



FEATURE

by KARIN WILSON

20-year-old Fisheries documents float to the surface

Okanagan Lake serpent now blamed for salmon loss



The Official Opposition is on the verge of exploding a long-held discovery that the Liberal Party wanted to keep under wraps until it could get maximum international coverage leading into the 2010 Olympics. Documents leaked from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans based in Kamloops reveal there is now scientific evidence that the famous Okanagan sea serpent not only exists, but is responsible for the mysterious drop in salmon stocks in recent years. A long-time member of the New Democratic Party in Penticton received the information and quickly passed it on to Victoria.

"I'm not usually one to get leaked documents," said Jeanette Oak, "but this was slipped under my door all wrapped in newsprint."

At first, Oak thought there was something fishy going on, but once she un-wrapped the parcel, she realized the significance and quickly sent it on to colleagues in Victoria. It was only then the Opposition realized the Liberal Party's true intentions -- to release the existence of Ogoopogo in 2009 as part of the government's promise to the Interior that it would benefit from tourism dollars flowing into the province for the 2010 Olympics.

"We've had our researchers working for weeks on what their plans were for the Southern Interior. We had heard rumours something significant would soon surface, but we had no idea it would be this big," Oak said.

But Oak emphasized her real concern isn't the premature arrival of millions of tourists -- it's the future of the Okanagan Lake environment.

"What are we going to do about this beast which appears to have an insatiable appetite and is bent on ruining our entire inland fishery?" she asked.

The legend lives

How old is the Ogoopogo? How old is the Ogoopogo story? To many babyboomers, the Ogoopogo came to live on the cover of an apple crate sent to grocery stores as late as the 1960s. As a small child in Vancouver at the time, the serpent at once frightened me, and compelled me. I wanted to taste those apples in the same way that Snow White wanted to bite into the shiny red apple from the wicked old witch -- I knew I shouldn't want something so evil, and yet it was so beautiful at the same time.

Fishery digs deep

The documents themselves appeared to be making their way to the recycle bin when the unnamed source recovered them. The 20 pages faxed to Off-Centre show signs of near shredding at the edges. The documents themselves were clearly written on a typewriter, double-spaced in Courier -- a popular font in the 1970s. A hand-written note attached to the documents said the papers were found buried inside an old cardboard box labelled White Rock soda with the words "recycling" printed on the outside in black marker. It was the "recycled" part that tipped off the source -- no government bureaucrat recycled that long

ago. These documents were clearly meant for some other purpose.

Fishing through the pages, the source uncovered a bioassay study completed between 1970-71 which outlined numerous problems in Okanagan Lake -- all of which clearly point to the very early research into the existence of the legendary Ogoopogo. The study showed how certain portions of the lake, notably near Peachland and the Okanagan bridge, experienced higher than normal rates of nutrient growth, while other areas appeared much more normal. Chemical analysis showed "anomalously high" incidents of various organic compounds plus iron, magnesium, aluminium, zinc and carbon -- all consistent with an ancient life-form. There was also evidence that an unusual sediment was appearing in various parts of the lake.

"This sample consisted of a stiff grey clay unlike any other collected during the initial Task 121 survey," the report reads. "This clay is a newly exposed remnant ... that has been recently brought into contact with the modern lake waters by the mass transportation of overlying modern lake sediments to the adjacent depths of the lake."

Along with the peculiar chemical nature of

the lake, there was also evidence that the Okanagan Lake resembles a tropical marine carbonate reef -- again, a scientific configuration that in all other cases throughout the natural world operates as an ideal environment for an abundance of species.

"The break occurs at a depth of 43-feet," the document continues. "It is probable that this depth approximates the mean depth of the summer thermocline, integrated over recent geologic time."

Finally, the most conclusive evidence came through acoustic sounding equipment using a 26b echo sounder.

Out on a limb

It was the results of the echo sounder that convinced Dr. Nerka Daphnia, a consultant to the Department of Fisheries, that this in fact was the key piece of information fisheries had been trying to recover for the last two decades.

"There has been a lack of Kokanee in the lake and it could well be that the reason for this is a fish eater," Daphnia said. "The rise in nutrients could well mean that this creature is fertilizing the lake itself."

