mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Are mermaids real?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

Hi, it's Doug! A few years ago, the Natural History Museum of Denmark announced that they had made an important discovery. They said that they had found the skeleton of a real-life mermaid, and they were even going to display it in the museum. Some people were pretty confused. Wait a second, aren't mermaids supposed to be pretend? Was this even real? Turns out it wasn't. It was April Fool's Day and the museum was just joking. Someone named Henry and Joanie have a question about mermaids. Let's give them a call now.

[Video Call]

- Hi, Doug!

- Hi, Henry and Joanie!

- I have a question for you. Are mermaids real?

- Oh, that's a great question.

Mermaids and mermen are found in all kinds of stories and movies. There are friendly ones, like Ariel and King Triton in "The Little Mermaid" and scary-looking ones like the merpeople in "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire." There's even a mermaid on the cups of coffee that a lot of people drink. Images of mermaids really can be seen all over the place. Now the mermaids we watch on TV or read about in books are just pretend, but what about real mermaids? Do they exist? A

long time ago, a lot of people thought yes. Some ancient books about nature described merpeople as real creatures along with dolphins, whales, and fish. Their proof—what they thought were skeletons of mermaids they found on beaches, plus hundreds of stories from sailors who thought they had actually seen merpeople swimming in the ocean. Were the sailors just lying or did they really see something? Before I say anything more, I'm curious, what do you think the sailors from a long time ago really saw?

VIDEO 2

Well, one thing you might find surprising is that these aren't the only mermaid stories that were told by people in ancient times. For example, the first Australians told stories of mermaids called yawkyawks with green seaweed hair. While in ancient Japan, people told of ningyo creatures with human heads and fish-like bodies. And get this. They were as long as a school bus. In ancient Europe, there were even stories of blue mermen with gray beards that would challenge sailors to a rhyming contest. If the captain of a ship was able to rhyme better than the mermen, the mermen would let the ship pass. What's especially interesting about these mermaid stories is that these stories come from all around the world, not just one place. How is it possible that people from completely different places on opposite sides of the world were all describing the same thing? They must've been seeing something at least sort of like a mermaid, right? Well, maybe, but some experts point out there is another possible explanation. A long time ago, the ocean was a complete mystery. It was deep and dark and no one had any idea what was down there. Anyone sailing on boats would have seen animals like whales, and sharks, and dolphins pop up out of the water. And they knew what those were because they saw them all the time. But every once in a while some of them might've seen a creature that they didn't recognize.

Something swimming far away or something seen through the fog or something seen at night. Like, they might see a tail moving past them in the water, or an arm popping up out of a wave, or maybe a face that almost looked human. What could this be? Could there be half fish, half human creatures living in the water? Though it really seemed like a mermaid to them, could it have been something like this? Look closely. You see the flat tail? It almost looks like a mermaid, right? And check out those front flippers. They almost look like arms. This is a dugong. Or you might be familiar with her cousin the manatee. And scientists think that the shape of creatures like these might be what gave people the idea of merpeople. In other words, people in ancient times might've mistaken animals like dugongs for being half human, half fish. Now dugongs may not look exactly like mermaids but imagine seeing them at night. Or really far away. Or even with green seaweed wrapped around their heads. It would almost seem as if you were looking at a real-life mermaid with long green hair. And when people found skeletons of dugongs they were sure of it. Look closely. You notice the end of the arms? A dugong has bones that look kind of like fingers. And check out the bones in its tail. Kind of looks like a mermaid. When people found these skeletons they displayed them in places like circuses and even museums. Mermaids were real, they must have thought. And now they finally had proof. Today it's pretty clear that merpeople don't exist in real life. I mean, if they did a lot more people would have seen them. Like people would have posted videos of them for example. And human beings have been studying animals on land and in the ocean for a long time now. And we've never found any evidence of a creature that's half of one animal and half of another. I mean, think about that. Have you ever seen anything like a half-elephant, half-lizard? But even though there may not be such things as mermaids in real life, believe it or not, there actually is kind of such a thing as a merdog. Check this out. You see the long snout, the sharp claws? Look at its teeth. It does kind of look like a dog. In fact, it even has fur like a dog. And get this, it barks. This

is a sea lion and sea lions are part of the cuneiform group of mammals, which means dog-like. They aren't closely related to whales or fish or anything else that lives in the ocean. When you're looking at a sea lion, you're really looking at a real-life relative of the dog family, one that lives in water. Sea lions are the closest thing there is to being a real-life merdog. Maybe we should call them that. So in summary, we have no reason for thinking mermaids exist in real life. In fact, scientists have never found a living creature that was half one animal and half a different kind of animal. People in ancient times might've thought merpeople were real because of the human-looking traits of sea creatures like dugongs. That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Henry and Joanie, for asking it!