ISSN 0264-7001

NESS INFORMATION SERVICE
NESSLETTER NO 78
OCTOBER 1986

SONAR

A number of expeditions have used sonar in Loch Ness. It has proved to be a useful tool, however there has been controversy about the results it has produced. They have been difficult, if not impossible, to reproduce, and the interpretation is open to question. The Loch Ness & Morar Project have used sonar almost exclusively, and over the years have become experienced both in it's use and interpretation. In 1982, while working in the deepwater central basins, the Project logged contact with 40 very strong targets at great depth. They have been unable to explain these contacts as freak echoes or debris. This season the Project planned to stage a major sonar-curtain search of the loch. This was to comprise multiple sonar units deployed from a formation of surface vessels, in line abreast across the loch. Should contacts continue to be made, it is intended to continue the programme with a much larger sweep in 1987. The first element of the programme was undertaken during the second week of October, 1986. Mr Jim Hogan, the proprietor of Caley Cruisers who has a longstanding interest in the research, made available ten of his vessels for the operation. The sonar equipment was supplied by Swiftech Ltd. Based in Wallingford, Oxfordshire, they are one of the major distributors of echo sounders, VHF radios, radar, navigation and other electronic products, in this country. They have previously provided a number of echo sounders for the Project's research work. They represent the Lowrance Company and have made their products the top selling range in the U.K. The Eagle Mach 1 model, well known to fishermen and divers, has out sold all comparable opposition for the past three years. The equipment used this time was the more powerful and sophisticated x-16 and z-15 echo sounders, these have a combination of great depth penetration and clear detailed recordings. They also provided the services of two experts, who were aboard the vessels during the operation. The boats were crewed, who were aboard the vessels during the operation. The boats were crewed by Project members with very valuable assistance from the Sea Scout troop and one of the master, Hamish Macdonald, from the Abbey School at Fort Augustus. The Loch Ness Exhibition Centre at Drumnadrochit was the administrative H.Q. and the whole effort was backed by Tony Harmsworth, in his role as Director of Searchglen Ltd the makers of 'Nessie Hunt' board game. Searchglen Ltd have reached a royalty agreement to give financial assistance to the Project's work, this could be as much as £80.00. After all the preparation and organisation the expedition was unfortunately curtailed by adverse weather. Starting from Dochgarroch they made their way along Loch Dochfour and into the northern end of the Loch Ness at Lochend, the weather was fine but very windy (equinoctial gales) making the loch very rough. When I was talking to Mrs Betty Gallagher, Press Liasion Officer of the operation, she said that in all her time at the loch she had never seen it as rough. Adrian Shine, field leader of the Project, and the team persevered for two days; getting as far as Castle Urquhart. Adrian then judged that conditions were too bad, and it would become dangerous to proceed further along the loch. However the operation was not a total loss, producing much interesting data and very valuable experience. The sea scouts proved themselves very capable in their handling of the cruisers, in the most difficult of conditions, along with their ability in monitoring the sonars. The Lowrance experts were pleased with the performance of the equipment, they were also very impressed with the loch, it's size and the obvious problems involved with using sonar in it. They were also amazed and somewhat taken aback by the ferocious weather conditions, although those experienced were worse than usual. It is hoped to organise another, larger, sweep next year, with up to 40 craft involved. I also asked Betty if there was anything more to report on the photograph mentioned in the last Nessletter. She told me that all that had been managed was to show a dark shape on the surface, but it could be almost anything from a wake wave, to a log, unfortunately no use at all. She also told me of a possible sighting in early June. Brian O'Brian, a hotel manager from Drumnadrochit, was on the hillside above Strong Point looking towards Dores, when he saw an object appear briefly just beyond Urquahart Bay. He said it resembled a large seal, but it did not re-appear and he watched for some time. I queried the fact that a seal was in the loch again this year, I knew from the local Inverness papers that there had been extensive seal activity in the lower reaches of the river Ness, but had heard nothing of another in the Loch.

