

Monster myth haunts Tahoe

TAHOE CITY, Calif. (UPI) — Lake Tahoe seems like a vacationer's paradise — except for the man-eating creature that myth says could lurk beneath its crystal clear and vastly deep water.

There are those who claim the lake has its own answer to Scotland's Loch Ness monster, and fear of "what's down there" is part of Tahoe's folklore.

Some strange sightings have been reported on the lake, right up to the 1980s.

But, as with "Nessie," scientists have been unable to find any evidence to back the legend.

One reason for the stories may be Tahoe's depth. As far as could be determined 100 years ago, Tahoe had no bottom.

Less than a decade ago, scientists used sonar to find the bottom of the 22-by-12-mile lake. At an average depth of 989 feet and reaching 1,645 feet at one point, it is one of the deepest lakes in North America.

The Washoe Indians, Tahoe residents for thousands of years, warned early settlers not to venture too far from shore because of the monster waiting to prey on the unwary.

Indian legend described a large animal with a lizard-like head and long neck. The legends say the creature made lunch out of those who went too far out onto Tahoe.

The settlers soon began to add their own tales of strange, huge forms swimming in the lake. The stories gained credibility because so few of Tahoe's drowning victims were ever found.

Scientists say that is because the lake's unusually cold water retards the decomposition that causes a body to float in most lakes.

The tales come not just from oldtimers. Even today, with the lake one of the most popular vacation spots in the West, the Coast Guard still gets an occasional monster report.

In June, 1982, waterskier Kris Beebe saw something black, slimy and huge swim past as he waited for his partner to turn the boat around. Jerry Jones saw it, too, from the boat.

"We didn't just think we saw it: we saw it," Beebe said. "It wasn't threatening us. It was just gliding right past."

"We checked into everything — divers, subs, everything — and we're convinced it was some very, very large creature."

Both men were police officers. Neither man had been drinking.

It was not the first such report.

Former Tahoe Coast Guard chief Don Anderson said there have been many sightings of "creatures," but he believes most were wind-created patterns that seem to glide across the lake.

But Beebe and Jones were only 25 feet from whatever they saw.

Last year, two nuns told Coast Guard officials they saw a monster-fish in Lake Tahoe. Boatswain's Mate James Cavin said it turned out to be a piece of plastic drainage pipe that had floated away from the Tahoe City Public Utility District plant. Even after officials showed them the pipe, the nuns were unconvinced.

"The University of California-Davis had a submarine down in here in '79 and they didn't see anything," Cavin said. "Of course, I imagine a monster would stay away from a sub. You never know what's down there. It's a really deep lake and there are crevices at the bottom that could hide things."

Reno restaurateur Miguel Ribera offered another explanation. He said he and his wife saw what appeared to be a 25-foot snake-like animal while boating at Pyramid Lake 50 miles northeast of Tahoe in the 1960s. On closer examination, Ribera said it turned out to be a school of minnows banded together in an apparent attempt to discourage attacks by larger fish.

Bill Bechdolt of Tahoe City, a lifelong resident of the Tahoe Basin, says perhaps Beebe and Jones saw "Herther, the big fish in Tahoe."

Bechdolt said several fishermen have claimed over the years to have hooked a fish so large it broke the strongest lines or ripped rod and reel from the mounts on the stern of the boat.

"The one guy who claims he saw it claims it's about 16 feet long," Bechdolt said.

Scientists say Tahoe's largest known denizens are Mackinaw, a variety of lake trout known to surpass 60 pounds.