In the Beginning

Whether it be Japan's Nippon Television, England's Yorkshire Television or David Frank, producer of the Fox network program called *Sightings*, Ogopogo appears to be a phenomenon that stirs endless interest. Naitaka or N'ha-a-itk, as he/she was referred to by the local Native people, has been discussed, written about and photographed since the mid-1800s. Indian legends abound, stories of close encounters are analyzed and skeptics, certain that it is simply all nonsense, make up the audience of today's Ogopogo script.

Why then, if something is as elusive as an unidentified lake monster, would there be such an intense interest and demand for information? Science accepts only data that can measure up to its standards. We, of course, would have to be prepared to provide a carcass or tissue sample for proper DNA analysis to meet these expectations. On the other hand, there are those who choose to believe because they have indeed seen, and others who choose to believe because the existence of unidentified species being uncovered and identified provides a strong link from the unknown to the known. Either way, whether skeptic or believer, this book will leave you with information and questions that are deserving of further pursuit.

In 1872, while scanning the lake in search of her husband John, expecting his return from his journey across Okanagan Lake, Mrs. Susan Allison was the first settler who reported seeing an unusual animal swimming against the waves. Afraid that her husband had met his demise in the jaws of N'ha-a-itk, she perhaps could be credited for opening the door to Ogopogo reporting. Very familiar with Okanagan Lake, she knew full well that this creature was something she could not readily identify, making its presence all the more foreboding.

John Allison, being a stalwart soul, listened to his wife's tale and laughed it off while he jokingly accused her of taking a nip or two from the wine barrel. However, his safe return from across Okanagan Lake through an intense storm, created a respect for the power of nature's wrath, whether it be monster or otherwise, and made him appreciative of the pleasures of home.

Susan Allison (who died in 1928) spent much of her lifetime studying Indian folklore and even contributed articles to London journals. Her writings told of a kindly old Indian who once lived by the lake and who was killed by an evil wanderer. As punishment, the Gods turned the killer into a giant lake serpent so he would spend eternity at the scene of the crime.

Long before the white man arrived, the Indians told tales of a lake monster they called N'ha-a-itk, a creature both revered and feared by the local Natives. So strong was this reverence and fear, that the wise man about to enter into communion with the unknown would procure a small animal to be used as a sacrifice, should they encounter the wrath of the beast. It was considered foolish to do otherwise. All too often a storm would spring up and out of the lashing waves the demon would appear and attempt to claim another life. To appease the serpent and ensure a safe return, the small animal would be thrown overboard.

One story told of a popular chief named Timbasket who failed to heed the warnings of his elders. Chief Timbasket and family, while visiting the Okanagan, were very skeptical of N'ha-a-itk as they watched the village tribesmen prepare for the trip down the lake. The canoes to accompany the honored guest were marked with a special symbol and a live dog was prepared for sacrifice. It was decreed that all canoes must travel within a certain distance from the shore and every precaution was taken to avoid rousing the fearsome beast. The chief, however, was not frightened by superstition, nor would he agree to steer a roundabout course simply to keep away from Squally Point. As he paddled his canoe close to shore, waves suddenly appeared, and in a flurry of lashing water, the chief and his family disappeared. The Indians were familiar with the antics of the lake monster who often lashed its tail in anger, churning up the waters to ward off the approaching enemy. Foolish Chief Timbasket was never seen again. Some say his canoe disappeared in the middle of the lake, other stories tell of his canoe being discovered washed up on shore near Squally Point, the home of N'ha-a-itk, or Ogopogo.

According to all who knew and believed, this young Brave succumbed to the jaws of the ferocious one.

The story of John McDougall and his horses often surfaces in conversations about N'ha-a-itk. This well-known Metis, who always crossed the lake in his canoe with his horses in tow, suddenly noticed his horses being pulled under. Realizing the danger, John grabbed his sheath knife, cut the tow rope and paddled off feeling very distraught as his horses slowly disappeared beneath the depths of Okanagan Lake.

