



Day 4: Sea Monsters in the Age of Exploration

Obstacles: Myths, Monsters, and Misinformation

54–76 Minutes (Adaptable for Grades 3–9)

TITLE:

Understanding Sea Monster Myths and Their Role in the Age of Exploration

OBJECTIVE:

Students will learn how sea monster legends developed, how sailors' reports shaped early beliefs, why cartographers placed monsters on maps, and how real animals inspired myths like the kraken. Students will examine historical images, analyze myths vs. reality, and explore old map artwork.

GRADE LEVEL:

Adaptable for Grades 3–9

MATERIALS:

- Printed or digital copies of the Sea Monsters article
- Projector or screen
- Access to historical sea monster images
- Access to the LearnAboutAmerica interactive map creator (for placing sea monsters on maps)
- Optional: drawing paper or devices for digital sketching

PUBLIC DOMAIN SEA MONSTER IMAGE LINKS FOR DISPLAY

Kraken / Giant Sea Creature Art

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Kraken>

1. INTRODUCTION (5 minutes)

Teacher Says:

“Today we’re learning about sea monsters—why sailors believed in them, how they appeared on maps, and how science eventually replaced these myths.”

Define the following terms:

- Kraken
- Myth
- Cartographer
- Exaggeration

Display 1–2 historical illustrations (kraken, sea bishop, sea serpent). You can get these images from the Sea Monsters Page here:

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/unit-and-curriculum/see-monsters-in-the-age-of-exploration>

Ask:

- “Why might sailors in the 1400s–1700s believe in sea monsters?”
(Students may note fear, unknown seas, shadows in the water, storms, real animals mistaken for monsters.)

2. ARTICLE READING (7 minutes)

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/unit-and-curriculum/see-monsters-in-the-age-of-exploration>

Choose one option:

- Teacher reads aloud
- Students read independently

- Younger students read simplified version; older students read the full version

Quick Check Question:

“How could real animals like giant squids, whales, or manatees inspire exaggerated sea monster legends?”

(Expect answers related to limited visibility, strange movements, size, fear, and imagination.)

3. SEA MONSTER ANALYSIS ACTIVITY (12 minutes)

Display **sea monster sections of the Carta Marina (1539)** or the kraken images.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/ea/Carta_Marina.jpeg/2560px-Carta_Marina.jpeg

Ask students:

1. “What kinds of sea monsters do you recognize?”

Possible answers:

- Giant squids/kraken-like creatures
- Sea serpents stretching across the waves
- Whale-like beasts attacking ships
- Sea bishop or sea monk (human-shaped fish)
- Dragon-like creatures

2. “Why would sailors report these creatures as real?”

Possible answers:

- Fear of unknown oceans
- Strange shapes in fog or storms
- Sightings at night or during rough weather
- Limited scientific understanding
- Real animals appearing much larger in certain conditions

3. “What artistic decorations do you notice on older maps?”

(Show maps on Sea Monsters Page)

Possible answers:

- Sea monsters filling blank ocean spaces
- Galleons and ships
- Wind cherubs blowing air
- Decorative borders and scrolls
- Latin labels
- Cartoonish or fierce facial expressions on monsters
- Waves and water lines drawn in patterns

4. “What does this map art tell us about explorers’ knowledge?”

Possible answers:

- Oceans were still mysterious
- Sailors guessed about unknown areas
- Explorers used stories, not data, to describe creatures
- Maps blended fact and fantasy
- Cartographers wanted to warn sailors or entertain buyers

(Grades 3–5: focus on visuals and simple explanations.)

(Grades 6–9: discuss scientific limitations, accuracy, and why myths persist.)

4. MINI CREATIVE TASK (15 minutes)

Make Your Own Beware of the Kraken Danger Sign!

This fun activity allows students to envision and draw their own Kraken and list its characteristics or warning signs of its approach.

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/unit-and-curriculum/beware-of-the-kraken-danger-sign>

Optional Literacy Enrichment (20 minutes)

The Kraken Reading Comprehension - Passage and 7 multiple choice questions

Online (Can collect data if on student dashboard) - Lexile apx. 1100; Word Count: 332

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/admin/pages/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/explorer-activities/the-kraken-online-reading-comprehension/>

Printable

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/explorer-activities/the-kraken-printable-reading-comprehension>

Optional Connecting Activity (10-15 minutes)

The Sea Monster Shuffle - Explorers trivia and review - Sea Monsters raise each other for the right to attack a ship!

In Sea Monster Shuffle, students choose a sea monster and race it toward an exploration ship by answering multiple-choice questions about the Age of Exploration. Each correct answer pulls their monster closer to the ship, while wrong or timed-out answers give the rival monsters a chance to surge ahead. When a monster reaches the ship, an animated sinking scene plays, and students receive a detailed score report showing their accuracy and which questions they missed.

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/explorers-games-and-fun-stuff/sea-monster-shuffle>

CLOSING (2 minutes)

Teacher reviews:

- Sea monster myths came from fear, real animals, and imagination
- Cartographers used monsters to fill unknown spaces and warn sailors

- Early explorers lacked scientific tools, so myths became “facts”
- Students explored how myths shaped real historical maps by designing their own