



This friendly Ogopogo can be sighted at Kerry Park in Kelowna

The Ogopogo Puzzle

Okanagan History Vignette

Picture This

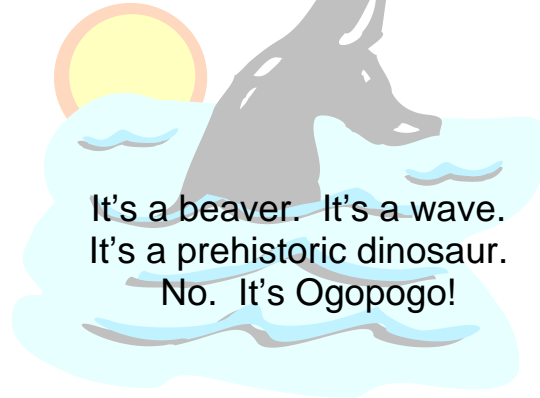
Early one morning you are driving south along Highway 97. As you leave Peachland and round the shore by Antlers Beach, you have a perfect view of Okanagan Lake. You are the only motorist on the road. The lake is strangely still. A light mist drifts over the water and softens the edge of the hills surrounding the lake. The colours of pale blue, silver, and white blend together as the sun creeps over the eastern peaks.

How mysterious everything looks. You take your eyes off the road and glance toward the lake. Suddenly, a ripple shatters the smooth surface of the water. One hump appears, then a second, and then a third. The humps look like waves, but they are a darker colour than the water. You brake the car and park on the side of the highway. As you run toward the water's edge, a large head appears in front of you. "Can this be?" you mutter to yourself.

The beast's dark eyes stare at you for a moment. You stand hypnotized. Not a sound disturbs the morning calm. Then an eyelid slowly covers one of the animal's eyes. Ogoogo has winked at you. You smile back delightedly. The creature nods once, and then it sinks slowly beneath the surface. Ripples fan out from the spot where the creature disappeared.

You return to your car and think about the Ogoogo puzzle. You have come face to face with the most famous resident of Okanagan Lake. You have shared a moment of communication. What did you see? Did you imagine it? Whom will you tell? What will you tell? Will you tell anyone at all?

The Ogopogo Puzzle



The Legend in the Lake

Okanagan Lake is located in the southern interior of British Columbia. It is about 80 miles long and about 1,000 feet at its deepest point. It is the home of the lake monster Ogopogo -- the Okanagan's most famous resident. The legend of Ogopogo has intrigued people for generations. People, not only in Canada but from around the world, have shown an interest in solving the puzzle of Ogopogo. What *is* Ogopogo? Is it a real animal, or is it a story-book creature? Many people who have seen Ogopogo say that at first they thought they had just seen a log. But when the log moved under its own power and dived under water, people realized that they had seen more than just a log. Arlene Gaal, the Okanagan's expert on Ogopogo sightings, says that there are between five and seven sightings a year that are reported. She suspects there are at least that number of sightings, if not more,

that go unreported. Indeed, many people fear that they would be ridiculed if they told anyone about their experiences. Some people are skeptical when it comes to Ogopogo and other lake monsters. They think Ogopogo is a wave caused by a boat or is a shadow caused by sunlight reflecting on the water. Many people have taken photographs of what they say is Ogopogo. But the creature turns out to be too fuzzy or too far away for the pictures to be solid evidence of Ogopogo's existence. Ogopogo has remained a mystery for more than a century.

Naitaka, The Lake Demon

The early First Nations inhabitants of the Okanagan Valley told stories about a creature living in the lake. They said it was long, maybe 35 to 65 feet long. It had dark skin. There were humps on its back.



