

Chasing Chupacabras:
Why People Would Rather Believe in a Bloodsucking Red-eyed Monster from Outer-
Space than in a Pack of Hungry Dogs

by

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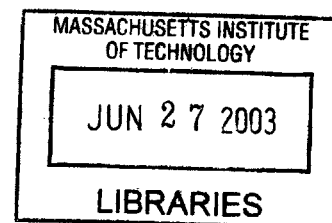
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ABSTRACT

In the tangled depths of its tropical rainforest, the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico is said to hide a monster. Part alien, part vampire, part kangaroo-bat-demon, this monster has been supposedly sucking the blood of animals since 1995. Though reports of the monster's alleged victims and eyewitnesses have since spread to eleven countries and made headlines worldwide, no scientific investigation to date has found any evidence supporting a paranormal predator. But like Bigfoot, ESP, and UFOs, this phenomenon—known to Spanish-speakers as the *Chupacabras*—has no shortage of believers.

In the face of little, no, or often-times contrary scientific evidence for the paranormal, people continue to believe. Why? The following thesis attempts an answer from the study of anthropology, psychology, and biology.

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para mi mamá

Chasing Chupacabras



Why People
Would Rather
Believe in a
Bloodsucking
Red-Eyed
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hirteen cameras focused on him. The night air was thick with the hum of a thousand voices and the damp of hurricane season. The Mayor was sweating through his fatigues. He flashed a large knife under the lights of the reporters, briefing them on tonight's plan.

It was Sunday, October 29th, 1995, the night everyone in Canóvanas had been waiting for. Finally, the mayor of the Puerto Rican town was going to put a stop to this mystery. For over a month his office had been flooded with worried citizens and frantic phone calls. Something was killing the animals, and not just killing them, but sucking the blood from their bodies. The carcasses were piling up: five, ten, twenty at time—goats, chickens, dogs, rabbits, sheep, calves, pigs and geese—all with two mysterious puncture wounds in the neck. People were calling the killer the *Chupacabras*, or the "Goatsucker," for its apparent taste for goat's blood. Now it had killed over 150 animals. So the Mayor, the Honorable José Chemo Soto, a former policeman, organized a hunt.

"I am pleased with the turnout," the Mayor announced. His audience of two hundred civilian volunteers nodded and cheered. Some laughed nervously, shuffling in crisp new fatigues. Others readied nets and tranquilizer guns. Those who came straight from home or work looked around for others armed with simple machetes. A baby goat bleated from a wooden crate. It was 8 p.m.; the sun had just set, and it was time.

Followed by reporters, camera crews, and curious citizens, the posse turned away from the city lights and marched towards the blackness of North America's only tropical rainforest, El Yunque. As the crunch of wet bramble grew louder, the squawking of onlookers faded into the hushed talk of hunters. Soon the only voice in the darkness was that of the tiny Puerto Rican tree frog, *Ko-kee! Ko-kee!*

The steepening slopes of the Campo Rico region signaled that it was time to set the trap. Chemo Soto ordered Civil Defense workers to load the bait. The baby goat trembled as she was shoved into a five by five foot iron cage. Mayor Soto was checking the lock mechanism when a flash of light pulsed over a nearby ravine. Someone opened fire; then another, and another, until the air was exploding with gunshots. "Hold your fire!" shouted the Mayor, "We want this creature alive." A man ran up to them.

"I saw something . . . near the gorge of Calle Nueve," he panted. "It was so fast. . . like a gazelle."

"It" has been described as a 4-foot fanged monster with the torso of a man and the haunches of a kangaroo. Huge, bulging red eyes, a demonic alien countenance. Spines running down its back. Bat wings and three-toed claws, hairy, scaly grey dinosaur skin. A darting tongue. Some have said it has the ability to fly, float, or change color like a chameleon, perhaps even control minds. And they say it leaves a sulfur stench in its wake.

Whatever the *Chupacabras* (Chew-pah-kah-brah) may be, it was blamed for over 2,000 animal deaths in Puerto Rico in 1995 and 1996 alone. But the creature didn't stop there. In 1996 it went on to terrorize the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Texas, Florida, New York, San Francisco, New Jersey and even Moscow. One hand-written letter from Cambridge, Massachusetts, warns, "To the very esteemed governor of Puerto Rico . . . This letter is to give you some very important information regarding national security. . . . You can find the Chupacabras near Pampas restaurant at 927 Mass. Ave. in Cambridge . . . I saw it drinking the blood of a cat . . . I await your help in this matter." The two-page plea describes one the thousands of

attacks reported during the "Chupacabramania" of 1996.

As the Chupacabras's range expanded from the tropics of the Caribbean to the arid plains of northern Mexico and the metropolitan areas of Miami and Manhattan, so did its popularity. Suddenly the monster was the subject of TV talk shows and weekly political cartoons. A Chupacabras Psychic Hotline started taking calls. Crisp white t-shirts hung in shop doorways featuring the Chupacabras as a gourmet chef, the Chupacabras as a lifeguard, the Chupacabras as a strapping party animal. A small town in Texas inaugurated an annual Chupacabras theme barbeque. Children in Puerto Rico fought over who got to have a Chupacabras theme party. Restaurants and candy shops opened in Florida in the monster's name, hoping to attract the hungriest customers. Even a new cocktail made its debut in San Juan, which its inventors said was named Chupacabras because "nobody knows what's in it."

By late spring of 1996, the U.S. and world media could no longer restrain itself. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Miami Herald*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Toronto Star* and the *London Daily Telegraph* ran creature-features between April and June. "Animals Killed; An Island is Abuzz," reported the *Times*; "Mexicans Go Batty when Vampire Gets their Goats," read the *Star*. By mid-summer, the monster had seduced the *X-files*, *National Geographic Explorer*, and *Unsolved Mysteries*.

But while some munched away on Chupacabras special sandwiches or sang along to "Chupacabrafragilistic-expialidocious," others boarded up their homes and pleaded with their teenagers to stay home from the prom. In Canóvanas, the town of 50,000 just fifteen miles east of the metropolis of San Juan, residents still hesitate letting their children go out alone or their pets roam outdoors at night. After all, attacks of the Chupacabras have been reported as recently as this past February 8th, 2003 in Fajardo, Puerto Rico and January 9th in Isabela, not to mention the attacks last year in Mexico and Chile. Why take a chance?

"It's serious, it's real, it's killing and it's going to keep killing," said Mayor Chemo Soto to the *Tampa Tribune* after his last hunt in 2000, "This thing is difficult to

catch. It hunts during the day and night. It flies, it walks, and it's getting bolder."

Now nicknamed "Chemo Jones" for his Indiana Jones-like adventures, the Mayor keeps an emergency cell phone at the hip in case someone spots the beast in the surrounding hills.

The results of his last four hunts? "Inconclusive," he replies.

