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Cat Tales: Investigating the Legend of "Car-Sized" Catfish at the Base of Dams

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Growing up, I have always been particularly interested in cryptids. Bigfoot, Ogopogo, the Tazelwurm and the Hodag, to name a few, gripped my imagination and stoked the cerebral flame I had that some animals were out there that could not be explained. I had a flair for the strange. What I really liked were the stories I read in cryptozoology books. Some stories were so unreal I doubted their veracity (the alleged kidnapping of Albert Ostman by a Sasquatch in 1924, for example). Other stories had a kernel of truth to them, such as stories of gigantic monsters in rivers or lakes. The Beast of 'Busco (Churubusco Lake, Indiana), for example, was a really large turtle named Oscar. A turtle is not a cryptid by itself, but Oscar was said to be truly gigantic, about the size of a dinner table. Due to my herpetology background, I knew that common snapping turtles could never grow so large. However, I thought it could have been an exaggerated estimated-size of a common snapping turtle or, more plausibly, a released alligator snapping turtle, since Indiana is outside of their natural range. Alligator snapping turtles can and do attain truly large sizes; still not as big as a dinner table but the largest wild specimen was over two hundred pounds. I have always liked stories of monsters that turn out to have a rational explanation; it is like solving a puzzle using science facts. My incipient interest in cryptozoology remained as a hobby, until I found out about the academic study of folklore many years later. Reader, you can imagine my surprise and delight when I found out that studying monsters has been an active research area in folklore!

Now I can return to where it all began, and write about a (not so) monster legend.[1] The focus of this paper is an investigation of the "giant catfish" story, or more appropriately, giant catfish legend (hereafter abbreviated GCL). A typical GCL unfolds as follows: when underwater maintenance is needed for dams, divers

volunteer to do the necessary repairs. While deep underwater, the diver sees catfish so big he refuses to go back down there again. In some versions of this story, the diver is so scared that the next day his hair had turned white. Although perhaps not as widespread as the typical contemporary legend one might have heard about (the Vanishing Hitchhiker, CryBaby Bridge, or the Hook Man Legend that harasses teens at "Lover's Lane"), this particular narrative is still memorable for the visual images it invokes. The catfish are always larger-than-normal, usually likened to being the size of a car, usually a Volkswagen. Here is a typical example:

> It was an account from a guy who maintained a dam on the Missouri River in South Dakota. He had to dive really deep and the water got dark. He was doing his work and felt a bump. He turned around shining the light on it. It was huge. It opened its mouth and from the size of it, could've swallowed him easily. I guess he never went back down there again. I wouldn't either!

I remember it like it was yesterday: In 2012, I first heard one of these narratives. The place was Gallipolis, Ohio, a town across the Ohio River from Point Pleasant, West Virginia, the town that spawned Mothman.[2] A friend of a friend (FOAF) told me stories of Volkswagen-sized catfish in the Ohio River. When I first heard the story, I did not think he was lying because of my background in biology and knowing that fish can keep growing, unlike mammals. Of course, he did not know any of the characters in the story. I had no way of verifying any of it. However, he and other people I asked all believed these stories implicitly. They said that catfish can really grow to be exceptionally large if left to grow. The legend would come to life more fully in Spring 2020, when I wrote a similar but less in-depth essay for a graduate Folklore seminar. That final paper I had to write caused me to remember GCLs again from all those years ago. I never heard any more stories directly other than the 2012 incident, but I did see a *River Monsters* episode, a popular TV show about giant freshwater fish starring Jeremy Wade, which caused the memory to emerge from the shadows, much like these catfish appear out of the darkness to scare underwater divers who participate in these legends.

Are these stories true? Why do people tell them? What purposes do they serve? An essential part of analyzing any piece of folklore is the *text-texture-context* method (Dundes 1980: 23). This method looks at not only the story itself, but also the versions of the story, the language used in telling the story and the social surroundings in which the story is told. All this information is as

important as the narrative itself. This paper is about a particular type of narrative, namely legends about giant catfish at the base of dams. This is a form of verbal folklore, and I seek to elucidate the purpose of such stories. I have done this in two ways: narrative analysis and digital ethnography. I analyzed the stories and user comments online who either told or heard such stories to gain a broader perspective on the function and context in which the stories are told. I also wanted to learn about the language used in telling such stories. A collective analysis of these areas will reveal issues that emerge from the telling of GCLs.

I contend that GCLs are much more than spinning yarns around a campfire to scare people. We know that in general, legends reflect some type of anxieties, serve to increase tourism, provide a sense of local identity, and provide insights on how humans construct "otherness" (Puglia 2022: 25). I argue here for the ability of a legend to facilitate the learning of natural history by serving a pedagogical function. By investigating to see if GCLs "are true" people who hear the legend, by virtue of looking up natural history facts about fish, learn natural history in the process. Thus, GCLs serve to bridge folklore and biology. I am not interested so much in the veracity of these legends as in the purposes they serve and how they are used in discourse. As we will see, the stories are not completely unfounded. This is where science plays a part. By using the narratives as a starting point, one can research to see if they are true and learn some biology in the process, thus breathing new life into them. This process of reviewing (and learning) information to determine the veracity of a legend is a process I am calling *sci-ostension*. The process of sci-ostension underscores a new function of legends: as a pedagogical device.

