Project to examine 'Yeti' DNA

May 23 2012

Unexplained footprint (left) found in the Himalayas in 1976 by René de Milleville. Credit: Wikimedia.

(Phys.org) -- A new collaboration between Oxford University and the Lausanne Museum of Zoology will use the latest genetic techniques to investigate organic remains that some have claimed belong to the 'Yeti' and other 'lost' hominid species.

The Oxford-Lausanne Collateral Hominid Project invites institutions and individuals with collections of cryptozoological material (cryptozoology: the search for animals whose existence is not proven) to submit details of the samples they hold, and then on request submit the samples themselves, particularly hair shafts, for rigorous genetic analysis. The results will then be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

Ever since Eric Shipton's 1951 Everest expedition returned with photographs of giant footprints in the snow there has been speculation

that the Himalayas may be home to large creatures ‘unknown to science’. Since then, there have been many eye-witness reports of such creatures from several remote regions of the world. They are variously known as the ‘yeti’ or ‘migoi’ in the Himalaya, ‘bigfoot’ or ‘sasquatch’ in America, ‘almasty’ in the Caucasus mountains and ‘orang pendek’ in Sumatra, as well as others.

Professor Bryan Sykes, a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, who will lead the project with Michel Sartori, Director of the Lausanne Museum of Zoology, said: "Theories as to their species identification vary from surviving collateral hominid species, such as Homo neanderthalensis or Homo floresiensis, to large primates like Gigantopithecus widely thought to be extinct, to as yet unstudied primate species or local subspecies of black and brown bears.

"Mainstream science remains unconvinced by these reports both through lack of testable evidence and the scope for fraudulent claims. However, recent advances in the techniques of genetic analysis of organic remains provide a mechanism for genus and species identification that is unbiased, unambiguous and impervious to falsification."

These techniques were not available to biologists like Dr. Bernard Heuvelmans, whose 1955 book Sur la Piste des Betes Ignorees (translated into English as On the Track of Unknown Animals) helped foster widespread public interest in the subject. Between 1950 and 2001, the year of his death, Dr. Heuvelmans, as well as investigating numerous claims, assembled a considerable archive that is now curated by the Museum of Zoology in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Professor Sykes said: "It is possible that a scientific examination of these neglected specimens could tell us more about how Neanderthals and other early hominids interacted and spread around the world."

Provided by Oxford University