CIENCIA Y CREENCIA

"These are classic canine punctures from dogs," announced the Miami zoologist to a group of local TV cameras on March 21st, 1996. The night before, something left 69 goats, chickens and geese "vampired dry" and strewn across two backyards in Sweetwater, south Miami. Residents blamed the Chupacabras. Zoologist Ron Magill of the MetroDade Zoo blamed a dog. "I took out a knife and cut into the carotid artery and blood came out of the carcass," Magill told the *St. Petersburg Times*. Not only were the animals full of blood, he said, but the surrounding dirt was stamped with dog prints. He even pointed local residents and the media to a place where it looked like a dog dug its way under a fence. "It was classic dog digging," he said, "You could see all the dirt pushed back and dog hair on the bottom of the fence."

Even so, when an elderly woman approached the cameras and started acting out her sighting of the Chupacabras ("It stood up on two legs and was hunched over like *this* with big arms and looked at me with these red eyes..."), Magill noted, "As soon as she did that every news media camera zoomed in on her. That was the footage they played over and over again." And the factual evidence he pointed out that day? "They were just totally not listening," the zoologist said.

Until then, the Chupacabras had never attacked outside Puerto Rico. But just three days before the animals were killed in Sweetwater, the Miami-based TV talk show *Cristina* broadcast a special on the Goatsucker to 100 million Spanish-speaking viewers worldwide. "I used to laugh every time someone mentioned the Chupacabras," host Cristina Saralegui told the *Boston Globe*, "but after doing the



Chupacabramania. In 1996 the Goatsucker was both a fear and a fad. T-shirts, toys, books, mugs, movies, and music abounded.

show and listening to many serious, credible people, I have to tell you . . . I don't think it's a normal animal at all." The credible Puerto Ricans invited were Mayor Chemo Soto, a.k.a. Chemo Jones, Jorge Martín (a well-known Puerto Rican UFOologist), and "Dr. Chupacabras," a veterinarian who claimed the wounds "weren't compatible with the bite of a dog, a monkey or any animal I've ever studied."

By the time the *Cristina* show aired in March 1996, more than 30 people in Canóvanas had reported close encounters with the Chupacabras, despite the fact that Puerto Rican scientists had found nothing out of the ordinary in any animal they had examined. One of the directors of a public autopsy, Dr. Hector Garcia of the Department of Agriculture's Caribbean Veterinary Laboratory, insisted after twenty autopsies that not only had all the examined animals been full of blood, but they lacked any perforations of the jugular vein—the likeliest spot for a bloodsucker to strike. Instead of a paranormal predator, he stated, the more likely cause of death was infection of animal bites.

But what animal? To date, scientists from the Division of Terrestrial Resources in the Department of Natural Resources and the University of Puerto Rico have not identified a culprit because most of the evidence was ruined



“It doesn't matter what scientists say,” says Eduardo Coll, “people will still believe.”

before scientists arrived. Dr. Garcia suspects feral dogs. Biologist Dr. Héctor Orta blames rhesus monkeys—it is well known that escaped lab monkeys have been living on the island since the late 70's (In fact, one policeman in the west part of the island shot a rhesus monkey five times, thinking it was a Chupacabras). But Dr. José Chabert, director of the Division of Terrestrial Resources insists that many animals, including feral dogs, pet pit bulls, monkeys, and exotic pets (many wealthy Puerto Ricans are known to keep some) have each been responsible for attacks.

Inconclusive results, however, prove to some the existence of a mysterious entity: “Do we ever see the final conclusions of these studies?” asks Roberto Nogal, an affluent citizen of San Juan, “No: They investigate and then the cases are shut tight. Here we have a lot of secret things kept secret because of the panic of the people. These are things that are happening, and the

United States government will always keep them secret, and everyone else will make people believe it doesn't exist.”

In Mexico, where the Chupacabras reportedly ran rampant in eleven northern states beginning in May of 1996, the Secretary of the Environment held nightly *Televisa* broadcasts with zoologists and veterinarians in hopes of persuading the public that the predator was nothing but a pack of hungry wild dogs faced with one of the worst extended droughts in Mexican history. Ironically, some believed that the government itself was fostering belief in the Chupacabras to distract them from more pressing economic and political concerns. Despite government advice, Mexican citizens set fire to several caves in pursuit of the Chupacabras, killing thousands of endangered bats.

Two years ago, a shepherd in Nicaragua claimed to have finally killed the Chupacabras. The vulture-picked corpse was brought to the biologist Pedrarias Davila of the University of Nicaragua, where the scientist told several local and U.S. papers, “There's no doubt about it, this is a dog, not a Chupacabras.” Two days later the shepherd complained to Nicaragua's *Diario La Prensa*, “They must have switched the animal around at the university.”

How can people believe in a bloodthirsty vampire kangaroo? Are they crazy? Ignorant? Seeking attention? Are hungry mongrels too mundane for the imagination? Public necropsies by scientists in Puerto Rico, Miami, and Mexico did little to change people's minds: “I want to say to the people who claim the Chupacabras is a dog or monkey that I will laugh in their faces,” says Luis Angel Guadalupe, one of the first eyewitnesses in Puerto Rico. “There is no one who says to me that this monster I have seen could not be real. I saw it with my own eyes, and I am not crazy.”

Not crazy. Then what is he? What are the other thousands of believers in Latin America and the United States? Perhaps the same question could be asked of the tens of millions of Americans who believe in alien abductions,

Gallup Polls

1978-2001

1978	
ESP	51%
The Devil	39%
Astrology	30%
Witches	10%
Clairvoyance	24%
Ghosts	11%

1990	
ESP	49%
The Devil	55%
Astrology	25%
Witches	14%
Clairvoyance	26%
Ghosts	25%
Extraterrestrial contact	22%
Communication with the dead	18%
Reincarnation	21%
Atlantis	33%

2001	
ESP	50%
The Devil (1994)	65%
Astrology	28%
Witches	26%
Clairvoyance	32%
Ghosts	38%
Extraterrestrial contact	33%
Communication with the dead	28%
Reincarnation	25%
—	
Possession by the devil	41%
Channeling	15%
Telepathy	36%

Believers in Pseudoscience and the Paranormal

astrology, ESP, Bigfoot, and the Loch Ness monster. Like Luis Guadalupe, millions of people ignore scientific evidence all the time, choosing instead to believe in pseudoscience and the paranormal. Rather than accept the probable, people cling to the improbable. This past decade, when the primary pieces of “evidence” for the Loch Ness monster and Bigfoot were admitted to be hoaxes, neither Scotland’s Loch Ness Lake nor Bigfoot tourist sites in the Pacific Northwest saw any dip in their half a million-plus visitors each year. One street vendor in Miami is said to have made more money selling plaster-cast dog prints as Chupacabras prints *after* city zoologists debunked the bloodsucker on TV. And for many in Puerto Rico, the proximity of the Arecibo Observatory—the world’s largest radio telescope that has spent a fraction of its time every year since 1975 listening for extraterrestrial life—is enough proof that the Chupacabras is a result of an alien encounter. In fact, some believe the vampire must be an alien probe designed to collect blood samples of Earth livestock. The leading UFOologist Jorge Martín, however, editor of *Evidencia OVNI (UFO)* and author of *La Conspiración Chupacabras*, thinks the Chupacabras must be a “pet” left behind by a passing crew of extraterrestrials.

