Scottish Myths and Legends



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Aim

- I know about some Scottish myths and legends.
- I can discuss the importance of these myths and legends to people in the past.

CfE:

- I can compare aspects of people's daily lives in the past with my own by using historical evidence or the experience of recreating an historical setting. **SOC 1-04a**
- I can compare and contrast a society in the past with my own and contribute to a discussion of the similarities and differences. **SOC 2-04a**

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Scottish Myths and Legends

Scotland has a rich history going back over 2000 years. In the past superstition was common and unusual events were often explained by stories. These stories were then passed on by word of mouth resulting in the many myths and legends around today.

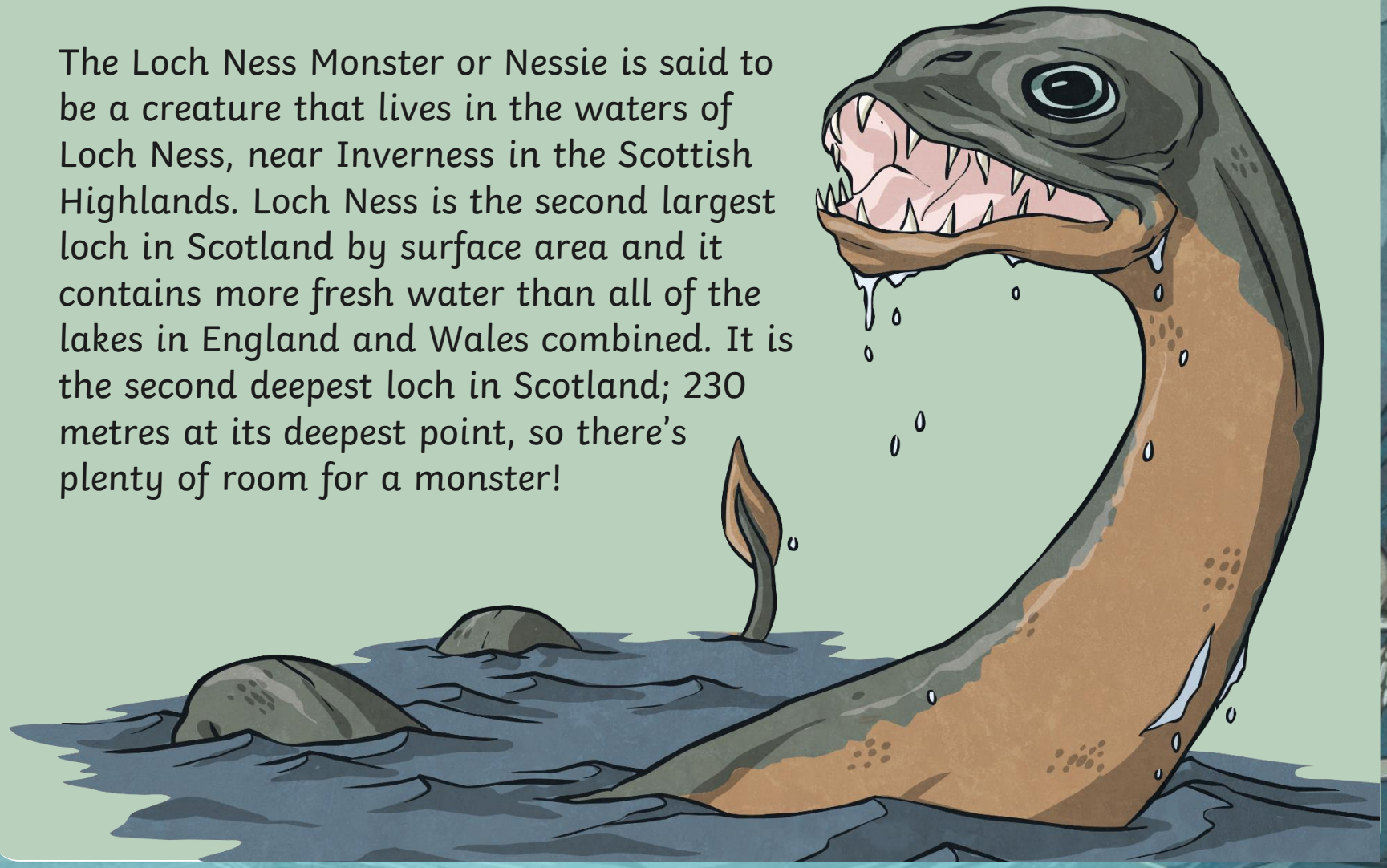
Here is some more information about eight of these Scottish myths and legends:

- The Loch Ness Monster
- The Kelpies
- Selkies
- The Blue Men of Minch
- Bean-Nighe
- Wulver
- Ghillie Dhu
- Red Caps

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The Loch Ness Monster

The Loch Ness Monster or Nessie is said to be a creature that lives in the waters of Loch Ness, near Inverness in the Scottish Highlands. Loch Ness is the second largest loch in Scotland by surface area and it contains more fresh water than all of the lakes in England and Wales combined. It is the second deepest loch in Scotland; 230 metres at its deepest point, so there's plenty of room for a monster!



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The Loch Ness Monster

The first recorded sighting of the monster was in AD565, when it supposedly attacked and killed a local man, before being stopped from attacking another man by St Columba. Over the years, rumours have spread around the world about strange events and sightings at Loch Ness. Photographs have been studied, eyewitness accounts examined and boats have scanned the deep waters looking for evidence but, to this day, there is no definite proof that the monster is real.

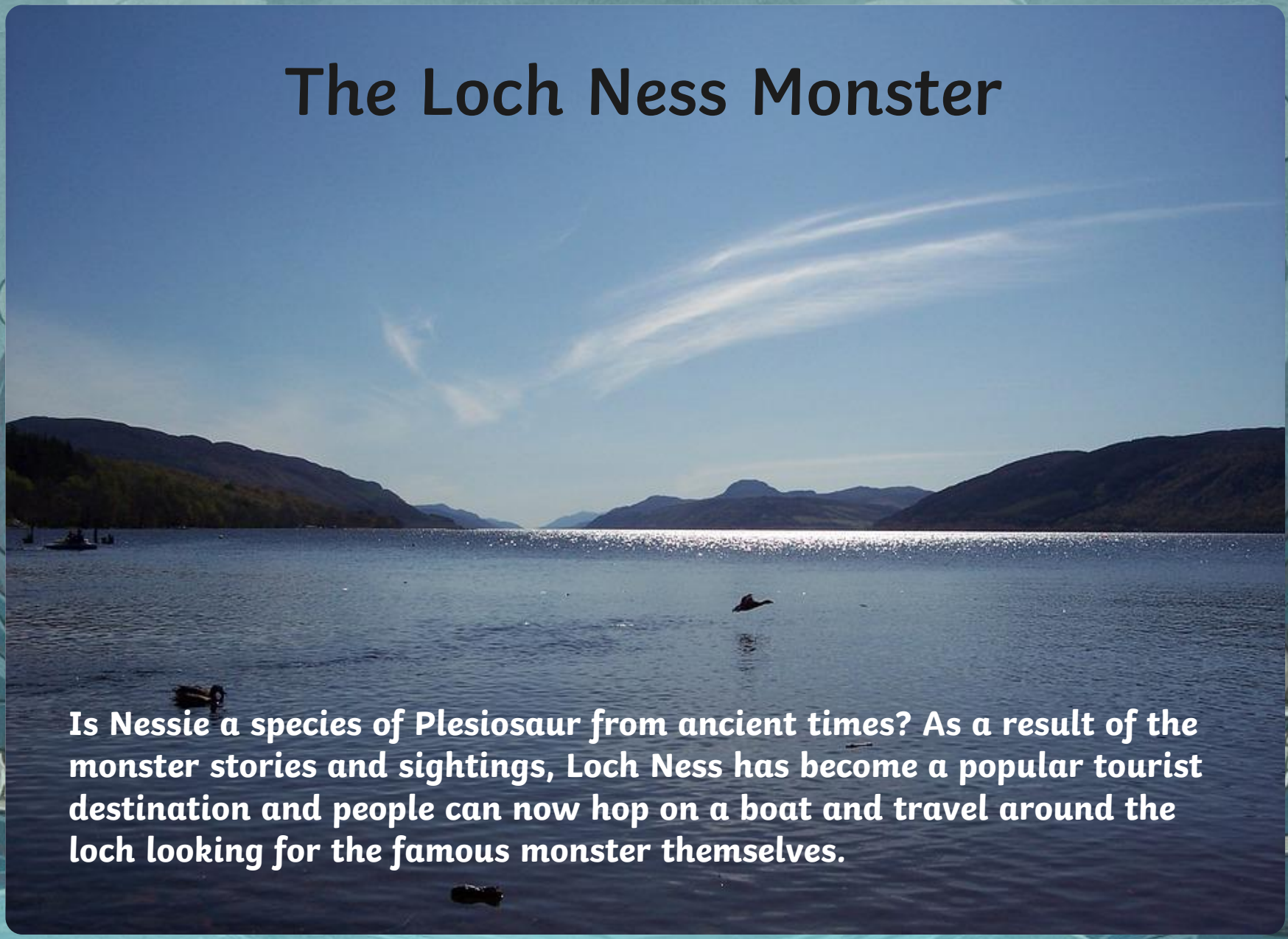


The water of the loch is dark and murky due to the high levels of peat in the surrounding soil. This makes visibility poor and adds to the difficulty of getting a clear photograph underwater. However, many genuine observers have been utterly convinced they have seen a monster in the water.

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The Loch Ness Monster



