



Sea Monsters: From Myth to Scientific Species

The story of *Idomeneo* is based on the legendary King of Greece, Ulysses (who is known in Roman Mythology as Odysseus). This King triumphed in Troy using the famous Trojan Horse to hide his soldiers. When the King left Troy he was lost at sea for 10 years before finally making it home to Crete! Sailing was not only a main method of transportation, but a dangerous one. Since cartography (creating maps and mapping new areas) was just beginning, sailors were often very superstitious and relied on the Gods of the Seas to look after them and ensure a safe journey. Prayers were offered to Neptune if you were Roman, and Poseidon if you were Greek. In *Idomeneo*, the God Neptune must be appeased after he is promised a sacrifice for saving the ship. When he does not receive his payment, he sends a sea monster to punish the kingdom.

The sea monster sent by Neptune in *Idomeneo* is never fully described and in many productions is never seen. In the 2009/2010 COC production, the monster is represented as a sudden illness that instantly and randomly kills the people of Crete. How would you portray the sea monster if you had to direct the opera?

By the late 1800s, sailors were busy mapping the earth and discovering new land masses. It was an exciting time to be an explorer. These men – for there were very few women on the ships – were not just sailors, but artists and scientists, who were setting out to discover what the earth was made up of.

Stories from early explorations often describe encounters with sea monsters that terrified sailors and destroyed ships. Today, through the growth of technology, some of these monsters are now named and a tracked species – although some of them remain terrifying! The theory of sea monsters being creatures summoned by sea gods to destroy ancient civilizations has given way to a more scientific approach of locating, tracking and studying sea creatures as a genuine species.

SOME EXAMPLES OF RECENT MARINE DISCOVERIES

Vampyroteuthis infernalis or Vampire Squid

The vampire squid is red in colour and is related to the squid and octopus but is actually a **cephalopod**. The Vampire Squid has phosphorescent globes that it uses like tail lights of a car to deceive predators that it is retreating. It lights up these **photospheres** and then slowly makes them shrink in size so it looks like it is getting further away. At the same time, it's other defence mechanisms include pulling it's cloak over it's body – essentially folding itself inside out. Finally, instead of releasing ink like an octopus, it releases a cloud of **bioluminescent mucus** – a glowing, blue-ish cloud that confuses the predator with it's distracting blue lights.

Watch an incredible video of this bizarre creature [here](#): Watch this second video put out by National Geographic by clicking [here](#). The videos are a must see!

Mola Mola or Ocean Sunfish presently holds the record for the world's heaviest bony fish--a 3.1 meter (10 ft) long specimen weighed in at 2235 kg (4927 lbs) and was discovered in New South Wales, Australia in September, 1908. These enormous fish have hug flat bodies and are

described as a 'fish head with a tail'. They sometimes come to the surface to sun bathe and can be seen floating on their sides catching some rays! Legend has it that Saint Piran, the patron saint of Cornwall was rescued by a Sunfish in the fifth century after being thrown from a cliff by a gang of ruffians during a raging storm! Allegedly when the Saint sank beneath the waters, the sea calmed and a Mola Mola surfaced with St. Piran on its side. Saint Piran escaped the ruffians by using the fish as a raft and sailing away to Perran Island in North Cornwall. For more information on this giant click [here](#).

The Colossal Squid or *Mesonychoteuthis hamiltoni* is exceptionally rare to scientists and only in 2007 was a live one caught. Sadly it died shortly after. New Zealand now has the species on display and has many resources and videos available online [here](#). Because scientists have only been able to capture one Colossal Squid, it is impossible to know how large they can grow. The one found off the coast of New Zealand was 456 Kg or 1005 lbs and 43 feet or 13 meters. These squid have rotating hooks on their club like tentacles. Their suckers have sharp teeth like spikes around the edges.

Young, Richard E. and Katharina M. Mangold (1922-2003). 2006. *Mesonychoteuthis* Robson, 1925. *Mesonychoteuthis hamiltoni* Robson, 1925. Colossal Squid. Version 26 September 2006 (under construction).

Read more about the Colossal Squid [here](#) as part of the larger [Tree of Life Web Project](#).

Mar-Eco is a group of 16 international scientists studying the depths of the North Atlantic Ocean and provides up-to-date information on the latest in marine explorations. Visit them [here](#).