GCLs can serve as a model for investigating how people use legends to determine "truth." Elliott Oring discussed this aspect of legends to profound effect (Oring 2008: 128). In it, Oring discusses a variety of rhetorical tropes in three categories (ethos, logos, and pathos) used to establish truth in legends. This folkloric contribution to scholarship can add to Oring's rhetorical tropes to establish truth in legendry; namely, invoking science to cognitively wrestle with legend content to ascertain its validity. GCLs, therefore, can serve as an example of the interdisciplinary nature of folklore. As the field matures, a central question is how can folklore be applied to other academic areas; what are the broader implications of folkloric items? We as folklorists need to see how folklore can look outward and extend its disciplinary boundaries,

forming conceptual synapses with other areas of study. The notion that folklore can form interdisciplinary cross-pollinations with science has already started; a great recent example is the edited volume *The Aesop's Fable Paradigm* (Barker and Povinelli 2021: 9). Science and the humanities are often thought of as being separate areas of inquiry, ill-suited for collaborations ever since the publication of *The Two Cultures* by C.P. Snow in which he articulates that academia is comprised of so-called "hard" sciences such as biology, chemistry and physics, and what have been called the "soft" sciences such as humanities/social sciences (Snow 1965: 4).[3] Scholarly inquiry in which there is folklore and science overlap disrupts this traditionally held notion of academic incompatibility and underscores the mutual enrichment that can occur between folklore and science. As we will see, the legend romanticizes the science aspect, and the biological knowledge breathes life into the legend.

Cutting Open Catfish Stories

Little exists in the form of scholarship on GCLs, although there are many examples of lake and river monsters, such as Ogopogo, Manipogo, Champ and of course the most famous of all, Nessie. The basic premise of a giant catfish in a body of water does appear in the Thompson Motif Index as type B874.1 (giant river catfish; Thompson 1960: 423). In *The Mexican Pet*, Brunvand noted: "…indeed, it is known almost everywhere in the United States, always localized to some specific place" (1988: 26).

The best category in which to classify catfish narratives would be that of a legend, hence my preferred use of giant catfish legends and not stories. According to Linda Adams, legends are narratives that occur in the real world and the principal characters are human (Adams 1990: 25). Also, legends have a knowable past, unlike a myth with an ambiguous past (McNeil 2013: 41). Furthermore, legends are couched as factual (Bascom 1965: 5). Curiously, in GCLs, many of the narrators swear that the legend is true, while others do not. A notable feature of legends is that it "…takes a stand and calls for the expression of opinion on the question of truth and belief" (Dégh and Vàzsonyi 1985: 5). One must differentiate "told to be true" and "believed to be true" when it comes to legends. Lynne McNeil articulates the point quite nicely: "The legend derives its impact from being presented as literal truth, but that same presentation also invites doubt, questioning and criticism" (McNeil 2013: 62). Narratives about giant fish

integrate all of these foundational characteristics of a legend. Concerning legends, some are tied to a particular place, while others diffuse widely through word of mouth not unlike how the wind disperses seeds. This is not unheard of in a narrative to travel widely; they are appropriately called *migratory legends*. GCLs, then, are migratory legends; curiously, they are not tied to a particular body of water (such as the Ohio River or Mississippi River). They are usually linked to any generic river, lake, reservoir, or dam. So, these stories are localized yet they are not. They blur the line between believable and unbelievable. While people may question whether a catfish can grow as big as a car (Volkswagen being the car of choice), no one questions the existence of catfish themselves. These stories are thus also classified as contemporary legends because they "…are told as if they are true or at least plausible" (Goldstein 2004: 25). In this way they are different from cryptid stories because, unlike Bigfoot or aliens, catfish definitely do exist, but the existence of a giant catfish is not unlike a cryptid conceptually in that it may or may not exist. The truth factor applies to just how big catfish can grow. Brunvand articulates:

> "Perhaps this legend is the rural counterpart of the legend that giant alligators infest the sewers of New York City. The certain clue that we are dealing with folklore here, besides the many variations, is the mention of the old-hair-turned-white motif, which regularly occurs—not in real life, but only in legends—especially the stories describing grisly crimes or gruesome accidents" (Brunvand 1988: 27)

Curiously, the "white-haired" motif element is a dynamic part of the narrative; I never noted it firsthand, but the implication is that the diver was so scared he prematurely aged. The excessive aging underscores the unnatural size of these fish; they are so big that people fear for their safety, due to the possibility of being eaten.

