

Scientific encounters of the best kind

A forum for serious exploration of heretical topics like UFOs, 'monsters'

1269 By Rebecca Salner
Examiner staff writer 244

STANFORD — Peter Sturrock doesn't believe in little green men from outer space. Flying saucers don't land in his back yard. He has never had what space aficionados might call a close encounter.

But Sturrock, like more than 100 other scientists across the nation who belong to the newly formed Society for Scientific Exploration, believes the search for life forms in outer space should be treated as a legitimate science.

Sturrock, a Stanford astrophysics professor who has become the month-old society's first president, hopes the new group will provide a forum for scientists seriously interested in substantiating or disproving the existence of strange things like unidentified flying objects and the Loch Ness Monster.

"In most sciences we have a history to go on. We established rules and criteria. But in this case we really don't know what the rules of the game are. What we want to do is treat these heretical subjects the way scientists treat the orthodox subjects."

Sturrock, who has been interested in UFOs for more than 10 years, said the problem is that an aura of disrepute surrounds the study of monsters and spacemen. Although many scientists are interested in investigating the subjects, they are often afraid they will be ridiculed for lending any credence to the existence of these strange things.

But unless the subjects are investigated, no one will ever know whether the Loch Ness Monster is a mythical beast or the UFOs reported by thousands of people across the world are meteors or some other explainable phenomena.

As Sturrock put it: "Whether or not the objects exist, reports do exist. If the things are not there, why are people reporting them?"

That is the question the society, formed in April after a six-year gestation period, hopes to answer.

Sturrock said the public attitude of scientists toward monsters, unidentified flying objects and people who claim to have a talent for predicting the future is generally negative.

But when Sturrock surveyed American Astronomical Society members several years ago he discovered that under the cloak of confidentiality many astronomers were open to the possibility of serious research on the subject. A few even admitted seeing UFOs.

There is no forum for discussing the topics, Sturrock said, and no place to publish serious research.

"Without that forum the work doesn't get anywhere. You can't make progress without open publication," said Sturrock, who has been at Stanford since he came to this country from England 27 years ago.

The Society for Scientific Exploration expects to provide that forum by publishing a quarterly journal and holding annual group meetings.

"The risk in science is that scientists say 'I'm not going to believe in something unless I understand it,'" Sturrock said. And because few scientists have seen the Loch Ness Monster or unidentified flying objects, they often doubt their existence.

"Lots of people view the whole subject as goofy," Sturrock said. "There's no doubt it's a weird subject and the reports are weird but there are a tremendous number of reports and there's no sign that the reports are stopping."

No subject will be too strange for the society, which includes serious believers and skeptics from the scientific community, Sturrock said.

Anything that is unexplainable or that runs counter to established knowledge will be open for discussion, Sturrock said.

Though Sturrock's personal beliefs about the existence of any anomalous phenomena are classified information, he said there are many theories which have been developed to

explain monsters and space beings.

Some scientists believe that all the reported sightings of the Loch Ness Monster, Big Foot and UFOs are frauds or hallucinations.

Another theory holds that the sightings are misperceptions of ordinary events.

Then there are the professionals who believe in space travelers from other planets.

Still another theory contends that the flashes of light in the sky are caused by the same thing that causes a meteorological occurrence called ball lightning.

Ball lightning, Sturrock said, is often reported after a thunderstorm. It is perceived as a strange ball of light often seen running down the bough of a tree. It continues to move along the ground until it either disappears or explodes in a flash of light.

Meteorologists recognize the existence of ball lightning, Sturrock said, but have not been able to figure out what causes it.

There are no hard facts to help scientists determine whether such beasts and occurrences are imaginary or real.

The Loch Ness Monster, affectionately called "Nessie," is said to have been seen by people at the Scottish lake for more than 1,000 years.

Nessie, a 30-foot-long water beast with a tiny head and flipper-like appendages, is said to rise from the surface of the lake.

Camera operators have tried to capture it on film. Sonar teams have tried to pinpoint its underwater hideout.

Is Nessie the figment of many overactive imaginations influenced by its reported existence? Or is it real?

Those who claim to have seen Nessie would swear it's real. Those who have not usually doubt the sanity of others

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who report a huge beast rising from a lake.

The same is true for Big Foot, the ape-like beast with 17-inch feet that reportedly inhabits California's forest, and UFOs.

UFO sightings date back to the late 1890s when waves of people in Europe reported seeing airships. But there were no airships in the 1800s, Sturrock said.

In 1946, in some Scandinavian countries, citizens kept saying they saw rockets but as far as anyone knows, there were no rockets being launched in the area.

26 May '82
San Francisco, CA
(San Francisco Co.)
Examiner

From all over the world, reports of strange lights in the sky continue to pour into observatories from all types of people.

"I don't think there's any section of the population that has not at one time or another or one place or another made reports that we call UFO representations," Sturrock said, adding that more frequently sightings are reported by well-educated people.

"I know there are reports. The question is what do they all add up to? They seem to be unknown objects. The real question is: Would they still be unknown if they were being observed by an expert?"