According to Gallup polls and other surveys taken over the past three decades, belief in the paranormal has been rising among Americans despite the growing dependence on science in daily life. More and more people are consulting New Age gurus and astrologists, palmists and channelers, numerologists and cryptozoologists—self-proclaimed “scientists” who study creatures that may or may not exist. The number of books in print on the occult and psychic has jumped from 131 in 1965 to well over 3,000 today, and approximately 1,200 of the nation’s 1,750 daily newspapers feature horoscopes. Today people in Malawi are murdering their neighbors, accusing them of

being syringe-toting “vampires,” alien encounters are being reported all over the earth, and psychic surgery and folk remedies are on the rise in “civilized” nations.

The Chupacabras casts its shadow over Latin America, but its pseudoscientific siblings grip the world.

Like many skeptics, attorney Eduardo Morales Coll, director of the Puerto Rican Institute of Literature, blames belief in the unbelievable on low intelligence and poor education. But contrary to most skeptics’ instincts, several psychology studies and Gallup polls have repeatedly found that levels of education and intelligence are unrelated to most beliefs in pseudoscience and the paranormal (with the exception of ESP, which people with higher education and intelligence tend to believe, and astrology and haunted houses, which people with lower education and intelligence do). Two floors down and one block from Coll’s office on San Francisco Street, the advanced degree-holding multimillionaire Roberto Nogal says, “I think the Chupacabras has to be an alien, because it’s nothing like what we already know.” And Adelaida Oquendo, a mother of three in the small mountain town of Jayuya, holds a Ph.D. in education and yet fears for her children at night—she believes her father lost his 8 chickens to the Chupacabras last November. Michael Negron was finishing his B.S. in engineering when he says he first encountered the Goatsucker face-to-face. And of course, the New York-born and raised Mayor Chemo Soto holds three advanced degrees and says in a low voice, “I don’t tell reporters this, but I think it is an extraterrestrial being.”

But these well-educated Puerto Ricans are not alone. In his bestsellers *Abducted* and *Passport to the Cosmos*, Harvard Medical School psychiatrist John Mack defends alien abductees. Jane Goodall believes in Bigfoot. Emory professor Courtney Brown “remote views” missile silos and aliens from the Farsight Institute he founded in Atlanta.

Hillary Clinton relied on a psychic guru to “speak” with the dead Eleanor Roosevelt, while the Reagans cleared their every decision in the White House through an astrologist in San Francisco. In 1995, the CIA made public its top-secret Stargate program, a twenty-million dollar twenty-year pursuit of psychic remote viewing. When the American Institute for Research reviewed the literature over the past few decades, they discovered that there had never been any scientific evidence backing remote viewing all along. So why the investment?

“It doesn’t matter what scientists say,” says Eduardo Coll, “people will still believe.”

The question is *why*.

news—never led any authorities to suspect a bloodsucking monster. So why do these people believe? Sagan would have blamed a superficial understanding of science; people are fed the findings of science in soundbites and textbooks, but the process of science rarely gets on the menu. When Puerto Rican scientists were quoted in the island’s media, reports tended to emphasize the scientists’ speculations of what the attacker *could* be (it’s a dog! It’s a monkey! It’s dogs *and* monkeys!), while few emphasized what the autopsy reports proved the attacker could *not* be—a bloodsucker. This allowed some people, like Roberto Nogal, to assume that the studies were never carried to conclusion, that “the cases

“It all started here in 1995 in Canóvanas,” recalls the Mayor, sitting on the edge of his chair. His arms are folded over a glass-topped desk cluttered with papers and books toppling into one another. Photos peek out from under the glass where a bronze statue of Don Quixote stands staring at pink walls tiled with dozens of plaques, awards, and pictures of local beauty queens. The rich blue carpet of his office is matted from the shuffle of fifty citizens he sees each day. Two ten-inch plastic aliens occupy the left corner of his desk.

“It was killing cows, horses, geese and sheep, goats, chickens and hens,” said the Mayor, “All the neighbors were going hysterical. There was terror in the streets and people were afraid of leaving their homes.”

First, there were the sightings, says the Mayor. There was Madelyne Tolentino, a 31-year old so traumatized by seeing what she described as a hairy, grey-eyed demon hopping like a kangaroo down a street she had to be hospitalized. She later told *The Washington Post*, “After it was over, I said to my mother, ‘We’d better not tell anybody about this or they’ll think we’re crazy.’” And Michael Negrón, a 25-year-old engineering student, said he watched the beast for ten minutes from his balcony, saying it had “skin like a dinosaur,” “multi-colored spikes,” and “eyes the size of hen’s eggs.”

Luis Ismael Guadalupe was fishing when he swears he saw something as ugly as a demon swoop through the air. “A pointy, long tongue came in and out of his mouth,” he told *The New York Times*, “It was gray but his back changed colors. It was a monster.” To Puerto Rico’s *El Nuevo Día*, Guadalupe said, “There is no one who says to me that this monster I have seen could not be real. I saw it with my own eyes, and I am not crazy.”

Eight years and five re-elections later, Mayor Chemo Soto retells these stories with a solemnity betrayed only by his lively low-sounding voice.

BLINDED MINDS

In his last book, *The Demon-Haunted World*, the late Carl Sagan wrote that people embrace pseudoscience in proportion to their misunderstanding of real science. In January of 2003, I approached fifty Puerto Ricans on the street—half from the metropolis of San Juan, half from Canóvanas, half of them men, half of them women—and asked, “Do you believe the Chupacabras exists?” Twenty-four answered “Yes.” Nine of those twenty-four people said they believed because of the “evidence” or the “dead animals they found.” Five of the twenty-four said they believed because “people have seen it,” and another five said they believed because the “news” or “science” said the Chupacabras exists.

But the “evidence” they cite—the dead animals, the eyewitnesses, the science and the

were shut tight,” when in reality, science—in Sagan’s words—“gropes and staggers” toward truth. Still, the different speculations offered over several weeks of media coverage may have allowed people to roll the “Chupacabras” into the same mental drawer with every trashed model of the universe and “cure” for cancer, concluding that scientists haven’t got a clue. But even that doesn’t explain why believers would still choose to believe in the highly improbable—a super-intelligent bloodthirsty biped—over the probable: hungry stray dogs.