The following paper explains GCLs, functions, and applications. I first describe my methodology and then list results of digital ethnography, paying attention to stable and dynamic narrative elements as well as elucidating the narrator's belief in such stories. I also state my case for how sci-ostension is used to cognitively wrestle with these stories. Then, I discuss functions of the legends, seeking connections to previously published folklore research when appropriate. Finally, I conclude with a summary and suggest future research applications. To describe GCLs more deeply, I used digital ethnography and looked for examples of such narratives in various social media groups as well as noting how these legends

were deployed. I also looked for relevant comments in YouTube videos and online articles about giant catfish.

Catch of the Day: Reeling in Giant Catfish Stories

Giant catfish stories are quite short; they are not like traditional stories in that they consist of no more than a few sentences. There is no language that frames the story from surrounding material or has a stylized structure ("Once upon a time…"). Stories are either told by a family member, friend or friend of a friend (FOAF); the context was always fishing, or an activity related to fishing, such as cleaning fish that were caught. Stories are told to fellow anglers, notably people who have never fished in the river/lake/dam before previously. Below are some examples:

> "I was helping a friend clean some catfish some years ago and he told me this story."
>
> "I've heard pretty much the same story for my whole life for any dam…"
>
> "When I was around 10 I heard a story from my dad…"
>
> "My grandpa would tell stories of catfish that divers were scared to death of."

I noticed stable elements in each account. For example, a diver was always involved. Also, an attack was mentioned most of the time, but not all of the time. One account tells of the catfish sitting still until a diver got too close and it threatened to "suck him in." I did not record the white-haired motif in any of my informants (whereby the diver is scared so badly that their hair turns white overnight). The catfish involved were also always unusually large. The specific size of the catfish was interesting. Some were as big as a car (mini-van or Volkswagen); the rest were described as "giant" or "huge." Here are a few examples:

> "there were catfish the size of mini vans."
>
> "they found huge catfish…"
>
> "It was huge, it opened its mouth and from the size of it, could've swallowed him easily."

Size as an inherent property, then, is a stable element in that all informants describe that catfish are exceptionally large.

However, exact dimensions of the fish is a dynamic element in just how big the catfish are described as capable of attaining. Note that the size is not mentioned in specific feet, but as relative to a car. I do wonder if the reason a Volkswagen is often invoked to indicate size is because it is not so large as to be deemed false. Would a Cadillac-sized catfish still capture the imaginations of listeners as being potentially true? The specific model of Volkswagen is never mentioned. When I think of a Volkswagen, I think of the VW Beetle model; their length is about fourteen feet. (Edmunds 2019). Some believed in the giant size, others were skeptical but had an open mind. No one outright denied the possibility of a giant catfish. Many were sure that catfish that large do exist. Some even were planning to catch just such a fish by using outsized bait (fish that are 10-15 pounds; most people would be happy to catch fish of this size). A few individuals in online forums even knew that catfish could get unusually large. Most of the people who told these stories believed them. Interestingly, some people knew that these stories were widely traveled: A few said that they heard these repeatedly in more than one state. I also found numerous comments in response to YouTube videos and online articles that support this statement; people who have heard this story are keenly aware that it is widespread:

> "These stories are all folklore and every lake with a "Dam" has that story."
>
> "I've heard pretty much the same story for my whole life for any dam in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas ... anywhere there's catfish lol"
>
> "I grew up Georgia and heard this story all the time."
>
> "I heard this story many times in Tennessee."

There is also, from what I have seen, one main scenario involving maintenance divers. An alternative version tells of a car wreck at the bottom of a lake and anyone going down there will meet giant catfish that make it too scary to go back down there again. So, then, we have migratory legend about a known fish that could grow to an abnormally large size, big enough to eat a person or at the very last scare them pretty badly. GCLs fall within the realm of cryptid stories because of the "what if" factor. This mindset is summed up nicely by Loxton and Prothero in the book *Abominable Science!*, a recent cryptozoology work:

> What if it turns out that there really is a primate living in the Pacific Northwest? Or what if some strange tide brings in a frilled sea serpent? What if a presumed extinct bird or mammal is found in some remote, exotic locale? I doubt most of these monsters or cryptids are real—but it's the what if that keeps me excited. (Loxton and Prothero 2013: 299; italics in original text)

What is the relationship between GCLs and cryptozoology? Car-sized catfish may or may not exist, but catfish certainly do. That much is certain. But it is not hard to wonder if fish could grow to larger than normal sizes. The use of science to support or fail to support facts is crucial. This process is used in GCLs to elucidate their veracity. Supporting the existence of an animal of which there is no actual specimen, like a Sasquatch or Nessie, is far more problematic. And this problem is at the very crux of how cryptozoology is perceived.

