



News

OXFORD UNIVERSITY NEWS RELEASE: Scientists to investigate 'Yeti' DNA

For immediate release

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Project to examine 'Yeti' DNA launched

A new collaboration between Oxford University and the Lausanne Museum of Zoology will use the latest genetic techniques to investigate organic remains that some have claimed belong to the 'Yeti' and other 'lost' hominid species.

The Oxford-Lausanne Collateral Hominid Project invites institutions and individuals with collections of cryptozoological material (cryptozoology: the search for animals whose existence is not proven) to submit details of the samples they hold, and then on request submit the samples themselves, particularly hair shafts, for rigorous genetic analysis. The results will then be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

Ever since Eric Shipton's 1951 Everest expedition returned with photographs of giant footprints in the snow there has been speculation that the Himalayas may be home to large creatures 'unknown to science'.

Since then, there have been many eye-witness reports of such creatures from several remote regions of the world. They are variously known as the 'yeti' or 'migo' in the Himalaya, 'bigfoot' or 'sasquatch' in America, 'almasty' in the Caucasus mountains and 'orang pendek' in Sumatra, as well as others.

Professor Bryan Sykes, a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, who will lead the project with Michel Sartori, Director of the Lausanne Museum of Zoology, said: 'Theories as to their species identification vary from surviving collateral hominid species, such as *Homo neanderthalensis* or *Homo floresiensis*, to large primates like *Gigantopithecus* widely thought to be extinct, to as yet unstudied primate species or local subspecies of black and brown bears.

'Mainstream science remains unconvinced by these reports both through lack of testable evidence and the scope for fraudulent claims. However, recent advances in the techniques of genetic analysis of organic remains provide a mechanism for genus and species identification that is unbiased, unambiguous and impervious to falsification.'

These techniques were not available to biologists like Dr Bernard Heuvelmans, whose 1955 book *Sur la Piste des Bêtes Ignorées* (translated into English as *On the Track of Unknown Animals*) helped foster widespread public interest in the subject. Between 1950 and 2001, the year of his death, Dr Heuvelmans, as well as investigating numerous claims, assembled a considerable archive that is now curated by the Museum of Zoology in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Professor Sykes said: 'It is possible that a scientific examination of these neglected specimens could tell us more about how Neanderthals and other early hominids interacted and spread around the world.'

For more about how to submit material go to: <http://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/academic/GBFs-v/OLCHP>

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On Saturday, April 28, I had lunch with Dr. Bryan Sykes and his lovely wife Ulla, in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah. Professor Sykes is the author of *The Seven Daughters of Eve* (2002), which traces the descent of Europeans back to seven women, who lived tens of thousands of years ago. His stop-off in Salt Lake City was part of a book tour for his latest popular title, *DNA USA: A Genetic Biography of America*. Sykes is a former Professor of Human Genetics at the University of Oxford and a current Fellow of Wolfson College. He is founder of Oxford Ancestors, a genealogical DNA testing firm.

Sykes published the first report on retrieving DNA from ancient bone in *Nature*, in 1989. He since has been involved in a number of high-profile cases dealing with ancient DNA, including those of Ötzi the Iceman, a natural mummy over 5,000 years old, discovered in the Alps between Austria and Italy, and the Cheddar Man, Britain’s oldest complete human skeleton, nearly 10,000 years old.

Sykes also analyzed hair samples from Bhutan attributed to the Yeti, which seemed to defy DNA identification. Interestingly, during our conversation I learned that further efforts were subsequently successful in determining that the hair originated from bear.

We also discussed the relict hominoid question and the potential for addressing the genetics of the issue. I was pleased to learn of his interest and intentions, first from RHI editorial board member Dr. Anna Nekaris, Reader in Biological Anthropology and Primate Conservation at Oxford Brooks University, who will be collaborating with Sykes on the production of a related television documentary project to include the results of the study. Nekaris’ field research into nocturnal prosimians of southern Asia has brought her into contact with local accounts of, e.g., the *Orang Pendek* and *Mande Barung*, two distinct potential relict hominoids. The “Oxford –Lausanne Collateral Hominid Project” is a welcome development.