

# Giant Serpents of Humboldt

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## Serpents in Mythology and Legend

Snakes have long since captured the human imagination. Because snakes are common figures in legends around the world, some experts believe that people's general, innate fear of serpents is due to primates long being prey for snakes. Some areas, however, have an especially rich legendarium involving serpents. Humboldt County, California, is one of those areas—an area better known for the legend of Bigfoot (Fig. 1).

The enduring presence of multiple indigenous tribes in Humboldt County is one factor in the lingering serpent lore. In Tolowa mythology, for example, Dead Lake was the scene of the people's fall from grace. Like the hinged jaws of a snake, the ground opened beneath their feet and swallowed them whole. Where that gaping abyss opened is where Dead Lake is today. And to this day, the Tolowa consider the lake bottomless, infested with enormous serpents, and it is forbidden to go there.

Other local tribes have their own legends about giant snakes that roamed the waterways of Humboldt County, many of which correlate with the sightings of Euro-American settlers who arrived with their own myths and preconception of snakes. The snake in the Garden of Eden, Leviathan from the Book of Job, Jormungand, gorgons, and many local legends of sea serpents are found all over the world (Figs. 2 and 3). These combined mythos likely influenced the sightings of serpents in Humboldt County.

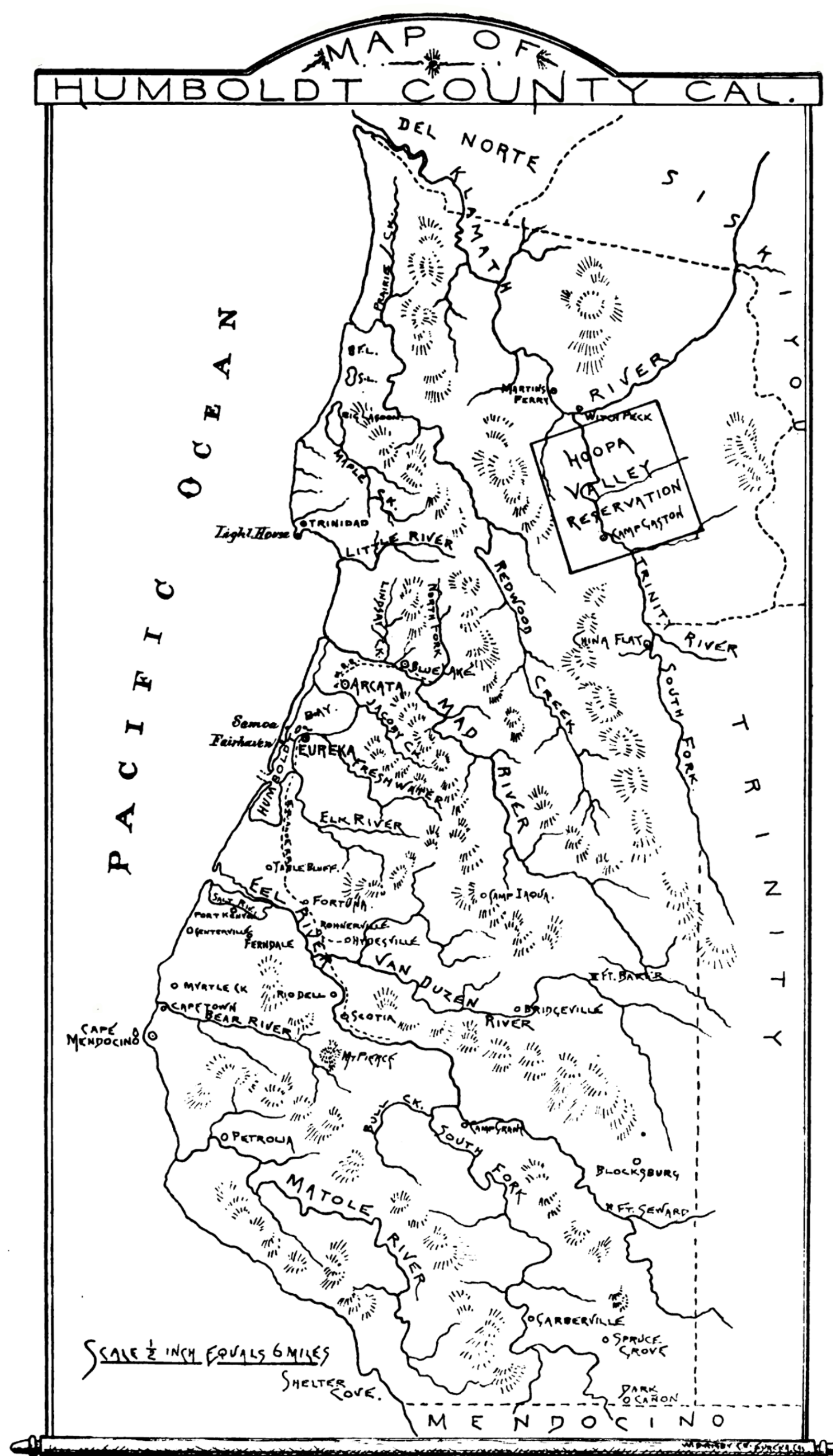


Fig. 1: Map of Humboldt county 1893 from "In the Redwood's Realm: By-ways of Wild Nature and Highways of Industry as Found Under Forest Shades and Amidst Clover Blossoms"

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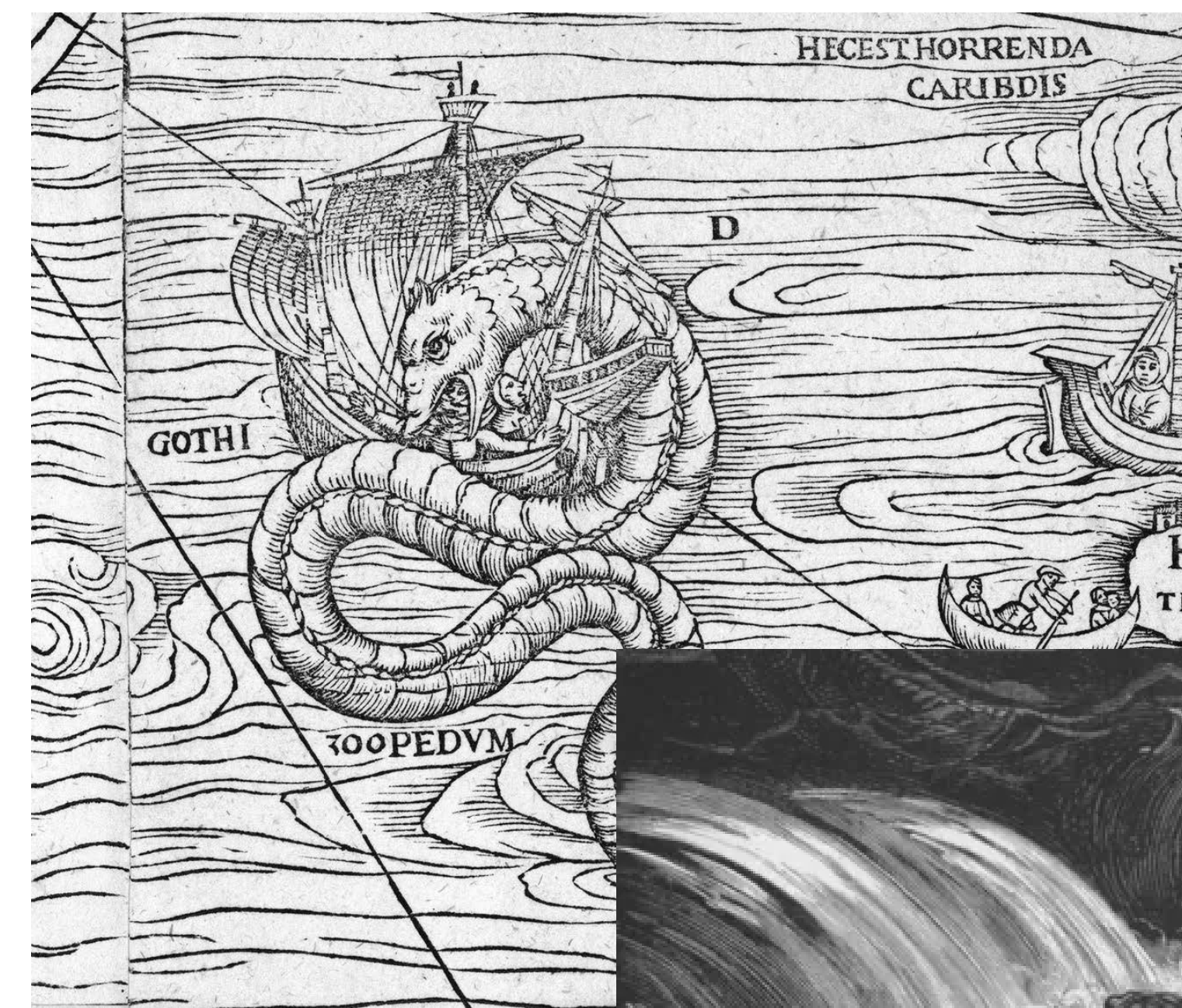