The field of cryptozoology has been heavily criticized since its inception (the word was first coined by Bernard Heuvelmans in 1965) (Rossi 2016: 573). The major reason that it is considered a pseudoscience is because of a difference in epistemology. Traditional science as we know it employs the hypothetico-deductive method, more familiar as the scientific method. Central to the scientific method is a hypothesis, which must be testable and falsifiable. Additionally, peer review is required for research to be published in the form of journal articles or books. All of these are missing in cryptozoology (Loxton and Prothero 2013: 13). The importance of science is crucial in explaining biological diversity. Cryptozoology also has been reliant on oral narratives:

> When screening resources, Heuvelmans emphasizes the great importance of myths and legends because usually the rarest and lesser-known animals tend to become myths, thereby making it easier to transform them into something quite different from their original zoological status in oral and written tradition. (Rossi 2016: 576)

Butchering of folklore terminology aside, legends have been used to describe biological diversity. However, using a scientific approach would give cryptozoology more validity and less criticism from outside scholars. The short-lived journal *Cryptozoology* of the International Society of Cryptozoology circulated for twelve volumes, from 1982-1996. Many journal articles were a serious attempt to use science for the purpose of validating animals, sometimes from legends. For example, Aaron Bauer and Anthony

Russell described a single known specimen of a likely extinct gecko in 1986, named *Hoplodactylus delcourti*, the largest of known geckos at two feet long. They believed that this was the *kawekaweau* of Maori legend in New Zealand (Bauer and Russell 1986: 147). Subsequent papers from the pair of herpetologists used osteological evidence (two bones found in a New Zealand cave to show evidence that these bones either are derived from *Hoplodactylus delcourti* or a similarly sized giant gecko (Bauer and Russell 1988: 22). A subsequent study extracted mitochondrial DNA from the single stuffed specimen and determined it is closer, phylogenetically (evolutionary) speaking, to New Caledonian geckos, meaning that it is probably not the *kawekaweau* but the only known local lizard to fit the description (Heinicke et al. 2023: 7). Still, the process used to arrive at this point is emblematic of other papers published in the journal *Cryptozoology* and underscores the use of science to make sense of unknown animals, some presented in legends. Finally, Bauer and Russell, in a paper in the Journal of Ethnobiology, extol the importance of folkloric sources in biology, stating:

> The evidence we present serves as an example of the value of native folkloric sources in certain aspects of zoological alpha systematics…Nonetheless, the reciprocal illumination of the fields of zoology and ethnology holds great potential for uncovering useful information…Here we have a taxon represented by a partial specimen and "known" only from anecdotal sources. It is precisely these sources that have aided in its identification. (Bauer and Russell 1987: 83, 89)

Monsters in the Water … or in Our Minds?

The informant interviews revealed a few possible functions of giant catfish narratives upon further analysis. Legends can serve a number of functions other than the obvious story. They can provide us much about the anxieties and tensions of the community (Goldstein 2004: 140). For example, one function of these stories could be that of an advertisement, a hook to draw tourism to the lake or dam. If one looks cryptids in general, small towns are well represented. Whether in Fouke, Arkansas, or Lake Churubusco in Indiana, small towns have commodified their monsters and leveraged them into profits. The Fouke Monster Festival takes place over a weekend every April and tickets run between $29 and $40 (Swanson 2017). Turtle Days occurs over 3 days every June and features rides, Miss Turtle Days, turtle races,

a parade, and a 5K race (Turtle Days 2024).[4] Giant catfish do not seem to follow this trend because of the widespread nature of the legends, but I did find evidence of a recent festival starting in 2022 in honor of a giant catfish Eli, who was never real but the subject of a children's book, in the tiny town of Satartia, Mississippi (population sixty-four as of 2022; (Broom 2022).

These stories are also effective because they play on primal fears in people: xenophobia and thalassophobia: fears of the unknown and open water, respectively (Phobia List 2024). Diving into deep, dark water is indeed a strange and foreign place for many people. The combination of being deep underwater where it is dark is claustrophobic. It is also interesting to note that senses are attenuated; you cannot see or hear very well and of course cannot communicate with a fellow diver, should they be down there as well. This sensory deprivation sets the stage for a scary experience; humans lack control in such a setting. They are at the mercy of the surrounding elements.

These narratives could serve as a warning not to venture into an area where humans are out of their element or do not belong. Giant catfish narratives are similar to many cryptid stories, in that a large creature is encountered in a foreign setting (such as underwater or deep in woods); the person is out of their element and far from civilization. It is as if such stories are a warning for humanity to keep some places wild and runs counter to the belief that the planet has been thoroughly explored. If maintenance divers cannot finish their job on repairing a dam, and subsequent divers are too scared to do so, the dam goes unrepaired. The implication is these structures would be non-function and nature would slowly reclaim them. Nature 1, unnatural structures, 0.

The blockbuster *Jaws* struck an emotional chord with American audiences when it premiered just in time for summer vacation in 1975. Looking at *Jaws* fan sites on social media, many people remarked that the movie made them afraid to even venture into the water:

> " I saw it as a teen and have not gone in the water since."
> " No one went to the water that summer it came out."
> "For several weeks afterwards my friends and I wouldn't even swim in rivers or creeks
> "Over 100 miles inland."