One possible explanation for people’s belief in the Chupacabras is a phenomenon psychologists call the “confirmation bias,” which holds that people tend to selectively notice or ignore things according to their already-held beliefs. For example, hypochondriacs are at the mercy of the confirmation bias, interpreting every ache as indicative of a serious illness. But psychologists have found that the confirmation

bias is a fundamental tendency in human thinking. An example can be seen in Mayor Chemo Soto's analysis of the Goatsucker attack "patterns":

"Now, listen there's something about this: there's something about bodies of water. It appears near water, little creeks, waterfalls. Every time it appears there is a big noise, a deafening sound, a sound of a turbine. It never appears close to the houses, but in the hills. We have run after it when we heard that noise, and when we get there, there is a terribly strong smell of sulfur. That's everywhere that the Chupacabras has been—sulfur. A violent stink in the place where the noise had been. It's very strange. The other day, a meteorite fell by the mountain and when it fell, there was a terrible smell of sulfur too. So I started thinking, analyzing . . . so it has to be from outer space. Because of the smell and the noise."

How about the times when people reported a "wet dog" smell instead of sulfur, or didn't notice any smell at all? Or the reports of silent attacks beside people's homes? What did he think of the Goatsucker attacks reported in arid, waterless environments such as those in central Puerto Rico, Mexico, or Texas? No, he replies, he hadn't considered those. But he insists they weren't important. He does, however, have a keen memory for the details and events that confirm his hypotheses: "When it was attacking around here, you could always smell that terrible stink. You would go to the hills, and you would know it had been around there, because of that terrible stink of sulfur."

In one psychology experiment conducted by researchers at Iowa State University, ESP believers and skeptics read a scientific paper either supporting or debunking ESP. Then they were tested on their memory of the paper's content. The ESP believers who read the paper undermining ESP not only remembered very little of it, in some cases they "remembered" that the paper upheld ESP rather than challenged it! And "normal" beliefs are subject to the same bias. In a similar experiment at Stanford University, people were asked to read studies arguing for or against capital punishment, and they consistently judged the one confirming their own view as "better conducted" and "more convincing." Everyone was more critical of the study attacking their previously held belief, regardless of which belief they held.

The confirmation bias is so powerful that lawyers are known to build their cases around it by swamping juries with confirming evidence. A

startling example of the bias comes from a study by Columbia University psychologist Deanna Kuhn, who observed people listening to an audio recording of a real murder trial. She found that instead of evaluating the evidence objectively, most people first composed a story of what happened and then sorted through the evidence to see which facts confirmed their story. Alarmingly, the people that focused most on finding confirming evidence for a single story (as opposed to those who considered at least one alternative scenario) were the most confident in their decisions.

Seeing is not always believing; many of us, like Mayor Chemo Soto, see what we want to believe: "After the [first] search, we continued looking," says the Mayor, "but we have not found it. People were saying to me, 'Oh Chemo you're



"What we propose is a fair and equal arrangement . . . Nobody will steal all the publicity: Each gets a hemisphere and we'll decide which with a coin toss!"
 "PSSST! Which hemisphere has Chemo Jones?"

Between Little Green Men and Chupacabras, I prefer the first, with or without Chemo!

crazy!' This and that, but then when it started attacking again—well you know—'It's true what Chemo says,' they say, 'It's true.'"

And yet, why would Puerto Ricans blame a bloodsucking monster if a pack of hungry dogs was the more likely culprit? Another possible explanation is our tendency to use what psychologists call an "availability heuristic," or a rule-of-thumb to base a decision on how

"sucking the life-blood" of Latin American communities in the form of cheap labor and commodities. Citing NAFTA and other U.S. trade negotiations, the historian writes that "the Latin American vampire provided a face, however gruesome" behind the suffering of the domestic economy overshadowed by a booming global market. But Derby, the only academic so far to explain the Chupacabras, does not provide any



“The Chupacabras was created by cloning experiments, and [the scientists] could not overpower it.”

frequently we've heard of something. For example, many people are terrified of flying but few are afraid of driving, despite the fact that driving is approximately 65 times more deadly. This is because people have heard of many more fatal plane disasters than fatal car accidents. When an airplane crashes, many people die at once, and the event receives national media coverage. Because the images of flying disasters come more readily to mind—are more *available*—they have greater influence on the thoughts and emotions associated with flying. In Latin America, images of animal-bloodsuckers are ubiquitous in the modern literature and history of a region where blood rituals used to be practiced by many native peoples. Images of dogs as hunters, however, are relatively rare. So when uneaten dead animals were found in backyards, Latin Americans blamed the only animal that came readily to mind: a bloodsucker.

SUCKERS FOR SCAPEGOATS?

"I think that a lot of these people just want to blame these animals' deaths on something outside their power," San Juan resident Alejandra Martin told *El Nuevo Día*. Martin's thinking is not unique. History professor Robin Derby of UCLA argues in her soon-to-be-published book chapter, "Vampires of Empires: Why the Chupacabras Stalks the Americas," that the Chupacabras is not only a scapegoat, but a manifestation of socioeconomic fears of U.S. domination in Latin America. According to Derby, the Chupacabras is a "fetish" born of a desire to blame U.S. market capitalism for

surveys of Latin American feelings towards the U.S. nor any interviews with believers or eyewitnesses.

One of the most often-heard narratives from Puerto Rican believers suggests instead a fear of science: "The Chupacabras was created by cloning experiments, and [the scientists] could not overpower it," explains a believer from Canóvanas. "There are people that do experiments with animals and other things so that they can create different species," says another. "I think that the 'Chupacabras' could be an 'experiment' that escaped from someone, or they released it on purpose," says a young man in San Juan. Rather than a scapegoat for economic woes, perhaps the Chupacabras is a scapegoat for fears of modern science. Certainly Puerto Ricans have had plenty to fear from the scientific community: as early as 1932 doctors from Europe and the United States were injecting cancer cells into Puerto Ricans to trace the progression of the disease; U.S. eugenics policies in the 1950's enforced a human sterilization program on the island; and in 1984, scientists pushed through Congress legislation requiring that all Puerto Rican pigs be slaughtered to prevent hoof and mouth disease from spreading to the mainland. And residents of the small Puerto Rican coastal island of Vieques, a U.S. military test site, have one of the highest rates of cancer in the world. Who wouldn't mistrust science?

"I live in the country, and I'm not joking: I hear the Chupacabras every night, and you know, it's scary," says one man in Old San Juan, his little daughter perched on his shoulders, "I don't believe in anything like that, but when you hear all this stuff going on, and things are flying

around you, well, *something* is going on out there."

