

'Yeti Fur' Found in Siberian Cave

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Kemerovo's Azasskaya cave, perhaps inhabited by abominable snowmen.

There's a high likelihood that hairs recovered during a state-sponsored expedition in a southern Siberian cave came from a yeti, a prominent Russian cryptozoologist said Tuesday.

Valentin Sapunov, a professor at the State Hydrometeorological University in St. Petersburg, told The Moscow Times that DNA analysis and examination under an electron microscope had led him to be "60-70 percent" certain that the hairs belonged to a yeti-like creature.

The fur was recovered during a trip to the Azasskaya cave in the Kemerovo region, part of a yeti conference held at the initiative of Governor Aman Tuleyev last October.

Attendees included yeti enthusiasts from around the world as well as former heavyweight boxer Nikolai Valuyev, who was then a candidate for a State Duma post, which prompted Nina Ostanina, a Communist Duma deputy from Kemerovo, to dismiss the event as a publicity stunt.

Yeti buffs also criticized the expedition as a PR ploy.

"There was no expedition. The conference participants were accompanied by the press on a field trip to a cave site. It is my opinion that the 'evidence' found in the cave was unreliable," said Jeff Meldrum, a biologist at Idaho State University and cryptozoologist.

Meldrum, who took part in the expedition, added that the footprints in the cave, a "short line of right feet only," were not convincing, and the "nest" of ferns had never been slept in.

"There was no other sign of occupation in the cave, except a few empty soda cans and snack food wrappers," he wrote in e-mailed comments to The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

Meldrum and Sapunov are part of a handful of professional scientists actively searching for abominable snowmen, whose existence is denied by the mainstream scientific community but who continue to captivate the imagination of enthusiasts worldwide.

Based on the evidence accumulated over decades, Sapunov said he's now "95 percent" certain that the creatures are real.

His latest announcement was hailed by the Kemerovo regional government in a press release. Tuleyev has promised a 1 million ruble (\$32,000) prize to anybody who can present an actual yeti.

Arkady Tishkov, deputy head of the Academy of Sciences' Geography Institute, suggested in an interview with The Moscow Times last year that the yeti conference could attract tourists.

Some 1,000 yeti sightings have been claimed in the former Soviet Union. They range from the Caucasus to Siberia and more recently also in the Kirov region northeast of Moscow, where a yeti was said to be discovered in the Vyatsky forest.

Sapunov said he wasn't discouraged by skeptics, arguing that there was more evidence for the existence of yetis than for many of the other 5 million documented species, some of which are recognized on the basis of a single bone, he said.

He also attested to the scientific value of searching for an elusive object. "Every science needs its yeti," he said, noting that Fermat's Last Theorem spurred advancements in mathematics for more than 350 years before it was solved in 1995.

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