This primal fear is also rooted in empirical data. According to the Center for Disease Control, drowning death rates hovered around 1.2-1.4% between 2019 and 2022. If we look at age class drowning

rates, they are highest in ages 1-4, following by ages sixty-five and above (CDC 2024). Thalassophobia, the fear of open water, is a prominent fear in America; 26.9% of those surveyed said they were afraid or very afraid of deep lakes and oceans (Chapman University 2023). Seán Harrington, in *Beasts of the Deep*, had this to say about human and the deep:

> The deep sea offers us an oppressive and foreboding context—A space unexplored, unknowable and overwhelming. In the farthest reaches of the abyss there is only darkness, light can barely penetrate past 200 metres and beyond these depths the sea is populated by monstrous creatures of the real, the fictional and the 'possible.' (Harrington 2018: 27).

In addition to Jaws, there are many movies about shark attacks or dangers of the deep. *The Reef, Under Paris, Great White, Deep Blue Sea, The Shallows* and many more. Other movies that harness our fear of underwater creatures include *Lake Placid, Piranha and Piranha 3D*. The multitude of movies about the dangers of attacks by large creatures in deep or open water (the vast majority being fish) underscores the role of thalassophobia in human lives.

What is interesting about these stories is that there is a shred of credibility here; unlike Bigfoot or the Loch Ness monster, catfish do exist. Large ones exist too, but the size of a Volkswagen? Are people deliberately lying about the size? It turns out that this is not a straightforward answer. It is common for people to exaggerate the size of a fish. Fishing enthusiasts are notorious for doing that, either deliberately (by holding the fish closer to the camera so forced perspective causes the fish to appear larger) or unintentionally by exaggerating. It may be that the catfish sizes are exaggerated but they are still larger than normal (a Volkswagen is fourteen feet long). If the catfish were even half that size, it would still be larger than average and certainly possible. We do know that objects appear larger underwater and that diver masks can cause an object to appear larger due to the density of the lens (Ross and Nawas 2003: 69). Strategic lying can make a story more interesting (Bauman 1986: 12). However, I have not determined the degree to which the narrators exaggerate the size of the fish; many genuinely believe that catfish can grow to monstrous proportions or are simply repeating rhetorical elements when they first heard the legend.

So, can catfish grow to such proportions? The answer is yes, and no. Catfish in the U.S. have never been verified to be that large. The biggest on record are 134 lbs. for blue catfish and 123 lbs. for

flathead catfish, the only two American species that could theoretically give rise to giant catfish stories (Schmidt 2017). Both of these records were five feet long; large but not car-sized. But there could be specimens that have not been verified but have been seen by these divers. There are two biological reasons why catfish could grow to larger than normal sizes and give rise to these stories. One reason is a phenomenon among fish and reptiles known as indeterminate growth. Whereas mammals grow to a certain point and then stop, fish keep growing throughout their lives (Hariharan et al. 2015: 1). Thus, the largest fish are also the oldest fish. Since fishing pressures are higher now due to a higher human population, fish are seldom able to live long enough to attain monster sizes. Another reason for a super-sized catfish is due to a unique feature of the narrative: dams. Dams are locations where fishing is often not allowed. In addition, dams are spots where there is a constant influx of highly oxygenated, nutrient rich water. Consequently, any fish living there would have access to more food than normal and not be caught by fishing; thus, such a fish could grow larger than normal. Taking the two facts together, it is biologically possible for a catfish to grow to larger than normal sizes. Fish that are eating more food than normal and not being caught could grow into monster-sized fish. Since such fish are rare due to overfishing, the narratives could serve as a metaphor for the tension between humans and nature.

Another possibility is that the catfish stories are a case of mistaken identity. Paddlefish are a species of fish that attain five feet and have huge mouths and look almost other-worldly. They are harmless to people, but it is easy to see how someone diving in the deep could mistake it for a huge catfish. Another likely candidate is a species of fish known as a sturgeon. These are bottom dwelling fish that can attain huge sizes; certainly, larger than a person and for one species (White sturgeon) up to twenty feet in length. These lack teeth and have small mouths; they function like a vacuum cleaner along the river bottom and are unlikely to pose a threat to humans. Still, if someone diving in deep water came up on one it is understandable how they could become frightened. In this scenario, the size is not exaggerated but the species of fish is.[5]

Additionally, such stories may serve as a purely entertainment function. They are more common in the south and Midwest, although more data is needed to support this statement. This is supported by statements from my informants:

> "Heard the same urban legends around Charleston, WV…"
>
> "I've heard the same story about areas in western/central Kentucky."
> "It's a story that's everywhere. We hear the same thing in Tennessee."
>
> "I've heard pretty much the same story for my whole life for any dam in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas...anywhere there's catfish…"

Much like Appalachian ghost stories, catfish narratives may serve as a way to bide the time and provide entertainment in rural areas where things to do for fun are scant. Thus they could serve a similar function as the Jack tales in Appalachian folklore. There is a type of person known as a sensation seeker. These individuals actively seek out new experiences, especially dangerous ones, such as hang-gliding, mountain climbing or in this case, listening to scary stories (Carter 2018). Much like the scary stories told by the campfire or the person slowing down to see the aftermath of a traffic accident, catfish stories could fill that role of a controlled type of fear: something scary but in a regulated manner. You are scared but you realize that this scary event will not happen to you. It is like watching a scary movie.