With the arrival of the first settlers, stories of a large unknown animal in Okanagan Lake continued. Concerns arose and many settlers took turns patrolling the lakeshore, musket in hand, to protect their families from an impending Ogopogo attack.

When the British Columbia government announced that a ferry would run between Kelowna and Westbank in the summer of 1926, it was stated that "the ship would be armed with devices designed to repel attacks from Ogopogo."

The story caught the attention of some big game hunters from around the province and Washington State who began staking out the lake awaiting opportunity to shoot this unusual creature. Much to their disappointment, the animal did not comply and remained beneath the depths of Okanagan Lake. The hype, of course, soon died down.

Frank Buckland, in his book *Ogopogo's Vigil*, wrote: "From time out of mind this legendary creature has viewed with bulging, 'picis-zooid' eyes, the hills, benches, and flats surrounding Great Okanagan Lake. A mysterious something makes its appearance, usually in the warm summer and early autumn, to excite the credulity of those who look upon it.

"Long ago, the elusive monster was known as N'ha-a-itk, Sacred Creature of the Water. It was not until some years later that it was referred to as the Lake Demon."

The evidence of an unusual animal observed by the Native culture can be seen in the many pictographs found in the rock face and on bluffs that border Okanagan Lake. Although interpretation may be deemed questionable, there is no doubting the resemblance to some form of aquatic species. One in particular shows an animal upright with a long neck, flippers, reptilian head with raised ears. Other pictographs in the Gellatly Bay area portray similar creatures, an obvious early artistic depiction of something other than fish, that were either observed or perhaps remembered from stories told to them by the elders.

Ogopogo, or N'ha-a-itk, is a subject of controversy among tribal members. Much like in our culture, there are those who believe and oth-

ers who stand firm and deny its very existence. The skeptic is deserving of the same respect as the believer.

Okanagan Lake extends from Vernon in the north to Penticton in the south, some eighty miles (129 km), with depths varying from a few feet to nearly 1,000 feet (305 m) near Okanagan Center. Reported sightings of this Okanagan USO (Unidentified Swimming Object), occur in almost every area of Okanagan Lake and descriptions are invariably similar. A large animal from twenty to seventy feet (6–21 m) in length, darkish green or brown in color moving or undulating through the water with two or more equidistant protrusions.

A sighting of Ogopogo is as rare as a lottery win, but seeing the animal with the head out of the water is even more unusual. Those lucky enough to see the head have described it as being reptilian or serpentine in shape. Others allude to protrusions or horns on its head, a description that rarely if ever crossed my desk during many years of research. It could possibly be a physical characteristic similar to a periscope, that can raise and lower according to its oxygen requirements. Another theory is that we may be observing the animals in various stages of development, which can account for the differences. Ridges on its back have been reported and an identifiable fin was photographed by Mike Paskal in 1990. The Riegers, while out fishing in the north end of the lake, talk of seeing an animal of at least twenty ton (18 t) having front appendages with a distinct join at the elbow and strong back legs similar to those seen on a dinosaur. They described a swooshing sound as it propelled itself through the water pushing with its strong back legs. It was apparently feeding, as its neck moved back and forth beneath the surface where a school of fish was spotted.

