reports of Sasquatches began to reference gorillas as well as “wildmen.” Fascinating is that some Sasquatch reports, for example meat-eating or projectile-throwing, were found only later to have counterparts in ape behavior.

Chapter 10 is about the importance of theoretical approaches in combination with empirical ones, followed (Chapter 11) in natural fashion by an analysis of the discovery of Sasquatch as a process, a complex one, and not a single event, as Thomas Kuhn suggested is the case with any really novel discovery. Chapter 12 again follows naturally with the citing of Barber’s classic paper, “Resistance by scientists to scientific discovery” (Barber 1961), and notes of such resistance in the discovery of the various apes as well as other phenomena like that of the okapi and several medical conditions: geometric patterns associated with migraines, Tourette’s syndrome, and alien-limb syndrome.

Then there come detailed discussions of the inadequacy of four common conventional explainings-away of Sasquatch claims: misidentified bears (Chapter 13), hallucinations or imagined entities (Chapter 14), myth (Chapter 15), and hoax (Chapter 16). Philosophy of science regards parsimonious explanations as preferable to others, and Bindernagel points out that the Sasquatch hypothesis is far more parsimonious than the others, albeit perhaps superficially less plausible.

Chapters 17–19 look into reasons why discovery of the Sasquatch has been hindered. It identifies specific points in line with the general analyses of delayed discovery ventured long ago by Gunther Stent (Stent 1972) and discussed more recently in Ernest Hook’s edited volume (Hook 2002). That



mainstream science has not taken an interest amounts to a vicious circle: The investigation is left largely to amateurs, thereby lacks the discipline of professional approaches, thereby enhances the mainstream's tendency to write the whole thing off, especially since the media like to publicize the hoaxes and the antics of the craziest extremes among Bigfoot hunters. Further, labeling Sasquatch-seeking as "cryptozoology" with the implicit aim of gaining scientific status may be counterproductive given that mainstream pundits label cryptozoology as a whole as pseudo-science. The inability to connect Sasquatch convincingly to known species is an obvious barrier to acceptance, just as centuries of empirical experience left Western explorers unprepared for the fact of Australian black swans.

Perhaps above all, the mainstream's disdain means that most professional scientists in the relevant fields are simply unaware of the evidence. Thus they readily presume that, because the evidence for Himalayan yetis is slim to non-existent, the same must be true for any similar creature elsewhere. This illustrates a very general point in anomalistics: No matter how satisfactory general principles for studying anomalies may be, ultimately each specific investigation must succeed or not on the basis of idiosyncratic efforts (Bauer 2013). The Bigfoot hunters who claim yetis and almas and other reported "wildmen" as adding to the plausibility of Sasquatch are not actually making it more plausible but rather, in the eyes of many, significantly *less* plausible.

That anomalistics is inevitably multidisciplinary brings in difficulties categorized by Hook (Hook 2002) as "interdisciplinary dissonance," research in one disciplinary approach being inhibited by clashes with what is accepted in some other field. Once again we are reminded of important discoveries that had been long delayed: the prevention of scurvy by citrus fruit, and the prevention of fatal infections at birth advocated by Semmelweis. And in the Epilogue we are reminded that chemist-philosopher Michael Polanyi extrapolated his personal experiences to describe issues of paradigm shift in a similar way as Thomas Kuhn did a few years later.

This book is eminently worth the attention of all anomalists, for many lessons pertinent to all investigations of improbable claims as well as for a convincing demonstration that Sasquatch, interpreted as a great ape rather than a humanoid "wildman," is far from implausible.

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