Betty said she had heard fairly certainly that a seal had been seen in the Dores area. Perhaps Mr O'Brian had seen a seal, although what he reported did not behave in a typical seal-like manner, appearing in mid-loch and then no more. Seals usually surface frequently, either for air or just curiosity, they show great interest in anything in their vicinity. Another of those interesting reports that leave you wondering. We must just hope that the Project has better conditions for it's 'Operation Deep-Scan' next season.

GAMBIAN SEA-SERPENT

I have received letters and copies of two articles from Karl Shuker, whose request for books was in Nessletter 73. Karl is a professional zoologist as well as an active and enthusiastic cryptozoologist. He has recently been investigating a most singular encounter with a mysterious sea creature, as related to him in great detail by the person who actually discovered the creature, washed up dead on a Gambian beach in June 1983. From the description given to him by it's observer (a keen wildlife observer who grew up in Gambia and is very familiar with both its terrestrial and aquatic fauna), Karl says he is certain that it fits no known living creature. It does, however, closely resemble certain creatures known only from fossils. What is especially important about this particular sighting is that unlike most beached carcases, this one was virtually intact (one hind flipper was partially missing) and exhibited no external decomposition - hence its morphology was totally undistorted - except for a slight bloating caused by internal gases. Its discoverer, Mr Owen Burnham, sent a short letter and diagram to the 'BBC Wildlife' magazine, it appeared in May 1986. Mr Burnham appealed to readers for assistance in attempting to identify this creature. Karl wrote to him for more details, specifying certain named details in particular. He has since then received a series of comprehensive descriptions and answers to his numerous questions, which he posed in order to ascertain the most, and least, likely contenders. Mr Burnham had previously contacted various other authorities about his find, but had received little encouragement or interest apparently. A Beaked Whale, or Dolphin, were offered as answers, despite the fact that no Cetacean, living or fossil, possesses hind limbs. As a result of his investigations, and the potential significance of Mr Burnham's discovery, Karl decided that a full account should be published as soon as possible. He obtained Mr Burnham's permission to write a comprehensive article about the incident, this appeared in two parts in the September and October issues of the magazine 'The Unknown'. The creature involved had been washed ashore during the night of 11th June 1983, it was found by Mr Burnham and three members of his family at 8.30am the next morning. They were not the first to come across it, two African men from the local fishing village were already there, and were busily hacking the head off with a machete. This curio would be a welcome boost to their income in the tourist market. It took them twenty minutes to complete decapitation, revealing very thick vertebrae and dark red coloured flesh, which reminded Mr Burnham of beef. He was tempted to try to purchase the skull himself, but feared that he would be asked an exorbitant price. He was also unsure how to get it back to England, so he had to be content with taking measurements and making sketches. What he was confronted with was as follows. Body observed in entirety, virtually intact, terminal portion of right hind limb and majority of left hind limb missing. Foul-smelling, but not disintegrating in any way, distended internally by gas, but still streamlined in shape; not notably flattened. Skin surface smooth, coloured dark brown above and white below, to midway down the tail. Head elongate, possessed pair of long thin jaws, containing eighty teeth evenly distributed and uniform in shape. Mr Burnham described the teeth as very sharp and conical, similar in shape to a barracuda's, but whiter and thicker. Brow of head slightly domed, head did not appear to possess blow-hole(s). Nostrils apparently sited at tip of jaws. In relation to size of head, the eyes were rather small, clearly visible though not protruding and brown in colour. The body, 10 feet long, lacked a dorsal fin or any sign of ever having one; terminated with a tail and had two pairs of limbs. The limbs were paddle-shaped and solid, they did not bear toes or claws, front and hind limbs were the same size. The abdomen displayed a lesion, through which protruded parts of the whitish coloured digestive tract, and fatty tissue. The tail was 4 to 5 feet long and pointed, round in section, and no evidence to suggest former presence of tail flukes was observed. Body dimensions were obtained by drawing a line in the sand alongside the animal and measuring it with a tape. Flippers and head were measured individually, the flippers being 1.1/2 feet long. The nose (jaws) was also 1.1/2 feet in length.