The idea of the scapegoat, whether linked to a fear of science or fear of the economy, is not new to anthropology. At the turn of the last century the English anthropologist, Sir James George Frazer, wrote a volume entitled "The Scapegoat" as part of *The Golden Bough*, his nine book survey of ethnology. In "The Scapegoat" he describes the rituals of many peoples all over the world casting blame, sin, guilt, or fear onto various animals and inanimate objects. Dr. Neftali Olmo-Terron, director of the State Psychiatric Hospital in Puerto Rico says the Chupacabras may be the typical scapegoat: "Some of us are able to maintain a hold on life only by keeping things in separate compartments. We are the good, the bad needs to reside somewhere else, outside. This projection is very useful in creating the scapegoat—we are good guys here in Puerto Rico. The bad thing is that alien from Mars that sucks the blood of our pets and farm animals!"

And yet that alien from Mars, noted the Smithsonian's curator for Hispanic history, Dr.

Marvette Perez, in the *San Juan Star*, "has migrated only to places where people speak Spanish."

THE MYTH WITH A THOUSAND FACES

"What happens is that people hear these things, and based on their culture, they get this idea," says one middle-aged woman, sitting at a park chess table in the Old San Juan. Does the Chupacabras have a particular resonance with Puerto Ricans and other Spanish-speaking people?

History professor Ricardo Alegría at the University of Puerto Rico says yes, pointing to a trail of similar modern monsters. The "Chupacabras" may not have appeared until 1995, but the beast does have a family of nearly forgotten relatives.

In March of 1975, reports from the tiny town of Moca in western Puerto Rico told of a bloodsucking bird-beast. Ninety animals were found dead in two weeks, all with puncture

Permission to Believe?

If there is one thing about the Chupacabras phenomenon that can't be ignored, it's the monster's mysterious "appearance" in eleven countries and five major U.S. cities in a single summer. How did the Chupacabras go from Puerto Rican predator to international terror? Many say the media fueled the phenomenon, lending credence to the creature by covering the alleged sightings. Even the world's best-known cryptozoologist Loren Coleman, a pseudoscientist who makes a living writing about creatures like Bigfoot and Mothman, says that the media played a key role in manufacturing a well-traveled monster: "The media attention appears to have caused the migration of Chupacabramania," he writes in his book *Mothman and Other Curious Encounters*, and "the Chupacabras represents folklore in the modern age of electronic telecommunication. Once it took centuries for a legend like the Abominable Snowman to be disseminated . . . The stories told now are similar; what has changed is the speed at which the word of mouth travels."

In fact, former Princeton undergraduate Hector Armstrong, founder of the official "Chupacabras Homepage" in 1995, says that not only did the media "spawn more sightings," but that his website's daily updates on alleged attacks "probably propagated them," he admits. "I didn't intend it; the dynamic just turned out this way," he says. Armstrong's homepage, complete with a "princeton.edu" web address, scored over 340 hits a day in 1995, ranking it in the top five percent of popular websites on the still-nascent internet that year.

"With the World Wide Web explosion," writes Coleman, "the Chupacabras was ideal for the medium." But, as he says in an interview, "the *Cristina* show was the foundation for global interest in the Chupacabras." For six months prior to the Miami-based talk show, stories of the Chupacabras had been confined to Puerto Rico. But three days after the feature on the Goatsucker aired to a 100 million Spanish-speakers worldwide, "encounters" were reported in Miami. Three weeks later, the Chupacabras appeared in Mexico and Texas, and from there moved on to Manhattan, San Francisco, and Moscow.

"It's interesting how people are fooled by credentials," says Hector Armstrong, recalling the interview requests he received in 1996 from reporters who viewed him as an "expert" from Princeton University. When *National Geographic Explorer* asked him to narrate a documentary on the Chupacabras, "my family thought it was funny," says Armstrong, "but it was clear [the producers] wanted a 'learned' response from Princeton," he says. And when Armstrong was the guest of radio talk shows, "callers asked questions as if I were an authority!" he says.

Mayor Chemo Soto proudly reminds reporters today that the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* called him for interviews as if their stories, though skeptical in tone, lent him credibility. And perhaps they did. When the highly-rated *Cristina* show or the *Washington Post* yields airtime or page space to the Chupacabras, are they not saying that the story is worthy of their attention? Does the phenomenon become more "real" after it flashes on a Princeton website or on The Learning Channel?

"People believe whatever they hear over and over again," says one woman of the twelve interviewed in Canóvanas. And when they hear it again from *National Geographic Explorer* or *Cristina*, perhaps they perceive a permission to believe.

wounds in the neck. Local tabloids quickly adopted the story as the “Moca Vampire.” The regular media jumped on a “killer snake” theory when one farmer shot two six-foot Puerto Rican boas about to “attack” his 700-pound heifer. But local herpatologists dismissed the possibility of boas attacking such large animals, and people continued to blame the Moca Vampire for several dozen deaths through late April. After the attacks died down, officials discovered that several alligators had been illegally introduced near Moca.

Later that decade, a sea monster called the *Garadiábolo* surfaced on Fajardo’s Black Water



“I think people like stories,” says Arthur Steinberg, anthropology professor at MIT, “People like to believe in the supernatural.”

Lagoon, a murky beach-swamp on the east coast of the island. The demon was said to have the body of a man, the skin of a shark, the face of the devil and a snake’s tail. A few months later after spawning an action figure, the *Garadiábolo* was found to be a mutilated manta ray from a California circus.

Then in the early 1990’s came the *Comecogollo* from Guaynabo. Few Puerto Ricans claimed to have seen the four-foot monkey-like creature with a taste for *cogollos*, the tender shoots of baby plantain trees, and most authorities thought the sightings were connected to the growing numbers of rhesus monkeys on the island—over 2,000 by the mid-nineties since their escape from the Caribbean Primate Research Center twenty years before.

While some believers in the Chupacabras claim that all these monsters were the Goatsucker all along (“It’s been around for thousands of years!” says one believer in San Juan), most Puerto Rican anthropologists find themselves suffering from monster déjà vu.

In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell tells how the hero’s journey and triumph echoes a thousand ways in a thousand languages all over the earth. The fact that certain kinds of stories are told and retold in human society has been recognized by anthropologists since Claude Lévi-Strauss at the turn of the century. Monster-slayers, floods, and oracles continue to resound in the collective narrative with similar themes and structural patterns, albeit

superficial differences in characters and settings. But few anthropologists have analyzed modern “mythical” creatures like the Loch Ness monster, the Yeti, and the Chupacabras in the same context because they are still the focus of scientific and pseudoscientific controversy. When asked about them, however, anthropologists say that the same cyclicity of myth is probably at work in modern human society, despite the influence of science in daily life. “I think people like stories,” says Arthur Steinberg, anthropology professor emeritus at MIT, “People like to believe in the supernatural.” And once you get outside machines and medicine, suggests Steinberg, and

into questions about life and our place in the universe, “People don’t believe in science—there are different ways to structure the world.”