This label that was used on apple boxes shows a menacing Ogopogo
Photo courtesy of Kelowna Museum

Its head was shaped like the head of a sheep or a horse or a goat. Most importantly, it was a speedy swimmer. First Nations people called the lake monster Naitaka or N'ha-a-itk (pronounced Nuh-haw-aw-it-ck). This name

meant Lake Monster, or Holy Serpent of the Water. They believed that Naitaka liked to eat people who got too close to the water's edge or who were travelling on the lake. To appease the creature, people paddling canoes across the lake would carry a pig or chicken with them. They would throw the small animal into the water as a sacrifice to Naitaka. The pig or chicken was supposed to keep Naitaka busy and give the people time to safely cross the lake. It was especially important to take a sacrificial animal when crossing the lake in stormy weather. In fact, some stories even say Naitaka whipped up dangerous waves with its tail. Ogopogo's home territory has always been said to be Squally Point, on the opposite side of Okanagan Lake from Peachland, where the water can be particularly turbulent. Legend has it that one day Chief Timbasket and his family were travelling on Okanagan Lake near Squally Point when they disappeared. Timbasket did not believe in the lake monster, so he did not take any precautions such as throwing an animal in the lake to satisfy Naitaka. No traces of Timbasket and his family were ever found. However, there were reports that the canoe was found many years later high above the shore line.

Early settlers also tell of witnessing a creature in Okanagan Lake. Susan Allison saw Naitaka in 1878. She was on her ranch on the west side of the lake waiting for her husband to come home. He was across

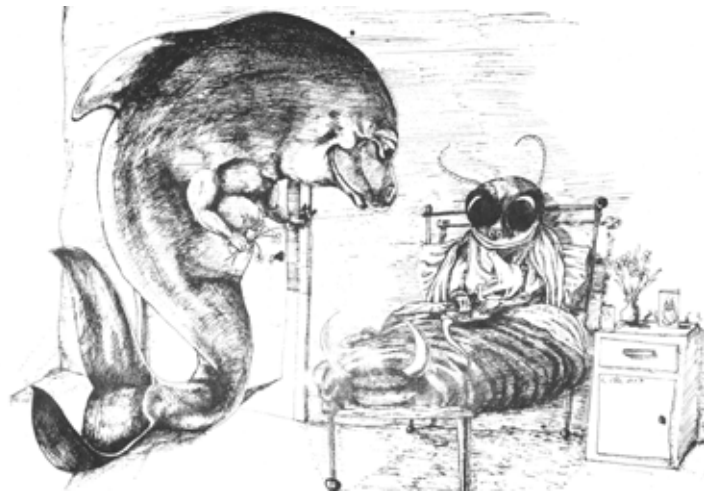
the lake at Okanagan Mission on business. While she was watching the lake, a huge storm blew in, and the water became very rough. Worried about her husband, she ran to the edge of the lake. Mrs. Allison then saw a 60 foot long creature floating motionless. Suddenly it began to swim against the storm, speeding up as it plowed through the wind and waves. John Allison, her husband, did not believe her story. But a mining superintendent, Thomas Smitheran, admitted that he, too, had seen the lake monster on that day. Settlers started to patrol the shores of Okanagan Lake. These armed men were ready to protect their families from the lake demon.

One day, John MacDougall, who was of First Nations descent, was on his way to John and Susan Allison's ranch to help with the haying. Usually, he would drop a chicken or a pig in the lake to keep Naitaka happy. But on this day, he forgot to bring an offering. He was towing a team of two horses across the lake. Halfway across, the horses got sucked underneath by some unknown force. MacDougall's canoe would have been dragged under too, but he cut the tow rope and quickly rowed away. His team of horses was never seen again. MacDougall was convinced that the lake monster had grabbed his horses.

