

UNUSUAL PHENOMENA

Imhotep, the world's first scientist, walked the Earth about 4700 years ago in Egypt. And since then, science has made great strides towards improving the quality of life and unearthing Nature's puzzling mysteries. But despite science's long history of triumphs, there are mysterious phenomena that scientists have been unable to explain. Such mysterious occurrences are known as anomalous phenomena because they don't agree with scientific principles. Read on to explore some of the world's weirdest phenomena, which have left scientists scratching their heads and wondering what in Imhotep's name is happening!



IMHOTEP

Imhotep was a genius who not only diagnosed and treated illnesses, but also designed and engineered the first pyramid. He was widely known for his achievements and revered as the God of medicine and healing in Egypt.



It Began With a Bang

On 30 June, 1908, a huge explosion occurred in Tunguska, Russia. The immense explosion occurred in a remote part of Siberia and was 1000 times more powerful than the combined nuclear explosions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki! Eye-witnesses reported seeing a blinding, bright light moving across the sky, which exploded with a series of loud bangs when it reached

AIMED NOVEMBER

(PART 1)



the ground. The force of the explosion was so destructive that it flattened over 2000 square kilometres of forest, shattered glass windows and knocked over people living hundreds of kilometres away!

Survivors of the explosion described a hellish doomsday scenario that seemed to come straight out of a disaster movie.

They reported that the earth shook violently and howling winds blew air that was so hot, it melted their clothes onto their skin. Fire ripped through their homes and farms, and flying rocks smashed onto the ground and killed anything that was unprotected. Terrified villagers fled their homes and took to the streets, believing that doomsday was here.

But it was not doomsday, as the villagers later found out, after the tremors and aftershocks ended. So what was it?

Scientists think that the explosion

could have been caused by an asteroid entering the Earth's atmosphere and smashing itself into Tunguska. The impact of such an explosion would have destroyed trees and created the scenes of destruction as reported by the villagers. However, it would have also created a large crater.

Yet, no such crater was ever found in Tunguska! Many theories abound but one thing is for sure, the Tunguska explosion will always be shrouded in mystery!

Spontaneous Human Combustion

Imagine a human being bursting into flames spontaneously like a fireball, and then burning until the body is reduced to a heap of ash. Sounds like a scene from a horror movie? Well, not exactly. In 1966, old Dr John Irving Bentley was found burned to death in his home in Pennsylvania, USA. It seems that Dr Bentley had gone to the bathroom and mysteriously burned to death.

What's even more puzzling is that only a small area of the bathroom was found damaged by the fire. Indeed, it seems that the fire had started within Dr Bentley and had engulfed him without igniting anything else in the bathroom! When Dr Bentley was found, only



a small section of his leg and foot was left among a heap of ash. Initially, investigators thought that the old doctor had accidentally started a fire when he tried to light his pipe, but this theory was soon thrown out when they discovered the doctor's pipe in the other room. Shocked investigators had to conclude that Dr Bentley had been cremated in his own bathroom without any external source of fire!

The Wick Effect

What happened to Dr Bentley that turned him into a human fireball? Scientists are at a loss to explain what had caused Dr Bentley's demise. In recent years, some scientists have proposed that human body fat may be able to sustain a slow-burning flame over a period of time, burning only the body and leaving its surrounding area untouched, much like Dr Bentley's undamaged bathroom. Also known as the wick effect, the theory proposes that the victim dies suddenly, for example from a heart attack. And then by chance, an external source of fire, such as matches, ignites accidentally and creates a fire that roasts the unfortunate victim until the body is



SPONTANEOUS HUMAN COMBUSTION

There have been many cases and reports of Spontaneous Human Combustion

throughout history, and one of the earliest known cases is the death of

Frenchwoman, Nicole Millet.

Madame Millet was found

burned to death in an armchair, and in typical Spontaneous Human Combustion fashion, the armchair was found undamaged by the fire. Her husband was hauled to court to defend himself for murdering his wife but luckily, a young doctor came to his defence and stated to the court that Madame Millet had not been a victim of homicide, but rather had been "visited by God" and had spontaneously combusted.

reduced to ashes. This theory is not accepted by all scientists and it is difficult to determine if that was what had happened to Dr Bentley on that fateful night, making Dr Bentley's death one of the best known examples of Spontaneous Human Combustion!

Next month, we tell you more about crop circles, nessie, littlefoot and naga fireballs!