Anthropologists have long tracked the cyclic merging and creation of deities and sacred things at the intersection of cultures. In Latin America, anthropologists study the fusion of Catholic saints with indigenous gods, sacred animals, or African deities. But these fusions aren’t confined to religion. The Transylvannian vampire was part Chinese bloodsucker *Giang Shi*, part eastern European bat lore, and part real-life tyrant Vlad the Impaller. Today people in Malawi are killing their neighbors suspected of being half vampire, half mad scientist. And the Chupacabras is a blend of vampire and extraterrestrial (some even say that extraterrestrials are the new folklore of the 21st century). But the reemergence of certain creatures goes beyond vampires.

Bigfoot is not the only giant humanoid primate reported to wander forests today. Nepal has the Yeti, Russia the Mecheny, Argentina the Ucumar. India has the Monkey Man, Vietnam the Nguoi Rung, and Australia the Yowie. Bigfoot was once the Sasquatch, and the Yowie was once the Yahoo. Over the years, names change, but the monsters remain. The Ogoopogo of Canada’s Okanagan Lake and the Mokele Mbembe of rivers in central Africa are just two lake monsters of the 300 worldwide recognized by cryptozoologists today.

Even the Chupacabras breed goes beyond the *Garadiábolo*, *Comecogollo*, and the Moca Vampire when the kaleidoscope turns over the United States. Mothman still scares in the South, the Jersey Devil and the Dover Demon still visit the Northeast, the Momo leaves its footprints in the Midwest. In fact, cryptozoologists track over a thousand different “cryptids” claimed to roam the United States today. Pan back further and the scope catches all the bloodsucking monsters of Mexico and the Caribbean like the Dominican *Gallipote* and the Haitian *Loupgarou*—both creatures able to fly, suck blood, and transmogrify into other animals.

“But those are all different,” says anthropologist of Puerto Rican and Caribbean cultures Juan Flores of Hunter College, “The Chupacabras was *news*. There were lurid photos of victims, everything. It was an everyday reality.” Unlike other modern monsters, the media pumps life into the Chupacabras with regular coverage of alleged attacks. “That is what makes it eerie, and yet in a funny way. . . . It becomes inexplicable, but people don’t try to find an explanation,” says Flores. For example, no one questions the unique feature of Chupacabras—its description.

OF CHIMERAS AND IMAGERY

Something strange happens when you ask believers in Puerto Rico what the Chupacabras looks like. Instead of describing the image circulating on more than thirty thousand web pages, book covers, and film, people describe something that sounds like a zoo. “I think it’s like a lion,” says one believer on San Francisco Street.

“It has gills, scales, a hump, and hooves,” says a believer in Canóvanas. “It’s an animal with four paws, a tail, and horns,” says another. “A type of lizard, clever, agile, and sneaky,” says a man in a San Juan shoe store. “It looks like a type of monkey about five feet tall,” says a woman in Canóvanas; “I believe it’s a spiritual force, like an evil spirit,” says a San Juan policeman in the rain. “Like a dog,” says a believer from Canóvanas. “Like a little monkey,” says a young blond woman.

This menagerie of reports doesn’t surprise one of the world’s leading hidden-animal “scientists,” cryptozoologist and professor Loren Coleman at the University of Southern Maine: “I have found that the closer you get to where the first eyewitnesses are, the further from a single image you will be,” says Coleman, an author of seventeen books on cryptozoology and a frequent appearance on documentary series such as the Discovery Channel’s “In the Unknown.” In fact, laments Coleman, it starts to “look like a zoo of cryptozoology.” Scientists might guess it’s because the creature never existed in the first place. But people seem to have no problem steering past the different descriptions and getting straight to the belief.

Going back to the original eyewitness reports of the Chupacabras in Canóvanas, Puerto Rico, the descriptions of the monster are nothing short of an animal alphabet soup. Madelyne Tolentino saw a spotted, hairy beast that looked like a tailless, grey-eyed kangaroo. Michael Negron said it was like a fish-faced scaly “dinosaur” with red eyes and multi-colored spikes. Luis Guadalupe saw a flying demon with a face of the devil. Today the classic image of the Goatsucker incorporates all-of-the-above, and the



The Many Faces of the Chupacabras. When Puerto Rican believers describe the Chupacabras, they don’t describe the classic image that appears on over thirty thousand web pages, book covers and comic strips. Instead they describe something that sounds more like a monster menagerie.

initial discrepancies apparently didn't matter: When Mayor Chemo Soto was asked about them, he said, "What discrepancies?"

At least one woman in San Juan is skeptical of the Chupacabras because of these reports: "People have chased it. People have seen it. But everyone sees something different!" she says with a laugh. According to cryptozoologist Loren Coleman, the classic image of the Chupacabras "doesn't mean what people actually saw paralleled it. I have found that when consulting eyewitnesses, it's like the Blind Men and the Elephant—each person sees a different part exaggerated." Perhaps the reason, writes reporter John Marino in the *San Juan Star*, "for the variety of descriptions of it given by 'eyewitnesses,' is that it looks different to each of us—like a mirror reflecting our personal demons."



“Even massively fictitious beliefs can be adaptive as long as they motivate behaviors that are adaptive in the real world.”

To attorney Eduardo Coll, president of the Puerto Rican Institute of Literature, "They incorporate *everything* into one big myth. This is how they create monsters."

And for some reason, people don't seem to notice the discrepancies. Instead the Chupacabras is a modern chimera. It's an alien-kangaroo-vampire-dinosaur-bat-demon. Perhaps a confirmation bias is molding people's belief, but MIT anthropologist Arthur Steinberg has a different idea: "I think there's something to these mixed monsters, chimera-like creatures, part this part that. They're like mixed-world creatures. . . . Maybe they help make your place in the world, like mediators between this world and the next." Indeed, one of the few repeated descriptors of the Chupacabras from recent interviews was, "I think it is a creature not of this world."

"But why these chimeric creatures?" asks Steinberg. "People have a need to move out of the purely rational, empirical world. It's hard to get to the divine world . . . except through death. Perhaps this in-between world . . ." his voice trails off and returns, "if they are mediators between worlds, then you wouldn't have to test these things, you hunt them (and if you catch them you gain its powers). But proving or disproving is outside the mindset of what it's all about."

Anthropologist Juan Flores of Hunter College came to a similar conclusion. "What I think is the *least* interesting part is trying to find out whether it [the Chupacabras] physically exists, to prove or disprove it exists."

Perhaps when legend lodges itself, there's no turning back. Science no longer matters.

IRRATIONAL RATIONALITY

"I think that the factual versus practical reality has been neglected in many ways," says leading evolutionary biologist David S. Wilson of Binghamton University, "Even massively fictitious beliefs can be adaptive as long as they motivate behaviors that are adaptive in the real world."