Fig. 2: 1539, Sea serpent detail by Olaus Magnus from *Carta marina et descriptio septemtrionalem terrarum ac mirabilium*



Fig 3: 1866 The destruction of Leviathan by Gustave Doré

## What Could be Worse Than Giant Snakes?!

"The snake is not a snake, as reported, but an animal somewhat similar."  
- G.E. Schumacher, a supposed serpent conqueror in Humboldt County (1878)

Many of the accounts and mythology surrounding the giant serpents in Humboldt do not point to them being merely giant snakes. While tribes in the area consider snakes as neutral or even positive forces, the same can not be said for the giant serpents. Humboldt native mythology sees giant serpents as man-eaters, containing evil traits, and often the antagonists in stories. In contrast, snakes especially rattlesnakes, are seen in a good light despite being a legitimate threat to human health. There are many descriptions of cryptic serpents that describe them as snake-like, but not snakes. There are distinct physical features that also point to these giant serpents being more than just snakes. Sometimes they are described as fish-like and snake-like. They are often described with horns and big fiery red eyes.

One thing that is common among serpent sightings is their giant size. The longest snake in the world ever discovered measured a whopping 32 feet long. However, this is still not as long as some accounts of Humboldt County serpents. Size reports of Humboldt serpents vary from about 12 feet long to 90 feet long. Most Humboldt serpents though are described to be around 30 ft long.

Fig. 4 is a drawing of a sizable serpent that supposedly washed ashore at Ferndale in 1944. At that time, reports were made that only the head was salvaged, and the rest washed away, so verification of the find and its size is not possible.

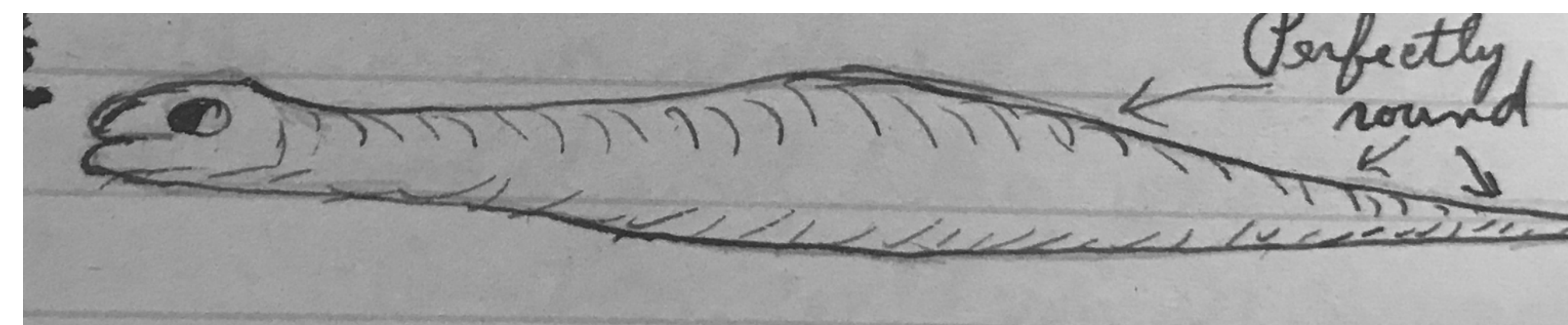


Fig. 4: Sketch of a 1944 serpent that washed up on a Ferndale beach (from Collection of C.I. Clay, Cal Poly Humboldt Special Collections).

## Habitats and Behavior

Humboldt serpents are often seen as aquatic creatures who seldomly move on land. There is common myth amongst the indigenous people of Humboldt where a man gains great luck for finding and taking care of an infant serpent within his home. The luck comes at a price, however, as the serpent puts strains on his relationships, eats his food, sometimes ends up being the death of him, and sometimes takes the man's baby back to the water. In other stories, the serpents will climb trees, slither upon land, or live in caves—but usually they swim in the water. They all seem to have the ability to live in both salt and fresh water.

The abilities and properties of the serpents are as powerful as they are magical. Many of the serpents in mythology can speak and some can make the water black so they can disappear. They can bestow great luck upon their owners, especially when it comes to hunting. The serpents can grow fast and eat multiple large mammals in a single sitting. One serpent turned to hot oil when it was set ablaze. Many seem highly durable with accounts of the serpents being able to take multiple gun shot wounds almost unphased.