Interestingly, I have anecdotal evidence that suggests that variants of giant catfish stories are not just exclusive to the U.S. Such a migratory legend would surely be associated with rivers, lakes, dams, and large bodies of water anywhere. Here is an example from an informant:

> Heard this story about Murray cod in Australia, large pipes believed to be blocked, divers sent down to inspect and return to the surface saying they will never go down there again as they saw Murray cod big enough to eat them blocking the pipes…

There are many freshwater fish worldwide that grow large enough to frighten an unsuspecting diver. These include the wels (Europe), piraiba (South America), goonch (India), Murray cod (Australia), and Nile perch (Africa; River Monsters 2024). There are stories of first three of these species attacking and, in some cases, eating humans. In Theodore Roosevelt's *Through the Brazilian Wilderness*, he mentions a story of a catfish that tried to attack men in a canoe; it was known as the *piraiba*. The man killed the attacking piraiba with machetes and paraded it around town; it

was ten feet long. These catfish were feared more than caiman because they could not be seen while in the water (Roosevelt 1926: 311-312). Jeremy Wade, host of the popular TV show *River Monsters*, told a story in an episode about a *piraiba* found with a missing fisherman's legs sticking out of its mouth. Whether the fish killed the man or scavenged his dead body is another matter. In another episode, Wade mentioned the infamous Kali River attacks in India. These were a string of attacks where people went missing, some in clear sight of other individuals. Wade ruled out whirlpools and crocodiles using deductive reasoning. The only culprit left was the goonch, a catfish species that can grow large enough to eat a person, aided by the local Hindu custom of having funeral pyres in the river, the fish were growing larger than normal on a diet of human flesh (Dark Tales 2019). Thus, catfish in other parts of the world can and do grow to unusually large proportions and have preyed on humans.

"I believe they can get that big": a Case for Sci-ostension

However, I argue for the unique role of giant catfish narratives not considered thus far: that of prompting the listener to negotiate the truth. By exaggerating the size of the catfish, these stories serve to introduce just enough doubt in the listener to cause them to investigate the story for themselves. The size of the catfish is so large (Volkswagen-sized) that people might have trouble believing such stories. They then research this to see if it could really be true. The role of legends in prompting people to investigate the truth is an interesting area in folkloric research. Elliott Oring has argued that legends are linked to truth determination (Oring 2008: 127). His descriptions of various legend tropes serve as an important way to qualify different legends and to extract the extent of truth inherent in the narrative. This makes an ideal lens through which to examine the giant catfish narratives. Oring asserts that a legend makes two claims about its truth:

> 1-Truth of the account as it is given.
> 2-Narrative makes a claim that goes beyond the facts. Facts call for further interpretation. (Oring 2008: 128)

Examining the giant catfish narratives, we can see both claims inherent in the stories. For example, the stories are about giant, car-sized catfish. For many people, that alone is believable. My informants mostly believed that catfish could grow to these large sizes. However, the catfish stories also invite further interpretation

of the information presented. This was something mentioned by one informant in particular who wanted to learn more about giant catfish to see if they really could grow this large. In summary, a listener who does not completely "buy in" to the story is interested enough to determine the veracity of the facts presented. Grappling with legends to see if they are "true" or not serves as a sort of pedagogical device; someone reading giant catfish narratives can learn about biology while researching to see if such claims are realistic. Indeed, this is an important function of legends that have only recently been mined. Koven, in a study about the TV show *Most Haunted*, found that viewers used the evidence presented in given episode to grapple with the veracity of said evidence (Koven 2007: 183).

Oring also discusses the issue of the distancing between the narrator and the narrative source (Oring 2008: 133). The authenticity of the source can affect the believability of the narrative; the more distance between the narrator and source, the less believable the story has become. If we look at the issue of distance among my informants' responses, many have a small distance:

> "I was helping a friend…"
>
> "I heard a story from my dad…"
>
> "…but I have heard it from actual divers."

None of my informants presented incorporated narratives or memorates, but I did find semi-incorporated and detached narratives. More narratives would have to be collected to determine the generality of these findings.

A feature that makes stories highly believable is the emotion such stories engender in their listeners. In fact, when emotion accompanies information, it is more likely to be transferred to long-term memory (Saladin 2018: 531). This is the *pathos* to which Oring refers (Oring 2008: 157). Giant catfish narratives are stories that stir up emotions in their listeners, usually fright or amazement. By playing on most peoples' fears of the unknown and of being in open water, as discussed earlier, these stories are not easily forgotten. It would be interesting to investigate what stands out most to people about these stories: the feelings produced, or the claims made.

