

Could depths conceal monstrous cash cow?

By **CAROLYN STEEVES**

CHARLOTTE – Sometimes the biggest draw to an area is something people rarely see.

For instance, Nessie-the monster allegedly living in Loch Ness, Scotland, Champ, the monster who supposedly resides in Lake Champlain, on the New York and Vermont border, ghosts all over the world, Bigfoot in the Pacific Northwest and perhaps now Normie, who is said to reside in Lake Norman.

Some area businesses are hoping Normie's legend catches on, because these mysterious beasts can really scare up tourist and merchandise dollars.

Even with scant proof and wide skepticism, stories of behemoths like Nessie and Champ are a huge attraction for their areas. Such modern myths can be so much of a lure to curiosity seekers that there have been cases of people making up monster legends to attract people to their towns. Not that anyone's saying that's the case with Normie.

Champ's allure

One of the more famous legends in America is Champ, up in Lake Champlain.

"Champ is certainly a draw," said Genevieve Burnell, the director of communication for the Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce, "it's two-fold in that some people come here almost strictly to see Champ and spend time on the lake and some people come anyway and Champ is a boost."

In 2005, Burlington, Vt., had more than 3 million visitors and they brought with them around \$400 million. It was not specified how much of this was due to Champ, but Burnell pointed out that "a

large reason that people come to the area is the lake" and a large part of the lake tourism revolves around their potentially largest inhabitant, Champ.

Across the lake, Port Henry, N.Y., holds a "Champ Day" once a year. Burlington has several maritime museums with Champ exhibits and several cruises who run daily Champ tours. Their AAA baseball team is named the Vermont Lake Monsters and Champ is their mascot.

"Certainly Vermont holds an enormous amount of pride in that we do believe there is a monster," Burnell said. She likened their belief in Champ to the belief in Santa Claus, "We all believe a little bit in Champ."

Selling Normie

Lake Norman does not yet seem to embrace Normie the way other monsters are embraced. Matt Myers, a Mooresville graphic artist and web designer, hopes that will change.

He started a Web Site in 2002 dedicated to Normie. The site has about 1,500 visitors a month and sells souvenirs, including hats, t-shirts and maps of Lake Norman. Myers noted that the t-shirts were a big seller.

Myers said the local population has not really embraced the legend, but thinks that it could potentially be a boon for tourism.

"I don't think that the local population is embracing it as much as they could, I think showing a little more support for it and being a little more aware of the legend could do a lot for tourism in the area."

Captain Gus Gustafson runs boat tours and fishing trips in Lake Norman. He says he has lived here for years, off and on since before Lake Norman was

even built. He recalls hearing stories about people working on the dam and seeing large shadows or people hearing splashes at night and seeing large, fast moving objects.

"There's all kinds of different stories, if they're true, I don't know," Gustafson said, "It's kind of a fun thing."

Gustafson takes people out on fishing tours and is often asked about Normie. He's heard many stories about people trying to catch him or people seeing him. He laughs and says that he doesn't know whether these stories are true, but he's heard them for years.

Myers has received e-mails from people who saw his site and asked about places to stay in Lake Norman and other things to do. He also has received e-mails from cryptozoologists and other people who research monsters showing interest in looking into Normie.

"I think that exposure to the legend and generating interest locally could generate some interest nationally for this and actually bring another set of clientele to the area for tourism," Myers said. "People looking for the unknown," he noted that there are ghost tours in Charlotte and Mooresville and other paranormal tourist draws throughout the area. "To be quite frank, tourist dollars are tourist dollars, so I think the local city would embrace that either way."

And Courtney Wolfrom, marketing manager for Cornelius-based Visit Lake Norman, certainly would embrace it.

"We've had quite a few inquiries and we're definitely hoping to make the most out of it for our area," Wolfrom said. They recently brought in a group of travel writers to experience Lake Norman and one of them wrote about Normie.

"With all of our growth, we're definitely on our way to becoming well-known and Normie can definitely help, so we'll all be looking for him," Wolfrom said.

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