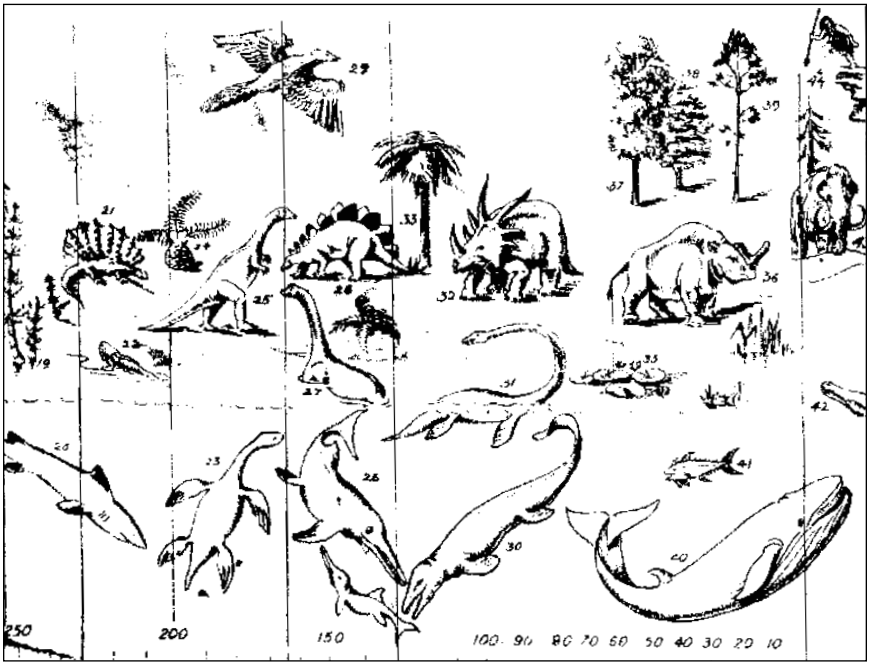
Ogopogo has been observed moving at incredible speeds through Okanagan Lake while creating impressive waves. Others have witnessed the creature thrashing about in one spot much like the sighting filmed by Japan's Nippon Television near Peachland in 1990, an event I was able to witness. At times the animal is seen gliding slowly over the lake's surface, oblivious to anything around it. As it surfaces and submerges, it can be likened to a submarine with massive waves rolling off its back.

This amazing lake creature is unlike any known species, but does indeed bear striking similarities to Nessie in Loch Ness, Champ in Lake Champlain, Issie in Lake Ikeda, Japan, and the many other aquatic animals reportedly seen in hundreds of lakes around the world. If ever the world grew tired of its present probes into space or if money was in abun-

dance, just think of what man might uncover in planned excursions beneath the depths of each of these lakes. Jacques Cousteau was my mentor and the recent loss of this great explorer ended my dream to have him participate along with his mini sub in the greatest expedition ever for these unknown animals of Okanagan Lake. His son now carries the legacy of his father's expeditions.

Imagine being thrust back to a time to witness your very own Jurassic Park in an era some 200 million years ago when dinosaurs roamed the earth. It is said that summer existed for millions of years allowing palm trees to grow in Alaska and fig trees in Greenland. Perhaps it is here that these unusual aquatic animals now being reported in hundreds of freshwater lakes throughout the world could trace their history.

As dinosaurs ruled on land, distinctly related reptiles swam in the seas. The *Tylosaurus*, *Plesiosaurus* and *Mosasaurus* may have been the forerunners to creatures now being reported in lake systems around the world. To assume that they survived the Ice Age in the same structural form as their predecessors may be presumptous but not entirely impossible. It may be more reasonable to assume that the above reptiles evolved in accordance to the environment in which they now live. How else could they have survived for so long?



A program produced in 1999 by Omni Productions, called *The River Giants*, in which I had the pleasure of participating, revealed some interesting facts. In order to provide fertile soil conditions to allow for farming, Sumas Lake near Chilliwack, British Columbia, was drained, fill was provided and farms were built. What was somewhat unbelievable is the fact that as the farmers plowed their fields even after five years, they often came across large prehistoric sturgeon buried beneath the mud. Amazingly, these animals, which should have been dead, were very much alive, and were reintroduced to the nearest body of water. What conditions were present to allow for this amazing resurrection? Is there some characteristic that has allowed for the perpetuation and existence of prehistoric species that the sturgeon was privy to? Could this condition have existed in the Mesozoic era at the time when the *Pleisiosuarus* began its reign in the Triasic period, or when the *Ichthyosaurus* swam about in Jurassic times or as the *Mosasaur* and *Elasmosaurus* entered the Cretaceous age, allowing also for the perpetuation of these species in our time?