In his recently published book *Darwin's Cathedral*, Wilson resurrects the idea from

anthropology that beliefs, no matter how far-fetched, can function as a motivating force for adaptive behaviors. The new spin Wilson puts on the idea (first introduced by the anthropologist Emile Durkheim in 1912) is *group selection theory*—the idea that puzzling individual behaviors such as altruism can be explained at the group level of natural selection.

When asked about belief in the Chupacabras and its pseudoscientific siblings, Wilson says it's not a question of whether the belief is true, rather, "the question is could these baffling or goofy beliefs, departing completely from factual reason do good work for people?"

Rationality, according to the biologist, is not the gold standard against which all other forms of thought should be judged. Rather, *adaptation* is the gold standard against which rationality must be judged, along with all other forms of thought. "In our country," an older woman in Canóvanas says, "there are many legends and histories without basis in reality." And according to Wilson, there are many situations in which it can be adaptive to distort reality. For example, the people of Bali believe in a hierarchy of water gods that watches over each fork in an aqueduct from the mountains to the sea, and though this belief may not represent "reality," the belief coordinates the efforts of

thousands of people to share scarce resources that might otherwise be squandered. Stories are at least as important as logical arguments in orchestrating the behavior of groups, says Wilson, and supernatural agents and events can provide better blueprints for action that “far surpass factual accounts of the natural world in clarity and motivating power.”

In fact, writes Wilson, there is no evidence that reason ever replaces faith in modern cultures; America has become more faith-invested over the course of its history, not less, despite the influence of science.

“The question is about this ‘silly’ end of the continuum,” Wilson says, referring to Goatsuckers and their kin. “Could it be sheer entertainment?”

THE TASTE FOR TABLOID

It was 1:30 in the afternoon last Christmas Eve when little Angel Oquendo found something that would draw reporters to the tiny mountain town of Jayuya, Puerto Rico.

Adelaida Oquendo, Angel’s mother, was basting the Christmas pork roast when he shouted for her. “He called me saying, ‘¡Mami, ven aquí! There’s a dead mouse!’ and I ignored him, but he kept calling, and I asked my husband to take over the preparations while I went to take a look,” she said. No sooner had she seen what her son found, than Adelaida Oquendo called for her husband.

There, between the supports of their newly built house, lay a small, dusty skeleton.

Six-year old Angel and his older brother Sixto thought it was a rat or a mouse. But their

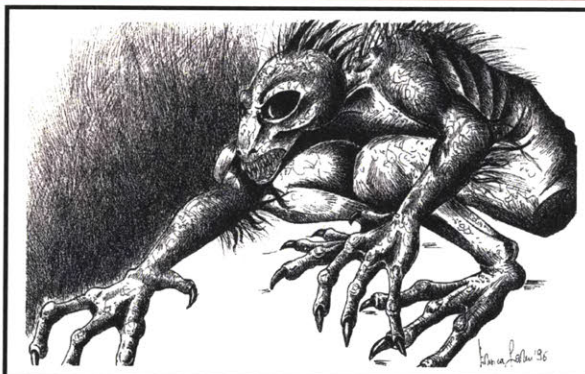
parents knew it had to be something else—it was too big to be a rodent. They slipped a piece of cardboard under it to bring it out into the sunlight.

“Upon seeing it, we wondered if it could be the Chupacabras,” said Adelaida Oquendo. It had powerful-looking hind legs approximately the same length as the two-foot-long body. The hind feet each ended with three claws, and its upper limbs appeared to be missing. A fourteen-inch tail curled behind it. It had no traces of hair, fur, or feathers left on its well-preserved skin. The skull’s closely-spaced eye-sockets and pointed fangs indicated a taste for meat.

Adelaida’s husband insisted on calling the paper the next morning—perhaps they would send an expert. Either that or they will make us look ridiculous, said his Ph.D.-holding wife. But Adelaida’s concern was tempered by her belief that her father had lost eight chickens and a large rooster to the Chupacabras two months ago. Not to mention the three neighbors that had lost thirty chickens combined to the Goatsucker since last October.

After a fuss of visits and calls from the respected *El Nuevo Día* and *National Geographic* to the *Hispanic Journal of UFOology*, one reporter lingered. Alex David of San Juan’s *Primera Hora* wanted to do his own investigation. He brought two biologists to the small town in the mountains.

“Look, it’s not a cat; it’s not a rat; it’s not a squirrel,” said one of the biologists upon examining the skeleton. Conducting their own research, the two biologists and the reporter agreed that the skeleton was most likely that of a *jutía*, a small carnivorous mammal native to the



The Jutía or the Chupacabras? The jutía is a rare carnivorous mammal native to the Caribbean. A few still inhabit Cuba and Haiti, but they are thought to be extinct from Puerto Rico.

Caribbean but thought to be extinct from Puerto Rico.

That same week, Puerto Rico's Channel 4 announced that the alleged "Chupacabras" skeleton belonged to a cat, despite the fact that a forensic specialist never analyzed the remains. "They were satisfied with that conclusion because they didn't want to go along with this [*jutía*] evidence," says David. "In television, they deal with the "right-now"—they didn't want to deal with an exhaustive investigation."

But by yielding to the cat claim without further study, says David, they were allowing the

believers in Sweetwater, believes in UFOs and alien abductions: "I'm not one of those pure scientists who say, 'No, we are the only ones with the truth and all that stuff is ludicrous.'" And Alex David, the reporter confident that the "Chupacabras" is an ordinary animal, says, "this doesn't mean I don't think that there are inexplicable things in the world." In fact, says the reporter, "I had a strange encounter once . . ." and tells a story from childhood about meeting a wish-granting spirit.

Do we have a need for mystery? Debunking rarely fails to make the believer's face



“They don't want to solve the mystery,” says the reporter. “So keep it alive. Keep it a monster!”

monster to slink back into the imagination. If the infamous Goatsucker was the *jutía* all along, says David, what would become of the myth? What would happen to the creature that so many people have invested their time, money, and animated emotions in? According to David, the past “debunkings” of the Chupacabras as a dog or another ordinary animal only increased its notoriety. But if the monster was found to be the *jutía*, somehow the “Chupacabras” disappears. Suddenly the t-shirts and the toys are no longer cool; the cartoons are not funny; the horror flicks and documentaries are no longer entertaining.

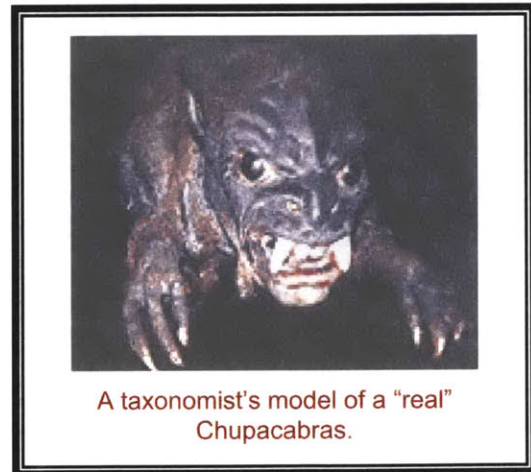
“They don't want to solve the mystery,” says the reporter. “So keep it alive. Keep it a monster!”

