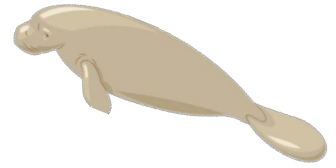




Mythical Mysteries



Cultures around the world tell stories of fantastic creatures with otherworldly powers. One of these mythical creatures, the mermaid, is said to have been sometimes inspired by one of our favorite animals, the manatee! Using information you have about the world today, try to guess what these people from long ago may have actually seen when they thought they spotted a mermaid or merman.

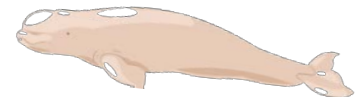
Suggested Age - Middle School +



Activity Instructions -

- Read the passages below about merfolk (mermaids and mermen), from eyewitness accounts of sightings and early natural history books.
- Try to guess which known animals these people may have seen that they mistook for mermen and mermaids.
 - Use clues from the region where the sightings occurred to narrow down possibilities.
 - Make a drawing that matches the description to see if it reminds you of anything you have seen before.
 - Remember: these people didn't have the same access to information or media as you have today, and they may have been out at sea for a long time before the sighting occurred!
 - There is not one right answer for each passage. Use context clues and make your best hypothesis.

Passages -



Captain Henry Hudson's Logbook,* 1608 - In the Arctic, near Norway

"This morning, one of our company looking overboard saw a mermaid, and calling up some of the company to see her...by that time she was come close to the ship's side, looking earnestly on the men...a little after, a sea came and overturned her...from the navel upward, her back [was] like a woman's...her body as big as one of us; her skin very white; and long hair hanging down behind, of color black...in her going down they saw her tail, which was like the tail of a porpoise, and speckled like a mackerel."

*Spelling updated to modern



Christopher Columbus, 1493 - Near the Dominican Republic

"He saw three mermaids, which rose well out of the sea; but they are not so beautiful as they are painted, though to some extent they have the form of a human face."



Peter Gunnerfen, Nicholas Jenfen, and Jeppe Jenfon Giffen's Mermaid Sighting, 1723 (from The Natural History of Norway in Two Parts by Erik Pontoppidan) – Near Norway

“In regard to his form and shape, they say he appeared to them like an old man, strong limb'd, and with broad shoulders, but his arms they could not see. His head was small in proportion to the body, and had short-curl'd black hair, which did not reach below his ears; his eyes lay deep in his head, and he had a meager pinched face, with a black beard, that looked as if it had been cut. His skin was coarse, and very full of hair...this Mer-man was, about the body and downwards, quite pointed like a fish.”

The Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences by Johann Theodor Jablonski, 1721

“...Sea-man, Mermaid, or Siren...is a Fish found in the seas, and in some rivers in the Southern parts of Africa and India, and in the Philippine and Molucca Islands, Brazil, North America, and Europe, in the North Sea. The length of this Fish is eight spans, its head is oval, and the face resembles that of a man. It has a high forehead, little eyes, a flat nose, and a large mouth, but has no chin or ears. It has two arms, which are short, but without joints of elbows, with hands or paws, to each of which there are four long fingers, (which are not very flexible) connected to each other...Their skin is of a brownish grey colour...”



The Natural History of Norway in Two Parts by Erik Pontoppidan, 1755

“This creature is often caught on hooks, and is well known to most of the fishermen. They are different sizes; some are of the bigness of an infant of half a year old; others of one of a year; and others again as big as a child of three years old...the upper part was like a child, but the rest like a Fish...Sometimes the peasants take them home to their houses, and, as they say, give them milk, which they drink. They tell us that these creatures then roll their eyes about strangely, as if it was out of curiosity, or surprise, to see what they had not seen before.”



Extensions –

- See if you can identify other famous mythical creatures using only pictograms on the “Who’s the Mythical Creature” worksheet.
- Make it a game! Write your own description of an unusual animal, and challenge someone else to identify or draw it.
- Research prehistoric animals, and see how scientists interpret evidence of these amazing creatures. What tools do we use to try to create accurate descriptions of animals that are no longer alive for us to see?
- Check this out: <https://www.amnh.org/explore/ology/anthropology/mythic-creatures-challenge>

Extra Information –

- Myths are not just inspired by sightings of unfamiliar animals. Many myths are thought to explain fossil evidence of amazing prehistoric animals like dinosaurs, mastodons, and flying reptiles. Myths are one way that humans have tried to understand how the world works, using cultural beliefs and evidence from the world around them.