A New Name for Naitaka

In 1924, the dreaded Naitaka was given a new name. A

Vancouver Board of Trade meeting was being held in Vernon. Bill Brimblecombe entertained the delegates by singing about the monster of Okanagan Lake that everyone was talking about. He made up new words for a popular English music hall song called Ogopogo. The next day, the *Vancouver Province* newspaper reported that Ogopogo was the official name of the Okanagan Lake monster. The silly name stuck. Soon it replaced the name Naitaka, that had been used by local people for many years. Along with the change in name came a change in how



♪ His mother was an earwig, his father was a whale;
A little bit of head and hardly any tail—
Ogopogo was his name. ♪

Illustration courtesy of Kelowna Museum

people felt about the sea serpent. It was no longer thought of as a terrifying monster that the name Naitaka suggested. Instead, it was a funny, harmless creature to suit the funny name Ogopogo. The word ogopogo is a palindrome because it reads the same forwards or backwards.

Some Exciting Sightings

Over the years, hundreds of well-respected people have reported that they have seen Ogopogo. The descriptions of what they have seen are very similar. Ogopogo has dark-coloured skin that is described as dark green, greenish-gray, brown, or bluish-black. It has the head of a horse or sheep or goat, and it is sometimes even said to have a beard. The creature has a snake-like body that moves in an undulating motion. People have often seen two or three humps that go up and down as the animal swims in the water. Ogopogo can move at very fast speeds. Only the estimates of size vary. The shortest creatures seen are said to be about 20 feet long. But other people have reported seeing creatures that were 50 to 75 feet long. These contradictory reports suggest that there may have been more than one creature in the lake over time. Or perhaps there have been several creatures living in the lake at the same time.



In 1926, the *Province* newspaper reported that devices to stop an attack by Ogopogo would be installed on the ferry that crossed the lake from Kelowna to the west side. But such devices were never installed. In this photo, the old *Eli Lequime* ferry, now called the *Fintry Queen*, is docked behind Ogopogo in Kerry Park in Kelowna.

In 1934, two young couples were in a rowboat just off Mill Creek near Kelowna. They saw what they thought was a log. They decided to row out to the log and hit it with an oar. One person even said, “Maybe it’s Ogopogo,” and they all laughed. But they were not laughing after they rowed out to the log only to see the log disappear into the water. The animal they saw was 15 to 20 feet long and was about 16 inches thick. They were frightened by what they saw, but the men said they did not admit to fear at the time. They didn’t want the women to think they were cowards.

In 1936, Geoff Tozer and Andy Aikman saw Ogopogo on the lake near Mission Creek. The two boys were fishing when they noticed a flock of seagulls about 50 yards from their boat. The seagulls were

upset about something, and they were making lots of noise. Suddenly, a huge creature came to the surface. It lunged about 14 feet out of the water and grabbed a seagull in its mouth. Then it slipped back into the lake. Geoff reported that the monster was as thick as a telephone pole. "It was an amazing sight," he said.

In 1967, four teenagers were waterskiing on the lake when they saw Ogoopogo. They got the waterskiier back in the boat and began to chase Ogoopogo. They said it was a grey-green colour and had three humps. It looked like a snake. They thought it was about 20 feet long. The boat was going 40 miles per hour, and it could not keep up with the sea serpent. The teenager who was in the water at the time of the sighting said she would never waterski on Okanagan Lake again.

Daryl Ellis of Vernon recently had a close encounter with Ogoopogo. The 52-year old Ellis, a cancer survivor, was swimming the length of Okanagan Lake in August 2000 as a fund-raising activity. He saw Ogoopogo twice. "I was a little spooked," he said. Near Peachland, two creatures joined him to swim for about 45 minutes. They swam about 8 feet below him. He described the one closest to him as big and snake-like. It was "three times as long as me – and I'm 6 foot 2 inches." The second creature was shorter and fatter. Ellis was told that maybe the second one was a reflection of the first one. A few days

later, he saw a creature when he was swimming just south of Kelowna's Floating Bridge. It created waves and raised its head. The beast came close to get a look at him. Ellis saw one eye. He said it was the size of a grapefruit. Not easily frightened, Ellis plans to retrace his route in the summer of 2001.

So What Is Ogopogo?