Since the late 1990s, scientists have become increasingly concerned that while other lakes seem to be losing all their nutrients, Okanagan Lake is becoming nutrient rich -- to the point where it may be too rich to sustain salmon stocks any longer. Daphnia said he's been suspicious for quite some time about what might be causing the dramatic drop in Kokanee.

"We've had a major fall down in the population since the 1990s," he said. "The biggest problem probably came in the 1960s when people decided to introduce this fresh water shrimp because they thought it would make for a good fishery on its own. Instead, the shrimp ended up competing with the Kokanee for food."

Up until now many people have believed that the Ogoopogo is in fact a very old sturgeon. Sturgeon have been found throughout the Columbia River system, and while Okanagan Lake has long been dammed, a single sturgeon may have remained on one of the numerous ledges deep in the lake's water.

Daphnia is outraged that any political party would choose to use Ogoopogo as a tool to feather their own nest.

"This isn't any better than when the Chamber of Commerce decided to offer millions to anyone who could reel in the Ogoopogo," he said. "There's no respect here for fisheries, no respect at all."

But Daphnia said it's not just the lack of respect, it's the understanding that this large beast is of real value to the future study of fisheries the world over. Now that there is evidence that Ogoopogo lives, and perhaps may even be dying as a result of living in what amounts to an increasingly filthy fish tank, scientists need to

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be brought here to study the creature. Turning him, once again, into a tourist attraction would be a massive mistake.

"It was 100 years ago that the Vernon Chamber came up with the tourism angle and now they're about to do it again," he said. "Don't these people ever learn anything?"

Apparently not. Jeannette Oak said she's already heard from her colleagues that funding for future scientific study is limited.

"Right now the Liberals will only throw water on the idea -- unless, of course, it's funding to research the possibility of off-shore oil near the Queen Charlottes," Oak said. "That they'll do. But save a big fish? Are you kidding? In their books, it's worth more dead than alive."

A spokesman who insisted on remaining faceless said it is true that Ogoopogo would be worth more dead -- not only is there the tourism dollars, but a real possibility that a new denomination of money could be named for the discovery, with Gordon Campbell on the back in place of the Queen.

"They're talking about calling it 'pogo-bucks'," he said. "Either that or they go paper and create a 'no-kanee-note' -- you know, 'No Kokanee'. Oak isn't laughing. Neither is Daphnia.

Call in Michael Moore

Kennedy Goodkey loves politics, but he was really interested in the subject long before the bubble burst on the Liberals' Olympic parade. Goodkey, of Vancouver, was already planning to come to the Okanagan next month along with his crew to film *The Beast of Bottomless Lake*. But when Goodkey received his own privately wrapped package, he called Scotland and is now bringing in the heavy artillery -- specialized equipment that's been used to track the Loch Ness Monster.

Goodkey plans to plunge to the depth of Okanagan Lake himself, but not before he shoots some reels of film speaking to the folks who have devoted their lives to searching for Ogoopogo.

Goodkey, who has a number of film credits to his name including *Sons of Cohen* (a story of two guys who believe their dad is Leonard

that move resulted in tremendous controversy, particularly with the First Nation population who have revered Ogoopogo for centuries and see the creature as a beast to respect, rather than make money from. Now that the creature is being blamed for the loss of salmon, Goodkey doesn't know what to think.

"We do have a local native person we will be speaking with. He had some personal experiences with the Ogoopogo and I expect that his presence in the film will help to diffuse any issues there could possibly be."

Goodkey said he wanted to speed up his arrival time, but the cost of crews, plus the time it takes to book places, locations and other matters means he can't start production until May at the very earliest.

"I just hope by then everyone will have calmed down somewhat, but not so much that they aren't willing to speak with me. This story is an everyman's story. There isn't a person in the world who wouldn't want to know that Ogoopogo lives."

Fools' gold

It will be a few more months before all the dust has settled on this case, and perhaps even more until the film is released. It's all another example of just how compelling the story of Ogoopogo is. How many fools decide to jump into the fray in April. How many people want to believe, even before all the evidence is in. How many people decide that just this one time, this blurry photograph, this unmistakable sighting will be their proof that there is gold in these hills -- and an Ogoopogo willing to pass a nugget on to everyone of us who has faith in truth, beauty, justice and the Canadian way. Here's mud in your eye.



photo: Mark McCann