Science Wonder Contest

Answer a simple question you could win a hamper from BIC!
Send your answer to: YG 311 Unexplained Phenomena, Panpac Education Private Limited, Times Centre, 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196. **Closing date: 26 March 2007**

Question: Where is Tunguska?

Answer: _____

Name: _____ Sex: M / F Age: _____

Address: _____

Tel. No.: _____

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5. The judges' decision is final and no correspondence will be entertained.
6. Winners will be notified by post.

UNEXPLAINED PHENOMENA



**More about the ponderous
mysteries that have remained
unsolved for centuries!**



Crop Circles

Perhaps one of the most troubling unexplained phenomena is the formation of crop circles. These geometric patterns first came to the public's attention in the 1980s, when a series of crop circles appeared in the fields of the English countryside. Initially, these crop circles were thought to have been created by pranksters looking to shock the public and annoy the farmers. But as the geometric patterns of the crop circles became more complex and appeared at a faster rate all over the world, scientists began to take a closer look at the phenomenon.

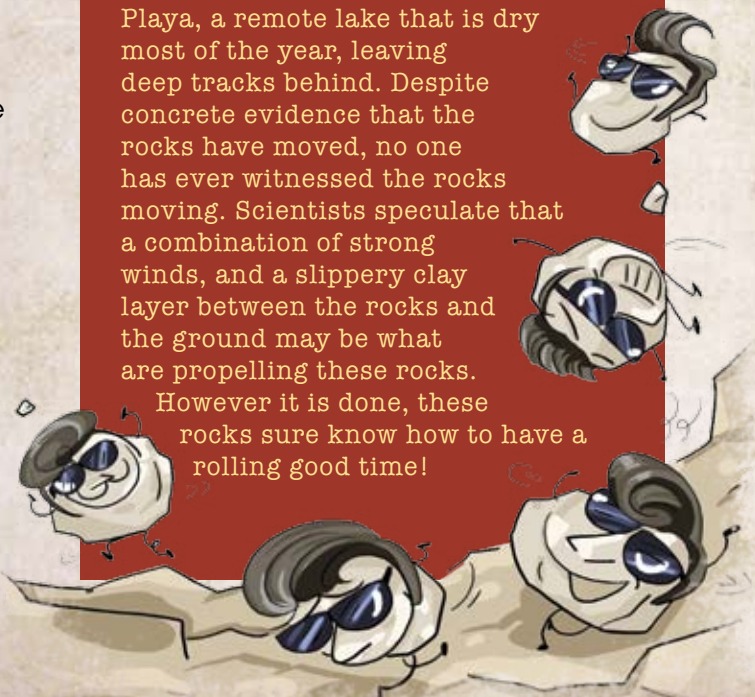
Scientists found that the more complex patterns were not abstract patterns that merely looked pretty – some of the patterns actually invoked the laws of mathematics! Remarkably, these complex patterns were created in the crop fields in a matter of hours, usually when the farmer was asleep at night.

What's more, scientists have found that the bent stalks in the crop circles are different from bent stalks found

ROCK AND ROLL

Something or someone is moving rocks in the Death Valley, California but no one knows why or how. If you think it's the work of a couple of pranksters, well, bear in mind that some of these stones are as large as a man and weigh hundreds of kilograms! The rocks travel for hundreds of metres on the Racetrack Playa, a remote lake that is dry most of the year, leaving deep tracks behind. Despite concrete evidence that the rocks have moved, no one has ever witnessed the rocks moving. Scientists speculate that a combination of strong winds, and a slippery clay layer between the rocks and the ground may be what are propelling these rocks.

However it is done, these rocks sure know how to have a rolling good time!



UNIDENTIFIED MONSTERS

by Maureen Ker

(PART 2)



elsewhere. Instead, the stalks taken from crop circles were similar to stalks that had been heated in a microwave oven! Does this mean that crop circles were created by microwaves (a type of electromagnetic wave)?