Many people have given eyewitness accounts of seeing Ogopogo rise from Okanagan Lake. If it is not their imagination playing tricks on them, what could it be? The simplest explanation is that people have seen a "disappearing wave." Although the water is smooth, and there is no wind and no boat in sight, a rolling wave can appear that is 25 - 30

feet long. It moves swiftly forward, and then it disappears. This wave can be the late appearance of waves generated by a boat. These waves are like echoes. They appear long after the boat has moved off. Or the sighting may be a “rogue wave”, which is a large wave in a group of smaller waves. Maybe Ogopogo’s humps are only waves after all.

Psychologists suggest that the way the brain works can explain the sighting of a lake monster. When we see something in the distance, the details are incomplete. The brain fills in what is missing. That way we can make sense of what we see. This phenomenon happens, for example, when we are driving along a straight highway. What looks like a hitchhiker in the distance turns out to be only a bag of garbage or a tilting signpost when we get closer to it. Our brain does not like what it cannot explain. It supplies the details, even if they are incorrect, to make the object into something we can recognize. We expect to see hitchhikers by the side of the road. Perhaps when people expect to see Ogopogo, the brain makes sure that they do.

Since Okanagan Lake is so long and deep, it is possible to believe that something large and unusual could be lurking along the bottom. When people insist they have seen a live object in the water, one explanation is that they have seen a sturgeon. This fish is the largest freshwater fish in North America. A sturgeon can grow to be 13 feet long

and weigh about 900 pounds. But a sturgeon doesn't move in the undulating manner that Ogopogo does. And there is no proof that sturgeon live in Okanagan Lake.



Ogopogo has a mouthful with Jan and Ruth, authors of this vignette. Let's hope Ogopogo is a vegetarian.

A group of scientists in BC think Ogopogo may be a huge river otter. They watched a video filmed by Salmon Arm resident Ken Chaplin. Chaplin filmed the lake creature near Bear Creek Provincial Park in July 1989. The film shows a head breaking through the surface of the lake, part of a body, and a long tail waving in the air. Chaplin described the creature as hairless with dark green skin covered with blotches. It was about 15 to 20 feet long. He spotted the beast about 75 feet from the shore. Chaplin and Arlene Gaal think it was a baby Ogopogo. The scientists concluded that the animal on the film must have been an otter because it wasn't a log, and it didn't have a beaver tail. Although otters are covered with brown hair, one scientist thought

the wet hair of the otter, covered with algae, could be mistaken for green skin. Only the size is wrong. The largest of the river otters is only 4 to 5 feet in length. If Ogopogo is not an otter, perhaps it is a new or unknown animal species.

Some people believe that Ogopogo can be explained as a kind of water dinosaur left over from the Ice Age. In fact, there have been several cases over the last century where creatures with prehistoric origins have been found. In 1938, a lungfish, thought to be extinct, was found off the coast of South Africa. In the 1950s, fishermen in the Indian Ocean pulled up a large fish called a coelacanth. It was supposed to have been extinct for millions of years. In 1976, a long creature never before seen by man was caught by the American navy near Hawaii. It was later named a megamouth shark because it had 2,000 teeth. In 1977, a fishing boat off New Zealand hauled up a 30-foot long creature which resembled an extinct sea reptile. It looked like a plesiosaur. The plesiosaurs were a family of marine reptiles that swam the oceans when dinosaurs roamed the land. They were long-necked beasts with small heads and long tails. They grew to be 15 - 40 feet long. Arlene Gaal of Kelowna believes that Ogopogo is some form of plesiosaur. The Okanagan Valley was originally gouged out by glaciers. At one time, the lake may have even been open to the ocean. Maybe creatures were

trapped in lakes when the glaciers from the Ice Age melted, and they have somehow managed to survive to the present day.