Dégh and Vázsonyi offer an alternate lens through which to examine giant catfish narratives by considering ostension, a

semiotics term (Dégh and Vàzsonyi 1983: 8). As a way of acting out a narrative element, ostension also is involved when a reader wants to interpret narrative aspects to determine the truth factor contained therein. The three major types of ostension are pseudo-ostension (a hoax), proto-ostension (presenting the narrative as part of the narrator's experiences) and quasi-ostension (a misunderstanding). Among my informants, nothing was ever mentioned about hoaxes, and this has never been read about during my research on this topic. Proto-ostension theoretically could happen, but I have never encountered a giant catfish story where the narrator was *the* diver involved. It is common for the narrator to hear the story directly from the diver involved, a situation with reduced egodistance and thus greater believability (Siikala 1982: 165). Quasi-ostension could be apparent in these stories, as many accounts could be a case of mistaken identity. A diver could encounter a sturgeon, a fish that, while large, is not harmful to humans. It does not take much for such an encounter to become heavily embellished as an attack. While none of my informants said they wanted to dive deep underwater to evaluate the truth of these stories, some did want to fish with large bait and tackle designed to catch a huge catfish. This action is a form of ostension. Here is one such example:

> "I've actually been thinking about headed to that dam with my shark rig just to see what's in there."

Here, someone who has heard GCLs wants to see for himself if such sized catfish can be found in a particular body of water. This is a first step in researching the legend: curiosity is piqued enough to want to investigate further. I have found numerous examples of individuals rationalizing how catfish can be large using biological knowledge:

> "And there were reports of catfish that are of gigantic proportions under the dam. Now, it didn't say anything about eating humans, though. Basically, a catfish that size would lay at the bottom of the dam and just have its food swim right in its mouth without having to move."

> "I do believe catfish can get absolutely huge given the right environment, so it's definitely a possibility there's a VW size catfish somewhere that we haven't documented yet in the U.S but they aren't everywhere as the stories might indicate."

> "I'd known about the indeterminate growth of fish for a number of years before I heard the stories."
>
> "With the right environment it could be possible."

I also found numerous instances where, during discourse on GCLs, many users on online forums would doubt the existence of catfish that attained unusually large sizes. These statements were countered with natural history knowledge that catfish have indeterminate growth and as long as they are not being caught, they will keep growing to larger and larger sizes. The TV show River Monsters was cited in many cases too, to demonstrate that host Jeremy Wade had used biological knowledge to find the underlying cause of legends such as Loch Ness or the monster of Lake Iliamna, Alaska. In a typical River Monsters episode, Wade would solve a mystery about attacks in a particular body of water or rationalize sightings of giant fish usually in freshwater environments. Many users participating in GCL discussion posts reference how they have learned from the show and how to apply this knowledge to educate users who are skeptical of GCLs. Other users admitted that they researched to see if catfish could grow so large using search engines like Google. This finding supports how many users were confident that catfish could grow so large; their belief was rooted in natural history knowledge. What is interesting here is the peppering of biological knowledge in these online discussions. People continue to interact with the legend, although not physically going to the site, but researching and learning to not only determine the veracity of a legend, but to use this knowledge to confront skeptics.

Catfish in the (Folkloric) Depths

The key findings of this paper are many. GCLs are migratory legends that involve a common motif in folk-literature (B870, giant animals). The catfish in the story are always super-sized and occur at the base of dams or otherwise deep places in lakes and rivers. The human characters in these narratives are always scared upon seeing the giant catfish, either intentionally or unintentionally. The scared diver vows never to go back down there again. GCLs articulate thalassophobia, the fear of open or deep water and the associated fear of drowning or not being in control of one's surroundings. These legends also underscore the continuing tension between humanity and the environment, revealing that there are still unexplored places. The conquest of nature is not

complete. There are still areas that humans cannot control, that the lack of agency in such situations is what scares us. GCLs can also function as a way to entice tourism because of people's inherent fascination with supersized animals. This phenomenon is well-known in freshwater anglers who are keen to show off the massive fish they caught in the form of pictures, some of which exaggerate the size of the fish using forced perspective.

Another key finding is the use of what I term *sci-ostension* as a way of thinking through GCLs and combining science and folklore in the process. Many informants believed that catfish could grow to such large sizes by applying natural history/biology that they learned previously. Consequently, people are "acting out" a legend not by diving to the base of a dam, but mentally, by researching the possibility that catfish can grow large or by recalling such information previously learned, most notably by watching previous relevant episodes of the TV show River Monsters. The host, Jeremy Wade, performs sci-ostension in about every episode as he strives to arrive at an explanation for giant fish or fish attacks. The production of these episodes combines science and folklore in a complementary way. In the process, people who have watched these episodes see how science can give support of legends and how legends can breathe life into natural history/biology of a given species. The process of sci-ostension can be used as a pedagogical device to teach science and how to effectively present an argument. Presenting a legend and then asking readers to research what is known about the content can be a model for teaching folklore or a related interdisciplinary course.