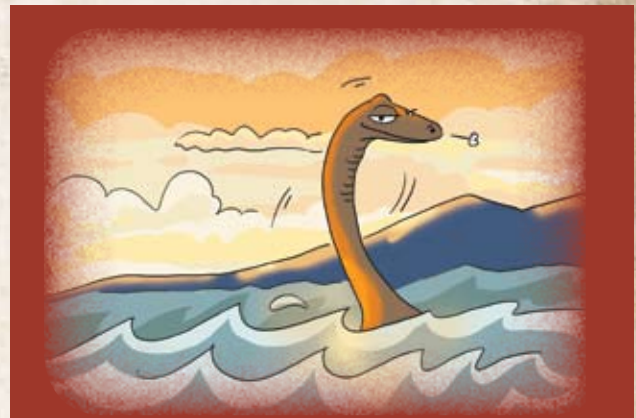
Some scientists think it is possible that these crop circles were created by sudden and powerful bursts of microwaves. These microwaves are thought to be created by the Earth's own magnetic field! The artist behind these intricate patterns could be Mother Nature. However, this theory is not widely accepted, so until today, crop circles remain a beautiful, unsolved mystery.

Littlefoot

Bigfoot may live in North America, but some people believe that its smaller cousin, the Orang Pendek, lives in Indonesia. The Orang Pendek is described as a sinewy, hairy, ape-like creature that is bipedal (walks on two feet). Remarkably, descriptions of this short (hence its moniker Orang Pendek, which means "short person") ape-like creature was first recorded in 1295 by Marco Polo! Since then, there have been many sightings of the Orang Pendek in the dense jungles of Sumatra. Despite the numerous sightings by locals, Western missionaries and scientists, no one has photographed an Orang Pendek yet, making it hard for scientists to prove its existence.

Coincidentally, footprints and hairs were retrieved near the site of an Orang Pendek sighting, and DNA analysis showed that the hairs did not match any known species! Does this mean that the Orang Pendek exists?

Scientists are sceptical that such a large, primate species could have gone unclassified for so long, while living in a jungle inhabited by humans. Hopefully, the mysterious Orang Pendek would provide a photo opportunity soon, before it fades away in the pages of history as another Loch Ness monster.



NESSIE

Nessie, as the resident monster of Loch Ness is affectionately known, is one of the most famous modern-day "monsters". The Scottish lake and monster gained worldwide fame when a famous photograph, known as the Surgeon's Photo, was made public. The photograph showed the head and neck of a dinosaur-like creature submerged in what was supposedly Loch Ness. The publicity gained Nessie fame and later on, notoriety, when it was discovered to be a hoax. Despite many trawling and sonar experiments, no evidence of Nessie was ever found, and Nessie lives on as one of history's most famous urban legends.



Naga Fireballs

If you think that only Indonesia has its share of weird inhabitants, wait till you hear about the fire-breathing dragon of the Mekong River in Thailand! Locals who live nearby in the Nong Khai province believe that the dragon Naga is responsible for a strange

phenomenon known as Naga Fireballs. Each October, fireballs about the size of an egg can be seen shooting out of the river and into the sky. These bursts of fire literally resemble fireballs spat out by a fiery dragon!

Naturally, scientists are sceptical of the dragon myth and think that a natural phenomenon is the likely cause of this fiery display. Some scientists have proposed that the fireballs are caused by a build-up of methane gas released by decomposing river sediment. When the methane gas is released from the water, it ignites and bursts into flames, much like a dragon breathing fire. Sounds plausible? Well, it depends on who you ask!

SHARK OR DINOSAUR?

In 1977, the Zuiyo Maru, a Japanese fishing boat, had an extraordinary catch - it caught a dinosaur! At least that was what its crew members thought when they hauled up a massive, stinking carcass as big as a... well, dinosaur. The decomposing carcass measured 10 metres long and weighed almost 2000 kilograms! It had a long neck, four fins and a long tail! Even though the carcass was rotting, it was easy to see the resemblance to an extinct dinosaur, the plesiosaur. So, was this the real thing or a look-alike? Unfortunately, before anyone had a chance to study the carcass properly, the captain decided to throw the carcass back to the sea to avoid contaminating the rest of the catch! Luckily, a young scientist onboard had the opportunity to sketch and photograph the carcass for posterity before it was thrown into the sea. Some scientists think the carcass was a basking shark, which can grow as large as 12 metres; others believe that the carcass was a dead plesiosaur. However, it is safe to say that no one will ever know the truth!

An Open Mind Opens Doors

Even though these weird phenomena may appear bizarre or unsolvable, we must press on with an open mind in order to solve the mysteries. Perhaps Sir Cyril Herman Hinshelwood, the 1956 Chemistry Nobel Prize winner, said it best when he said:

Science is an imaginative adventure of the mind seeking truth in a world of mystery.

Science Wonder Contest

Want to win a hamper from BIC? **Do some research in the library or on the internet and tell us in 50 words about an unexplained phenomena, not featured in this article.**

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