The world *would* be a more interesting place, wrote Carl Sagan, if such mysteries lived—if UFOs lurked in the deep waters off Bermuda, if dead people communicated with the living. It would be fascinating, wrote Sagan, if adolescents could make phones rocket off their cradles just by thinking at them, or if supernatural creatures really do slip between the shadows. “People like the feeling of the supernatural,” says a woman in San Juan, waiting for the Saint Sebastian parade with her family. Another woman across the street, gray-haired and soft-spoken, says, “People like to believe things that aren't real—they like to use their imaginations and believe.”

Even Ron Magill, the skeptical Miami zoologist who rolled his eyes at the Chupacabras

droop in disappointment, whether the debunked is fairies, dragons, or the Bermuda Triangle. Perhaps such disappointment hatches from the same place as our collective disgust of science figuring out what makes us laugh or love. Some would say that to dissect and predict the experience is to ruin it, that the only way to have a profound experience, writes Joseph Campbell, is “to have a profound sense of the mystery.” Maybe we don't want everything explained.

Perhaps the real surprise of Chupacabramania is that it isn't. As the cryptozoologist Loren Coleman himself points out, the explosion of the internet and sensationalist reporting contributed to the spread of the phenomenon, but the media was only



responding to what readers and listeners liked to hear. Who doesn't enjoy headlines like the *Toronto Star's* "Mexicans Go Batty When Vampire Gets Their Goats?" Who doesn't crack a smile reading the front of last February's *Weekly World News*, "Farmers Grow Monster Crops With Space Alien Poop!" and "Human Race *De*-volving Back Into Monkeys?"

If MIT anthropologist Arthur Steinberg was right, that "people have a need to move out of the purely rational, empirical world," do we concoct Chupacabras to entertain and transfix our imaginations? Do we all have a taste for tabloid? Behind our wide-eyed intrigue and chuckles at the Chupacabras stories, Professor Juan Flores of Hunter College says, "You're supposed to be afraid [of the Chupacabras], but you're secretly rooting for it, hoping it evades the clutches of reality."

And maybe we are. Maybe we are all hoping, wishing, and rooting for the weird and the extraordinary, the bizarre and the inexplicable. Last October, a caller to NPR's Science Friday asked guest Jane Goodall about her belief in Bigfoot. The primatologist answered, "Well, I'm a romantic, so I always wanted them to exist. . . . Of course, the big, big criticism of all this is, 'Where is the body?' You know, 'why isn't there a body?' I can't answer that, and maybe they don't exist, but I want them to."



El Yunque rainforest. An artist's concept of a Chupacabras family.

A Note on the Writing

My first and primary sources for this work were the many varied voices of the Puerto Rican people. The stories they told me in interviews, casual conversation, and during a survey I conducted gave me an initial picture of the Chupacabras phenomenon. From the tales of mad scientists and a Moca vampire to the Chupacabras's mischief on the friend-of-friend's farm, I began to see what the phenomenon was, where it was going, and how it got to be here in the first place. I conducted seventy-three tape-recorded interviews for this work, fifty of them within an anonymous survey. Without these stories, I would not have been able to get a glimpse of the space the Chupacabras inhabited in the imaginations of millions.

This knowledge allowed me to use my second major source with more efficiency: the archives of Puerto Rico's major daily newspapers, *El Nuevo Día*, *El Vocero*, and the *Primera Hora*. The daily coverage of Goatsucker "attacks" in the then tabloid *El Vocero* and the more thoughtful responses to the phenomenon in *El Nuevo Día* enabled me to see not only the range of attitudes towards the Chupacabras, but also its level of cultural impact, a key element necessary to learn *why* people believe. I was also guided in my research by the personal stories told to me by reporters Tomás de Jesús Mangual of *El Vocero*, Alex David of the *Primera Hora*, and Ruth Merino of the *Día*.

Lexis-Nexis was also an important resource for this work, enabling me to obtain dozens of articles on the Puerto Rican predator in major newspapers worldwide. Another indispensable source was the web, which was especially rich in Chupacabras websites, homepages, images, and eyewitness stories. Tracking all of these and noting their patterns on paper allowed me to map a timeline and see just how global the Goatsucker came to be, not to mention how the media can be a powerful, often unintended, contagion for such a phenomenon.

One major decision I had to make was how broad or deep I wanted to take this work. The Chupacabras phenomenon, as mentioned in the thesis, spanned several countries and cultures. Would I search the Chilean and Mexican news and television archives? Which controversies over the "evidence" would I cover, and which would I not? For example, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Chile had extensive scientific and pseudoscientific debates running in the major news media between 1996 and 2002—would I delve into these? What about the several dozen books, films, and paraphernalia emerging from these nations all over the Spanish-speaking world? Would I need to gather and reference these? A couple weeks into field work, I decided for three reasons to limit my research mostly to Puerto Rican sources:

- 1) The Chupacabras phenomenon began on that island;
- 2) I was physically located on the island for research, giving me a much richer and complete environment to write from and about;
- 3) Doing so tethered the writing to a specific place in time and space, rather than letting it float blandly in abstraction.

Another major decision that guided my writing was the decision to avoid discussion of other paranormal beliefs outside the Chupacabras. While it may seem counterintuitive, I hoped to better address why people believe in UFOs, Bigfoot, and channeling (for example) by more closely adhering to the Chupacabras narrative. Like focusing a traditional camera, I hoped that by shrinking the aperture on the subject, more of the background would come into focus. For the same reason, I avoided the "alien angle" on the Chupacabras. Many books and pseudoscientific "theories" have been published claiming that the Goatsucker is a part of a whole unseen alien invasion or experiment. But because my thesis was about *why* people believe and not *what* people believe, I felt the need to limit the amount of description for the sake of ideas.

The research and writing of this work was like being the bruised target of worm-filled cans labeled Religion, Superstition, Magic, and Myth. I quickly learned that I couldn't cover everything, and with the help of my advisors, I realized just how few ten thousand words really is. Even so, I hope that this thesis will someday contribute to a book.

A.E.S.
June 9th 2003

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About the Author

Anna Lee Strachan was born and raised in Tennessee. She graduated from Harvard University with an honors degree in Cognitive Neuroscience in 2001. Following graduation, she worked as a science writer for the NASA Astrobiology Institute. In the fall of 2002, she joined MIT's new Graduate Program in Science Writing. She is currently an intern for National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation: Science Friday*. Anna Lee loves running, drawing, cooking, and making people laugh. Her family recently moved to San Juan, Puerto Rico, where her mother is originally from. They see Chupacabras all the time. Usually in the form of hungry little brothers.