Other Lake Monsters

Okanagan Lake is not unique for being the home of what Arlene Gaal calls an Unidentified Swimming Object. Lake Champlain, on the border of Quebec and Vermont, has Champ. Champ or Champie, as it is sometimes called, is said to look like a serpent, is about 20 feet long and thick as a barrel, and has a head that resembles a horse. Cadboro Bay, near Victoria, BC, is home to Cadborosaurus, or Caddy. Caddy was seen by the local First Nations people, and sightings have been regularly reported for the last 150 years. Caddy is described as having a long body, big eyes, long neck and horsy head. It has even been seen swimming in groups. Ogopogo's most famous relative is the Loch Ness Monster of Scotland, also known as Nessie. Scotland's Loch Ness has similarities to Okanagan Lake. Both lakes have steep, rocky sides, and the lakes' depths are about the same. It is said that Loch Ness, the largest freshwater lake in Great Britain, is home to 30 or 40 Nessies. One theory says that Nessie is a descendent of a plesiosaur. Is it possible that these lake monsters are all plesiosaurs that have lived on since prehistoric times?

Tourism and Television

Whatever its origins, Ogopogo has been a bonanza for Okanagan tourism. There is a booming tourist trade in the communities around Loch Ness with people looking for the monster. The same is true for towns around Okanagan Lake. The personality of Ogopogo has mellowed. Instead of a source of evil feared by First Nations people and early settlers, Ogopogo is now shown to be a gentle and fun-loving creature. It is easily recognized by its smiling face and bright green body. Ogopogo can be sighted everywhere today as plush toys, as cartoon characters on T-shirts, and as friendly-looking statues.



Ogopogo was featured on a postage stamp in October 1990. The stamp was issued as part of the Canadian Folklore series. Ogopogo was shown along with three other

legendary characters: the Sasquatch, a giant squid called Kraken, and Loup-garou, the werewolf.

In 1984, as a gimmick to promote the Okanagan and attract tourists, the Okanagan Similkameen Tourist Association offered a \$1 million reward to anyone who could catch Ogopogo with a fishing rod.

Later, the Association offered \$1 million to anyone who could just prove Ogopogo's existence. In 2000, the Penticton Chamber of Commerce offered \$2 million to any person who could "provide indisputable evidence of the existence of Ogopogo in Okanagan Lake." The offer was renewed in 2001. While Ogopogo continues to be camera shy, the tourists are not. And the cash registers of the Okanagan ring steadily. Everyone loves the mystery monster.



Ogopogo is even part of the Kelowna Coat of Arms. The creature on the right is a seahorse, which is the nearest thing in heraldry to Ogopogo. Photo courtesy of Kelowna Museum

In an attempt to solve the mystery, sonar scanners and underwater cameras are the latest tools being used to find Ogopogo. The American television show *Unsolved Mysteries* filmed a segment about Ogopogo in 1989. The crew went to great lengths to recreate some of the sightings. There were scenes of pioneers patrolling the shores of the lake and of First Nations men throwing a chicken into the water when they paddled a canoe across the lake. Even John McDougall's team of horses was shown being pulled underwater. To make up for the lack of the real Ogopogo, the *Unsolved Mysteries* crew built a model of



Model of Ogopogo built for the “Unsolved Mysteries” show. It was built in four sections so that it could twist through the water. It had a styrofoam head and a canvas body. It was painted green.

Photo courtesy of *Kelowna Daily Courier*

styrofoam and plywood to use during filming. In 1990, a Japanese crew came to the Okanagan to film a show for *The World of Supernatural Phenomena*. But 10 days and \$50,000 later, they left without a glimpse of the star, Ogopogo. However, they did have a sonar image of a 30-foot long creature with head, body, tail, and feet that was swimming at a depth of 320 feet. They never did find out what this creature was. In 2000, a Kelowna group named Ogopogo Expedition 2000 used skilled divers and state-of-the-art equipment to scan the water for signs of the legend of the lake. On August 30, their sonar equipment showed a fast-moving 57-foot long object that was 160 feet in front of their boat. At first it was 23 feet from the surface, but soon it dived deeper into the lake. Since the Kelowna group did not find any conclusive evidence about Ogopogo, they are planning to use more advanced underwater

technology during their next expedition in 2001.

