SCRIPT — Creatures of the LAND

NARRATOR:
We share the landscape with countless living creatures. To make sense of our place in the natural world, humans have always been inspired to tell stories of mythic creatures of the land.

Intertitle: GIANTS
On screen ID:
Adrienne Mayor
Stanford University (Stanford lists AM as an independent folklorist/historian)
When ancient Greeks came across fossils, their natural conclusion was that these must be the bones of giants that had been killed by the gods and heroes. These were the stories they had heard since they were children in the nursery--stories told to them by their parents, by their grandparents, by their nurses. So they immediately recognized when they found giant bones in the ground that these belonged to giants from myth.

When the Greeks found these bones, they were actually looking at the bones of gigantic animals, mammals that had gone extinct. But they thought they looked human. Why did they think they looked like human bones? And the reason is because they looked just like human anatomy. The large bones, the limb bones, the shoulder blades, the thigh bones of mammoths, look exactly like human thigh bones and shoulder blades, but they were three times the size.

In order to prove the connection between the mythology and modern paleontology, I made two maps. The ancient writers described exactly where people found the bones of fallen giants. I made a map of all of those places. I then talked to paleontologists and found out exactly where fossils had been found around the Agean, in Greece, around the Mediterranean, and I made a map and it was no surprise to me that they lined up.

Which came first? Myths from antiquity or fossil discoveries in antiquity? And the answer is, we’ll never know.

Intertitle: UNICORN

NARRATOR:
In Europe during the Middle Ages, knowledge of the natural world was expanding. Familiar animals, as well as exotic and even mythic creatures appeared in art forms including tapestry.

On screen ID:
Timothy Husband
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
In the Unicorn is found... the imagery can be interpreted on several different levels. On one hand, it's a very keen realization of the natural world. On another level, it reveals the mythology of the unicorn. And yet on another, it stands as an allegory of
Christ and Christ's passion.

People looking at the tapestries would have recognized many of the animals simply by their familiarity in everyday life. The more exotic animals—they would've had to have heard it from other sources. And the most common one would have been the bestiary.

A bestiary is a compendium of natural history as it was understood, and compiles all animals known and thought to have existed, their legends and their fables. In addition to bestiaries, the unicorn also appeared primarily through a mistranslation from the Hebrew in biblical texts.

The word re'em referred to a wild ox, probably a species near extinction by the later Middle Ages. The Greek translators had no clear understanding of this word. They translated it as monocerus meaning single-horn. And when it was translated from Greek into Latin it became unicornus.

Knowledge of the natural world was very much faith driven. The mere fact that the unicorn appeared in biblical text—even if a mistranslation—was sufficient for the faithful to believe in its existence, even if one had never seen one.

Intertitle: YETI of the Himalayas

NARRATOR:
After the Middle Ages, knowledge of the natural world was based more and more on direct observation. But even today, there are some creatures unrecognized by science.

On screen ID:
George Schaller
The Wildlife Conservation Society, New York
It's very difficult to prove something doesn't exist. If there's something big that eats a lot of vegetation, you can't live on meat out there. Why aren't there droppings everywhere that George can do DNA from? So, there are a lot of questions that need to be answered and you need a good naturalist to do it.

On screen ID:
George Amato
American Museum of Natural History
The samples that I've received over the years, that were attributed to coming from a yeti, have been primarily hair samples. It's usually long, matted hair of some sort, which I suppose is supposed to be yeti-like. When we were able to finally obtain DNA from the sample and sequence it, it ultimately turned out to be horse hair from a domestic horse—either from the mane or tail.

Specifically, what we're able to do is examine DNA from specimens that are recovered opportunistically. For instance, George gathers small bits of skin or bones, and we're able to actually examine the whole genome of an organism from such a sample. Using our current techniques in molecular biology and DNA analysis, at this point we're able to solve about 99 percent of the cases, with 100 percent certainty.

On screen ID:
George Schaller  
*The Wildlife Conservation Society, New York*  
There have been a lot of expeditions for yetis. But those are big expeditions crashing through the underbrush and not finding anything and saying, "Ah, there is no yeti." Nobody's sat there quietly for a couple of years with a lot of camera traps and see what there is in the area. If there is a large creature, it will be found. If there isn't... then it's mythic.