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Malaysia launches hunt for 'Bigfoot' apeman after sightings in rainforest

By Jan McGirk in Bangkok

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The Malaysian state of Johor is organising an official search for one of its most famous and elusive inhabitants: the legendary apeman Bigfoot.

Local authorities are planning to allow scientists to set camera traps deep in the rainforests in an attempt to verify recent purported sightings, which enthusiasts claim prove the existence of the fabled primate.

The hairy hominids are known by a variety of names around the world: bigfoot, sasquatch, yeti or the abominable snowman. But Malaysia, where tribal people call the creatures siamang, mawas, or hantu jarang gigi, ("snaggle-toothed ghost"), will be the first country openly to endorse an official attempt to track them down.

Johor's chief minister, Abdul Ghani Othman, said the state was prompted to seek physical evidence of the animals after a spate of sightings late last year, when an outsized footprint found in the mud at one wildlife reserve - measuring 45cm, equivalent to a man's size 20 shoe - and broken branches overhead suggested that, if the animal reared up on its hind legs, it would measure between 8 and 10ft tall.

Malaysia has been gripped by Bigfoot fever since November when, just weeks before the release of Peter Jackson's epic King Kong in Kuala Lumpur's cinemas, three labourers digging a fish pond said they glimpsed a Bigfoot family of three on a river bank in Kota Tinggi reserve.

They dropped their tools and fled but returned with an educated colleague to inspect and photograph the enormous footprints. A clump of brown fur, drenched with sour-smelling sweat, was also said to be recovered from the site, along with scattered fish bones.

Last August, a frog catcher from the Orang Asli tribe claimed he encountered an auburn-haired tropical yeti scratching itself on a tree. Hamid Mohd Ali, 31, stopped about 30ft short of the creature which was twice his height.

"I could see its teeth but I did not wait to find out if it was smiling at me or whether it saw me as its meal," he said. "In this year alone, four villagers have claimed to have seen it and we think this is because of the shrinking jungle."

And while the Johor authorities have, unsurprisingly, been accused of hyping the Bigfoot mystery in a bid to entice wealthy eco-tourists from abroad, the theories are backed by some wildlife experts.

Jane Goodall, one of the world's most distinguished primatologists, is an unashamed Bigfoot and yeti enthusiast. "You'll be amazed when I tell you that I'm sure that they exist," she said in one interview. "The existence of hominids of this sort is a very real probability."