Ogopogo: The Okanagan Enigma

Despite all the attention, Ogopogo remains a puzzle. The skeptics scoff at the idea of a monster lurking in the water of the Okanagan's large and beautiful lake. But others are quick to point out the hundreds of reported sightings from rational people. Can so many people be wrong? Perhaps it doesn't matter if the truth about Ogopogo is ever discovered. Just the possibility that we might see it someday is enough to satisfy those who are thrilled by a good mystery. Over the years, there have been many sightings of the creature known first as Naitaka and then as Ogopogo. Although no one quite knows what it is he or she has seen, there is one thing on which they agree. There is ***something*** in the lake.



Do *you* think Ogopogo lives in Okanagan Lake?

Glossary

algae	small water plants; pronounced AL-jee
appease	to calm or make peace by satisfying demands
enigma	something that is puzzling or mysterious
extinct	having died out
intrigued	to be interested or curious
Loch	Scottish word for lake; pronounced Lock
plesiosaur	a fish-eating water reptile thought to be extinct
prehistoric	ancient period before written records of events were made
ridicule	to make fun of or laugh at a person
serpent	a large snake
skeptical	to not believe or to question something
sonar	device for detecting objects under water using sound waves
theory	an idea or explanation for something unknown
undulating	a rise and fall, a wavelike motion
unique	only one of its kind; pronounced you-NEEK

Imperial and Metric Measures

Most measurements in this vignette are given in the old Imperial format: inches, feet, and miles. When many of the sightings of Ogopogo were made, these were the forms of measurement that people used.

You can convert Imperial to metric measurements using these formulas.

inches X 2.54 = centimetres feet X .3 = metres

yards X .91 = metres miles X 1.61 = kilometres

pounds X .45 = kilograms

Here is a list of some of the measurements used in the Ogopogo vignette in both feet and metres.

Okanagan Lake is 80 miles (130 kilometres) long.

Champie is 20 feet (6 metres) long.

Ogopogo is said to be 35 to 65 feet (about 10 to 20 metres) long.

Some say Ogopogo is 50 to 70 feet (about 15 to 21 metres) long.

Ogopogo is described by one witness to be 16 inches (40 centimetres) thick.

The waterskiiers in a boat going 40 mph (64 kph) could not keep up with Ogopogo.

Sturgeon can grow to be 13 feet (4 metres) long and weigh 900 pounds (about 400 kilograms).

The largest river otter is only 4 to 5 feet (1 to 1.5 metres) in length.

Plesiosaurs grew to be 15 to 40 feet (4.5 to 12 metres) long.

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MEET THE AUTHORS



Ruth Chambers: I moved to Kelowna from Prince George in 1997, and I have enjoyed every minute of my life here. I have worked at Okanagan University College for the past four years teaching Adult Basic Education English courses. I can relate to the trials and triumphs of adult students because I returned to university when I was 35 years old. I received a degree in English from the University of Northern British Columbia with an undeclared minor in history. My university history courses always interested me because I learned about our province, our country, and our world. The more I learned about the past, the more connected I felt with the present. I hope these history vignettes of the Okanagan Valley will help readers feel more connected to their communities.



Jan Gattrell: I moved to Kelowna from Prince George in 1990. I have taught English and Social Studies courses in the Adult Basic Education Department for many years at Okanagan University College. I am also a librarian. I work at the Okanagan University College Library and the Kelowna Public Library. I studied history at the University of British Columbia. Writing vignettes about Okanagan history has been exciting work. I have learned about events that shaped the Okanagan and about people who lived here before me. I enjoyed doing research at libraries and archives. We searched for stories and old photos to help our history vignettes come alive. I have never seen Ogopogo. But every time I drive along Okanagan Lake, I look for him. Maybe someday he will wink at me.