In Karl's article there is a sketch, with the various dimensions listed. There is a discrepancy in the total length, which is given as 15/16 feet, from the figures above that is the length of the tail and body without the head. In the second part of his article Karl examines possible candidates for the carcase. He goes fully into the various possibilities, coming to the following conclusion. "It is clear therefore, that several different groups of living creatures share certain features with the Gambian sea serpent; none, however even comes close to possessing an overall similarity - prevented in every case by various fundamental morphological differences." He goes on to say that the simple, though startling, facts are that when the entire range of creatures known to science, living and fossil, are considered, any similarities that any living groups may have are insignificant compared to those possessed by certain fossil groups. These are the plesiosaurs, mosasaurs, (giant marine lizard) thalattosuchians, (sea crocodile) and ichthyosaurs, (fish-like reptile), all reptilian and currently believed to have been extinct for around seventy million years. The plesiosaurs comprise two different morphological lines, the elasmosaurs and the pliosaurs. The former are the more familiar plesiosaurs, with long necks and short heads and jaws. However it is the pliosaurs with their very short necks and notably elongated heads and jaws that present a possible solution to the Gambian riddle. There were giant forms as much as 40 feet long, but most pliosaurs were about 15/18 feet long. Karl discusses the various merits of the fossil contenders in his text, but also has a table of comparison, this produced two equal winners with a 89.3 percentage correspondence. They are a pliosaur and a thalattosuchian, following at 67.9 percent is a mosasaur. Karl says, "Thus, whichever way it is presented or viewed, the evidence available yields the same stunning yet unequivocal conclusion - the Gambian sea serpent most closely resembled organisms believed to have become extinct seventy million years ago! Karl then writes of the two arguments that are most commonly raised when the possibility of such creatures still existing is suggested. He answers these arguments comprehensively. He concludes, 'Unfortunately, without the conclusive confirmation that only physical remains made available for scientific examination could have given, the possibility (however real) of a fossil reptilian identity for the Gambian sea serpent being correct must remain a theory. Nevertheless, this remarkable beast still serves one immensely important function - it renews hope that the ocean's treasure trove of radically different creatsures still awaiting discovery is far from empty." I feel that this incident could be as significant as the discovery of the coelacanth, although there are some questions. There is the discrepancy in the measurement quoted for the length, already mentioned, and two other points that come to mind are, why no photographs and why no tissue samples of any sort. Perhaps they, Mr Burnham and companions, did not have a camera. As for the tissue sample, there are the problems of keeping one in good condition, however it is possible that it was not thought to be very important. Mr Burnham knew he was seeing something unusual, but even so, it could be that he was not aware just how unusual it was. It was not until Karl became interested and examined the case that the possibility of it being a fossil relict emerged. Karl has promised to keep us posted about any developments.

STEUART CAMPBELL

I've had a letter from Steuart in which he responds to Erik Beckjord's comments in NIS 76, on file since July. He said he did so reluctantly, as he does not know how interested everyone is in the continued debate. He has a point as the same ground is being covered, although he did write and complain when I did not use his letter in NIS 77. However perhaps we should look at some of his comments. Steuart says he is glad that Erik has grasped the trigonometry involved but notes that he now disputes the angle of view. Steuart has drawn the ellipses for the angles under discussion, 10 degrees and 19 degrees, and says that a comparison with the Wilson photograph shows that the ripple rings are not viewed at an angle of 10 degrees. He also says there is no way that the angle can be determined from 'the length of the relection on the water', as Erik suggested. He points out again that he took the ellipse proportions not from the photograph but from Dinsdale's sketch of the rings, and queries "Is Beckjord questioning Dinsdale's drawing?" He says that Erik chose the 10 degrees angle arbitrarily just because it suited his case. Steuart prefers to stick to the evidence, he says. He goes on to the question of height above water and the effect that has on the size of object photographed. Steuart says that, although Erik seems not to notice, he selected 10m as the probable camera height but pointed out that it could have less, if Wilson stood closer to the shore.

