

Opinion: Big Foot is worried about California

By Bigfoot (as told to Joe Mathews)

Some people doubt my existence. But, my fellow Californians, I'm one of you.

And as I travel widely, my fears have grown about our home state. My anxiety is not because of all the people who claim to have seen me, but because I'm seeing far too much of all of you.



Joe Mathews

Yes, it's true that there have been a few more sightings of me in Washington state (about 450, according to various Bigfoot trackers) than California (about 400). But every hair on my body calls California home. The most famous pictures of me (the Patterson-Gimlin film of 1967) were taken in the Golden State. And I've always been proud of the way I bring its disparate regions together, from Bigfoot-themed bars in L.A. to the Bigfoot Discovery Museum in the Santa Cruz Mountains. I bridge Hollywood (which made me famous on TV and in film) and Silicon Valley (Did you see me in Google ads during the Olympics?).

I spend most of my time in the far north of the state—there's a reason Siskiyou, Del Norte and Humboldt counties boast the most sightings of yours truly. I'm particularly loyal to the

tiny Humboldt town of Willow Creek, the world's unofficial Bigfoot capital. This Labor Day weekend, as usual, I'll ride down Willow Creek's Main Street in the parade for the annual Bigfoot Days celebration, check in on my artifacts at a local museum, and watch the lawn mower race, the hirsute's answer to the Grand Prix.

Seeing old friends will be fun. But I must confess I miss the solitude I used to enjoy when I had California's wilder areas mostly to myself.

These days I'm encountering so many people in our state's once-remote precincts that I can hardly get a moment's peace. The marijuana-industrial complex is relentlessly pushing into the lightly populated regions I favor; the noise of their trucks—bringing in soil, shipping out the finished product—disturbs my sleep. California's urban housing shortage is forcing more people to build in places near my remote haunts. And that doesn't include the homeless, who don't just live in cities. I can't walk a ridge on state or federal lands without running into a new encampment.

The presence of more people in forests adds to the risk of giant wildfires at a dangerous time. The drought has dried up waterways and turned brush and trees into kindling. And the death of millions of trees there has made some familiar landscapes almost unrecognizable. The erosion is extreme in many wild places, including Bluff Creek, where that video of me was shot nearly 50 years ago.

I find these intrusions on my wild existence so depressing that lately I've been spending more time intruding on your cities, particularly in settings where I fit in. In the hipster havens of San Francisco and Los Angeles, men are so allergic to shaving these days that if I wear a beanie hat, skinny jeans and custom-made sneakers, no one pays me any attention.

My urban forays have led me to wonder if the incursions into my once-quiet wilderness are my own fault. Californians used to be scared of the woods and wild things like me. I showed up in horror films. “In the 70s, Bigfoot was frigging terrifying—he was a monster who killed people,” says my friend Bobby Green, designer-owner of the Bigfoot Lodges in Culver City and Atwater Village in Los Angeles.

But then a more accessible, even cuddly me started appearing in cartoons, funny commercials, and comedies like John Lithgow’s “Harry and the Hendersons”. And so I’ve become a cousin to Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. Compared to the more visceral mythology of video games or Pokémon Go, I worry I’m passé.

Michael Rugg, who runs the Bigfoot Discovery Museum in Felton has written that we seek Bigfoot at three levels. At the level of myth. At the level of biology, as we look to confirm reports of the living thing out there. And at the level of the paranormal, in our search for things that that we’re not yet capable of seeing.

That third, paranormal level can be the hardest to take seriously, but it may be the most important. One thing that has always motivated my roaming is the knowledge that I help people recognize that the most important things in our world may be those things that we can’t quite understand. And so we must hold to a healthy fear that keeps us from treading too heavily where we do not belong.

I used to create that fear. I used to be scary; but these days, not so much. Now I run scared.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.