Scientists uncover the truth about remains of elusive 'Abominable Snowman' found in Himalayan mountains

A new DNA study of purported Yeti samples is providing insight into the origins of the Himalayan legend.
The hunt for the elusive abominable snowman has suffered a setback as supposed 'yeti' hair and bones proved to be from bears or even a dog.

Sightings of the Yeti or Abominable Snowman - a mysterious, ape-like creature said to inhabit the high mountains of Asia - have been reported for centuries in Nepal and Tibet.

Footprints have also been spotted, and stories passed down from generation to generation.

Now, a new DNA study of purported Yeti samples from museums and private collections is providing insight into the origins of the Himalayan legend.

Researchers analysed nine 'Yeti' specimens - including bone, tooth, skin, hair and fecal samples - collected in the Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau.

The findings, published in the journal Proceedings of the Royal Society B, showed that one was from a dog. The other eight were from Asian black bears, Himalayan brown bears or Tibetan brown bears.

Lead scientist Doctor Charlotte Lindqvist said: "Our findings strongly suggest that the biological underpinnings of the Yeti legend can be found in local bears, and our study demonstrates that genetics should be able to unravel other, similar mysteries."

The team is not the first to research "Yeti" DNA, but Dr Lindqvist says previous projects ran simpler genetic analyses, which left important questions unresolved.

Dr Lindqvist is an associate professor of biological sciences in the University at Buffalo College of Arts and Sciences in the US, and a visiting associate professor at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

She said: "This study represents the most rigorous analysis to date of samples suspected to derive from anomalous or mythical 'hominid'-like creatures."
A hair sample from a purported Yeti in Nepal. (Image: Icon Films Ltd.)
Dr Lindqvist says science can be a useful tool in exploring the roots of myths about large and mysterious creatures.

She noted that in Africa, the longstanding Western legend of an “African unicorn” was explained in the early 20th Century by British researchers, who found and described the flesh-and-blood okapi, a giraffe relative that looks like a mix between a giraffe, a zebra and a horse.

And in Australia some scholars have speculated that references to enormous animal-like creatures in Australia's Aboriginal “Dreamtime” mythology may have drawn from ancient encounters with real megafauna or their remains, known today from Australia’s fossil record.

But while such connections remain uncertain, Dr Lindqvist said the new work - like the discovery of the okapi - is direct, adding: "Clearly, a big part of the Yeti legend has to do with bears.”

Her team investigated samples such as a scrap of skin from the hand or paw of a 'Yeti' - part of a monastic relic - and a fragment of femur bone from a decayed 'Yeti' found in a cave on the Tibetan Plateau.

The skin sample turned out to be from an Asian black bear, and the bone from a Tibetan brown bear.

The 'Yeti' samples that Dr Lindqvist examined were provided to her by British production company Icon Films, which featured her in the 2016 Animal Planet special 'Yeti Or Not' which explored the origins of the fabled being.

As well as tracing the origins of the Yeti legend, Dr Lindqvist's work is also uncovering information about the evolutionary history of Asian bears.

She said: "Bears in this region are either vulnerable or critically endangered from a conservation perspective, but not much is known about their past history."
The scientists sequenced the mitochondrial DNA of 23 Asian bears - including the purported Yetis, and compared the genetic data to that of other bears worldwide.

The analysis showed that while Tibetan brown bears share a close common ancestry with their North American and Eurasian kin, Himalayan brown bears belong to a distinct evolutionary lineage that diverged early on from all other brown bears.
The split occurred about 650,000 years ago, during a period of glaciation, according to the scientists.

The timing suggests that expanding glaciers and the region's mountainous geography may have caused the Himalayan bears to become separated from others, leading to a prolonged period of isolation and an independent evolutionary path.

Dr Lindqvist added: "Further genetic research on these rare and elusive animals may help illuminate the environmental history of the region, as well as bear evolutionary history worldwide - and additional 'Yeti' samples could contribute to this work."
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