How do these findings contribute to our understanding of GCLs in both historical and contemporary contexts? For one, tales of giant catfish speak to human construction of "otherness" and make us keenly aware of it. Encountering something big in the dark depths surely triggers our sympathetic nervous system (increase in heart rate, breathing rate, and release of adrenaline aka norepinephrine to put our body into fight or flight mode). The human characters in the story always assumed the worst and immediately left the scene, never to return. In most instances they just saw a massive fish or it bumped them; it was not being inherently aggressive. We as humans fear the worst when the catfish was being merely curious. This communication barrier underlies the role of these legends in pointing out that we as humans do not belong down there. It is an undeveloped area; leave it be. Effectively GCLs take down human exceptionalism by a

few pegs by reminding us that we are not so special: one of those gigantic fish, if it really wanted to, could end that diver's life and there is not anything that can be done about it. Curiously, if the maintenance diver refuses to go back in, another one will be hired to do so. And the cycle continues. Overall, this means that dam maintenance is not performed and such a human-caused structure will fail, to return back to nature. In the human vs. nature conflict, score a point for nature.

The findings of this paper have wider implications. It would be interesting to document the geographic correlation of these narratives. Are they found mostly in the South and Midwest? Or are they associated with rivers and dams regardless of geographic area? The first time I heard one of these stories was in Appalachian Ohio; fishing for catfish was common in the area. Nobody in the area seemed to question if catfish could grow this large. Are these narratives better intact in Appalachia, which itself is physically and culturally isolated? Are these stories part of vernacular identity in Appalachia (and by extension, the South and Midwest)? For example, catfish is a major part of southern foodways (Schweid 2007: 136-138). A cultural biography of the catfish would provide additional insight into the importance of catfish, especially to Southerners, where catfish has transformed from a trash fish to a favorite food; farming catfish is big business (Schweid 2007: 138). Giant catfish narratives may be a way to build group cohesion. Noodling, the act of catching catfish bare-handed, is extremely popular in the South and Midwest (Laseter 2011: 154-157). An ethnographic study of noodlers in Missouri was done by Mary Grigsby and her findings reveal the importance noodling has to group identity, particularly among working class, rural men.[6] Noodling is seen as a form of resistance to an intrusion of urbanized culture (Grigsby 2012: 75). GCLs seem to also share this trait. Her book does not mention anything about GCLs but noodlers would be an excellent source for further collecting and analysis of such narratives. Regarding the stories themselves, the "truth factor" part of the narrative could also be influenced by the narrative performance itself, the egodistance between the narrator and narrated persons, and act of expressive lying by the narrator. These variables and others could affect listeners' perceptions of the truth just as much as the narrated events can. It is also possible that the listener's background, values, and the like could affect their ability to believe the narrative. A more in-

depth, nuanced study could help to reveal subtle patterns such as these.

Finally, giant fish are on the decline. Fewer and fewer giant fish are caught anymore worldwide. Overharvesting is a main source, but I have found evidence of an ironic culprit given the legends about giant catfish: dams. A 2021 paper found that dams reduce river connectivity and simultaneously increase fragmentation of available habitat, threatening freshwater megafauna (He et al. 2021: 1). Giant catfish legends, now are seen to take on a new light: as a conservation measure. I earlier stated how GCLs could in theory prevent dam maintenance, thus causing them to fail because workers are too scared to go down there. In light of the role of dams in fragmenting habitat, it all comes full circle: if dams fail, nature wins and river connectivity is assured, thus helping species of fish.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank David Puglia for inviting me to contribute to this volume. I would also like to thank several anonymous reviewers, whose comments improved the quality of this manuscript.

2. One wonders if the prior belief by residents in Mothman increases their likelihood of belief in subsequent legends. Many resident I talked to believed that Mothman was real and was due to the "nuclear waste" kept at the TNT area (one resident's words). Some do think an insect got mutated somehow to emerge as Mothman.

3. Unfortunately, folklore still has a stigma of being poorly understood by those outside the field. The number one assumption is that folklore means "old fashioned" or past tense when the reality is folklore is very much emergent and in the present.

4. Both festivals provide good examples of commodification. For a good example, see Lisa Gabbert's Winter Carnival in a Small Town (Utah State University Press, 2011).

5. There are two American fish that can grow exceptionally large, to the size of Volkswagens and beyond. They are the alligator gar and white sturgeon. Both are harmless to humans, despite their enormous size. Sturgeons in particular are thought to be the culprit behind many lake monster sightings/legends. Alligator gars are unfortunately persecuted but, despite their toothy appearance, do not make meals of humans. In an episode of River Monsters, host Jeremy Wade swam with human-sized alligator gar; they swam away when he approached.

6. Noodling is controversial, but is a valued tradition to community members. See Simon Bronner's book Killing Tradition (University Press of Kentucky, 2008). Noodling is effective because the fish is a male guarding eggs, so this is why the fish are so defensive. Any caught fish

are usually eaten. So, noodling deprives eggs of being guarded and thus they do not hatch, negatively affecting catfish population levels. Another comparable pastime that is both a tradition and ecologically harmful is the annual Rattlesnake Roundup in Sweetwater, Texas.

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