Therefore the tail length is 0.74m max, which falls within the range of observered lengths of otter tails. The next item for consideration is the shape of the object photographed by Wilson, or as Steuart prefers to refer to it, the otter's tail. He says that if one studies the underside of the curve it will be seen to be a smooth natural curve. He suggests the tail is curved away at an angle to the camera, not at right angles to it, this will make the curve seem sharper than it really is. He withdraws the suggestion that the tail is 'nipped bare', or broken. Steuart then comments on Erik's comparison of the Wilson photograph with the 1977 Shiel's pictures. He says that you cannot use one doubtful photograph to interpret another, and there is no evidence that the various photographs show the same subject. He says, "Shiel's picture is an obvious fake, Rines's 1975 pictures are of bottom debris and the Smith film seems to show a log or post manipulated by two schoolboys (who may or may not have intended a hoax)." Steuart then touches on Erik's sixth point, that of the trees between road and shore. He says that Erik seems to now agree with him that felling does not occur, but claims that farmers chop and plant them. He asks where the evidence is for this, saying that the old maps (OS1874) show the tree pattern in 1934 to be much the same as today. He goes on to say that even if there were no trees in 1934 the trigonometric analysis shows that the Wilson photograph could not have been taken from a position 30m above the water (in that area). He then asks what Erik is trying to do, as he has challenged his analysis with little comprehension of the method or willingness to examine the evidence. Having dealt with Erik, Steuart moves on to the remarks I made on his earlier comments about the facts concerning the Dinsdale film. He makes no new comments on the ground already covered in earlier Newsletters, but asks how we can disagree about things such as Dinsdale's height above the loch when he shot his film. It is fairly simple, there are known facts which Steuart reads in one way and I read in another. For example, Tim's height above Loch Ness when filming. In a report dated 18th November 1965 which went to JARIC with his film, Tim explains how he was able to be sure of his height. There was a A.B.S.L. Spot Height nearby and he used that. The Spot Height, to the East and downhill of the filming position, was 291 feet; standing at this point Tim was able to estimate the filming point was about 60 feet higher. This information has been re-affirmed by recent letters to me, and in earlier conversations with Tim. Now I accept this, but it seems that Steuart cannot, he kindly sent me a portion of map with roads coloured in and contour indicator ringed, he also marked where he 'presumed' Tim was, on the road below the school approx 250 feet above the loch. Tim wrote in a recent letter that the filming position was originally known exactly to him by a dip in the wooden fence by the road, and a vast panoramic view of the loch - today the fence has largely fallen down, and a wall of 30 ft. conifers block the view entirely. In his book, Loch Ness Monster, Tim has a sketch based on the Wilson photograph, in it he indicates the various features he can see in the photograph. Now this is a sketch, fairly true, but not a scale drawing, not intended to be used for accurate, detailed, measurements and analysis. It is strange that Steuart seizes on this sketch and time and again points out that his calculations concerning Wilson's angle of view are based on it. Yet he seemingly will not accept Tim's explanation for being able to give his filming height above the loch as 300ft. Another interesting point concerns Steuart's analysis of the object in the Wilson picture. Steuart produced a detailed account of the whole incident, as well as a scientific analysis of the object photographed, which he claims is nothing more than the tail of an otter, rather than the head and neck of some unknown animal. This head displays a slight peak, some have said it has small horns or protuberances. Steuart says that it is the tail tip kinked or broken, or nipped bare in play. When it is now pointed out that perhaps that explanation is stretching things, he says, ah well I'll withdraw it. How about the tail pointing away from the camera, thus making a sharper curve! Changing his position as the ground is cut away under his argument. Surely his original scientific analysis of the photograph should have shown him that, and it should have been included in the original article.

No more space, another Nessletter at an end. Please remember your news and views are always welcome and needed, my address is still:-

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