While habitat and behavior of the serpents vary, the accounts have much in common. The serpents seem to always be predatory, with their prey including humans. Some can be highly aggressive and territorial. Like real snakes, they do not take care of their young. With the relationships they do have, they seem to be manipulative and parasitic. Some even seem to have a hierarchal society among their kind; one tribe describes the serpent "Peeshka" as the largest of the "KA-Ha-Mis" (snake-like water spirits) and being the leader of the serpents. They seem to target human children as there many stories of them stealing human babies and reports of the serpents trying to prey on children. One is known to lure hunters into his lake using a deer to bait them.

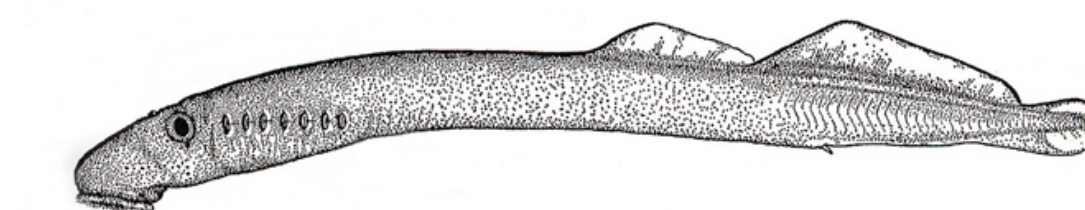


Fig. 5: A Pacific Lamprey.

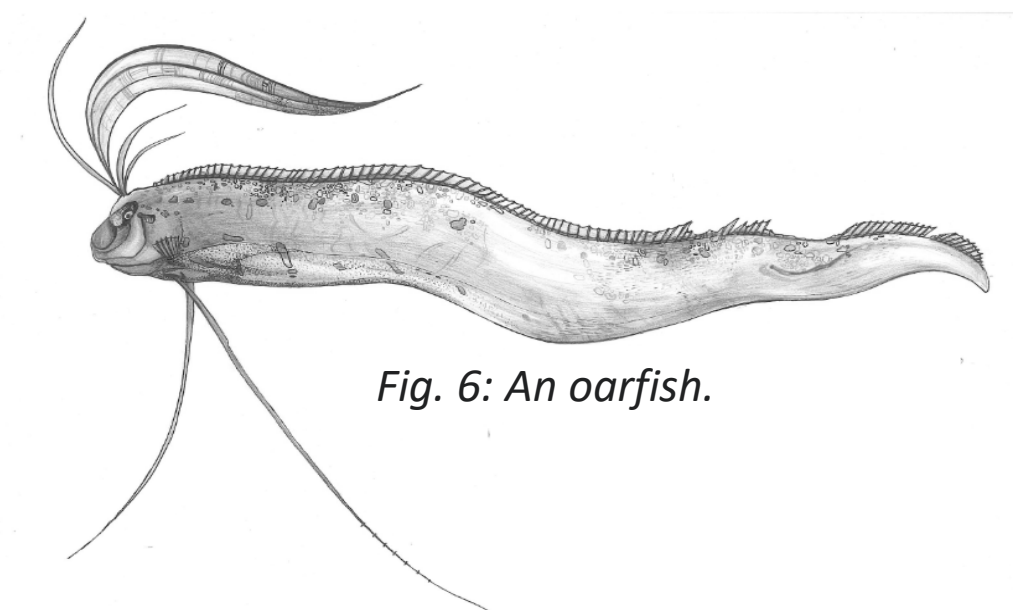


Fig. 6: An oarfish.

## Local Wildlife Inspiration?

It may be that the fantastical Humboldt serpents are inspired by regional wildlife. Most obvious are snakes themselves, which despite not exceeding 5 feet in length, lay eggs on land just as the legendary serpents. Figures 5 and 6 are examples of the two most probable inspirations.

Many sightings of Humboldt serpents were made in and near bodies of water, particularly the Eel River, which is home to Pacific Lampreys. Pacific Lampreys are eel-like parasitic fish that latch on to their victims, such as sperm whales, and suck their blood. Like Humboldt serpents, Pacific Lampreys are seen in both the ocean and freshwater bodies as they spawn their young there. Unlike Humboldt serpents, however, Pacific Lampreys only grow to be 2.5 feet.

The oarfish is another example of possible inspiration. The oarfish is a cosmopolitan species that lives in every ocean save the Arctic, with a slender serpent-like body that can grow up to 56 feet long adorned with a brilliant red, highly modified dorsal fin that runs from the creature's head down its back. Red-headed sea monsters and serpents have been rumored throughout history across the globe. The serpent water spirits known as "KA-Ha-Mis" has red fiery eyes and horns that may have taken inspiration from the oarfish's dorsal fin.

"KA-Ha-Mis" also can make the water an inky black to hide, much like squids living in Humboldt County that can grow to be 45 feet long.