To be realistic, the answer to these questions should be an emphatic "No." However, not to contemplate it as being a possibility would be an error in judgement, considering the many reported sightings today of animals resembling reptiles who lived during the Mesozoic age. Descriptions of these creatures cannot be discounted nor can the photos, film footage or videotape accounts showing creatures of enormous size that do not conform to the normal inhabitants of the lake systems in which they now live.

It is a rare interview in which I am not asked, "What exactly do you believe is being seen in Okanagan Lake?" To this I generally take a deep breath and reply: "First of all, I am not a scientist, but a researcher or historian with some fellow reporters coining the phrase Ogopologist, to which I take kindly as it does not commit me to any known science and therefore is free of assumption. No one can presently state without eliciting some doubt just what these aquatic creatures found swimming in hundreds of lakes around the world really are. We can speculate, provide intellectual examinations and state that they have similarities to… or bear a resemblance to…, but until an actual carcass is found and properly examined or a species captured, it is open season for any and all hypotheses. Until such time, the mystery continues."

The second question that almost always follows is: "Has anyone ever been harmed by the creature?" Once again, there is always the temptation to go with the dramatic to stir up the listening audience. However, my

usual truthful response is: “Not to my knowledge.” Unusual holes have suddenly appeared in the bows of boats and bodies of some unfortunate drowning victims have never been recovered, but rational explanations for the mysterious happenings take precedence to an encounter with Ogopogo. It should be remembered that this animal is much like any other living creature; if provoked or threatened in any way, it will react to protect itself or its young.

Lake History

Okanagan Lake is a “fjord lake.” Geologists state that the steep-walled, elongated, deep-water basin has all the same characteristics as a coastal fjord.

Recent seismic tests conducted by a team from the University of Toronto indicate the Okanagan Basin is one of the most impressive surface geological features in North America.

Nicolas Eyles, Henry T. Mullins and Albert Hines found the bedrock under the sediment in the lake at 2,133 feet (650 m) below sea level. They observed a steeply sloping V-shaped bedrock valley along most of the Okanagan Basin.

They state: “The average elevation of the surrounding plateau into which the basin is cut is 1500 meters above sea level indicating a total relief of over 2000 meters. We emphasize that this relief exceeds that of the Grand Canyon of Arizona (1600 m.) where the Colorado River cuts across the Kabib Plateau.”

The sediment of the bottom of the lake forms three layers. The first layer is thought to be ice moraine, left by retreating ice. The second layer was deposited while huge Glacial Lake Penticton existed, covering an area from Okanagan Falls to Enderby. The third layer was laid down after the glacial lake era; it is sediment brought down by the streams feeding the lake.

Kelowna-based geologist, Dr. Murray Roed does not agree with the current belief that Okanagan Lake gets all its water from these surface streams. He believes there is a huge source of groundwater also feeding the lake.

“There is a very high oxygen content in the water even at great depths,” he states, “and there is no way that it all comes from surface runoff.” To say that the surface runoff accounts for all the water going into the lake is unrealistic according to Roed who believes that at least

half the water feeding the lake comes from underground springs and simple groundwater leaching through the hundreds of fractures in the rock all around the basin (Kelowna *Daily Courier*, February 16, 1992).

The latest geological theory among Canadian scientists Dr. Randy Parrish of Ottawa and Dr. Dirk Templeton-Kluit of Vancouver, suggests that the Okanagan Valley was actually part of the west coast of North America, 1.7 billion years ago. Recent studies report that Okanagan Lake straddles a huge fault line at least twelve and a half miles (20 km) deep and extending well into the middle of the earth's crust, representing an earlier torn edge of the continent.

At one time the three layers were all stacked on top of the other. Then the bottom layer uplifted, forcing the two top layers to separate. One layer quite literally went west and the other east forming part of the Coastal Range and Cordillera, including the Coastal and Rocky Mountains.

Dr. Murray Roed is excited about this theory, saying it helps to explain a lot of the valley's landmarks. "Okanagan Mountain Park is probably the oldest existing rock in the area and lies across the lake from Mount Boucherie, which, along with Knox Mountain, represent more recent volcanic activity."

Ice-age scouring alone does not account for the amazing depth of Okanagan Lake. The bedrock floor of the lake sits at 2,100 feet (640 m) below sea-level. The water level measured at its greatest depths is1,200 feet (360 m) or more.

Roed stated that the Grand Canyon can't hold a candle to the way this valley looked at one point during the Jurassic age, when dinosaurs roamed the earth. The distance between the highest point in the Kelowna area, Little White Mountain, and the lowest points, the bottom of the lake, is 6,562 feet (2,000 m). That 2,000-meter difference in this valley was more dramatic 170 million years ago with great rifts and huge volcanoes side by side. After the upheaval and following at least two ice ages, an immense lake covered much of the valley from Enderby to Okanagan Falls and was known as Glacial Lake Penticton. Perhaps it was at this time that the prehistoric-like creatures that we now refer to as Ogopogo or N'ha-a-itk took up permanent residence in the massive lake system.

As the last of the ice damming the glacial lake at Okanagan Falls melted, a huge outrush of water swept out of the Kelowna Basin and carved out many of the hollows and spaces that we see today.

Toward the end of the age of reptiles, the great seas that flooded much of the land returned to their old basins and perhaps there is truth in the theory that the swimming reptiles such as the *Elasmosaurus*, *Mesosaur*

and even the *Tylosaurus* survived, making the many reported sightings of a prehistoric-like creature in Okanagan Lake, Skaha Lake, Lake Kalamalka and Shuswap Lake much closer to reality than many would care to imagine.

The creatures of the lakes could very well have possessed biological survival traits far greater than even the Sardis Lake sturgeon, allowing them continued existence. The on-again, off-again sturgeon debate is a theory that does not appear to "hold much water," where Okanagan Lake is concerned, according to some believers.

Cal Bevan, a well-known diver who not only lived on the lake in Bevan's Barge with his family for many years, but also spent countless hours in the depths of Okanagan Lake, was very much attuned to the different species. He offered an open $5,000 reward in the early 1980s to anyone who was able to catch a sturgeon while fishing the waters of Okanagan Lake. To this day no one has claimed the money. A few years later, a local radio station and sports store offered a $10,000 prize to anyone catching the elusive sturgeon in Okanagan Lake.

"The Okey-dokey Lake Monster Derby, sponsored by CKIQ and Harvs Outdoor Sports in Kelowna is being held in an attempt to prove that Ogopogo is indeed a sturgeon." Chris Gibson, CKIQ director of promotions and national sales states that "when Okanagan Lake Bridge was being built, local divers reported sightings of monstrous creatures in the lake, namely sturgeon."

Although Gibson hasn't been successful in finding someone who has caught a sturgeon from Okanagan Lake, he is "positive the prehistoric-looking fish do live there." In twenty years of research and investigating sightings, there has never been one single sturgeon caught in Okanagan Lake. I do, however, reserve the right to be corrected, as it is a known fact that sturgeon thrive in freshwater lakes.

Considering the great depth of Okanagan Lake and the fact that sturgeon are bottom feeders, if they do indeed inhabit the lake, they would rarely, if ever, need to come to the surface. Ogopogo, on the other hand, not only breaks water but enjoys swimming at high speeds through the lake with head held high. Sturgeon, as we know, remain underwater while swimming and do not have the classic neck of the Ogopogo. Upon request from Tokyo's Nippon Television who planned an expedition to Okanagan Lake, I obtained a species list from the Department of Fisheries. It mentioned common fish, such as kokanee, ling cod, trout and others, but clearly states that to their knowledge sturgeon were never reported in Okanagan Lake.