Is Nessie a species of Plesiosaur from ancient times? As a result of the monster stories and sightings, Loch Ness has become a popular tourist destination and people can now hop on a boat and travel around the loch looking for the famous monster themselves.

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The Kelpies

The mythical kelpie is a creature known as a water horse that is said to haunt Scotland's rivers and streams.



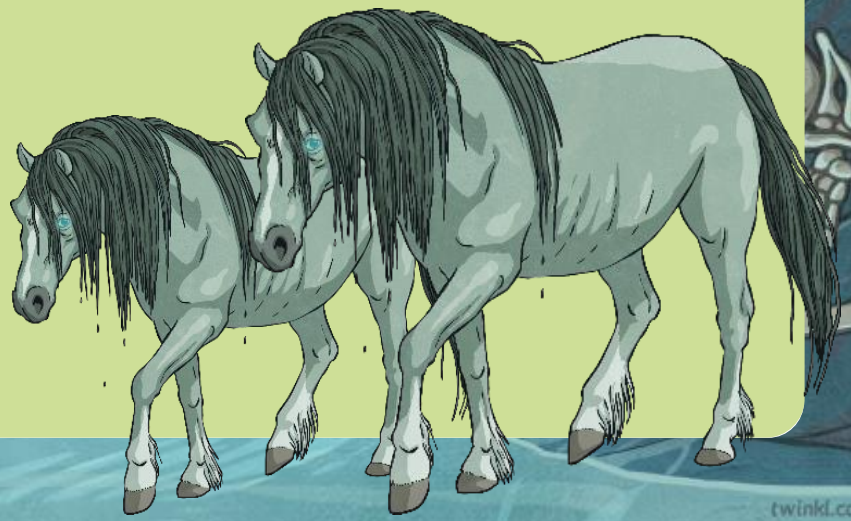
The kelpie would appear as a tame pony with a dripping wet mane. However kelpies were said to be nasty spirits. Stories said they would entice people, often children, to ride on their backs but once on the horse's back, they could not get off and the kelpie would then gallop off with them to a watery grave!

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The Kelpies

Kelpies were also said to be able to shape-shift; this means they could change their form from a horse to a human or any other creature. They might appear by the water's edge as a handsome young man, hoping to lure a young woman to her death. The clue to their identity would be their dripping wet or weed-entwined hair!

The kelpie did have a weak spot; it was said that if you could take and keep a kelpie's bridle then you could control it. These mythical beasts, if captured, were said to possess the strength and endurance of one hundred horses. Similar tales in Orkney call the water horse the nuggle and in Shetland it is called the shoopiltee.



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The Kelpies

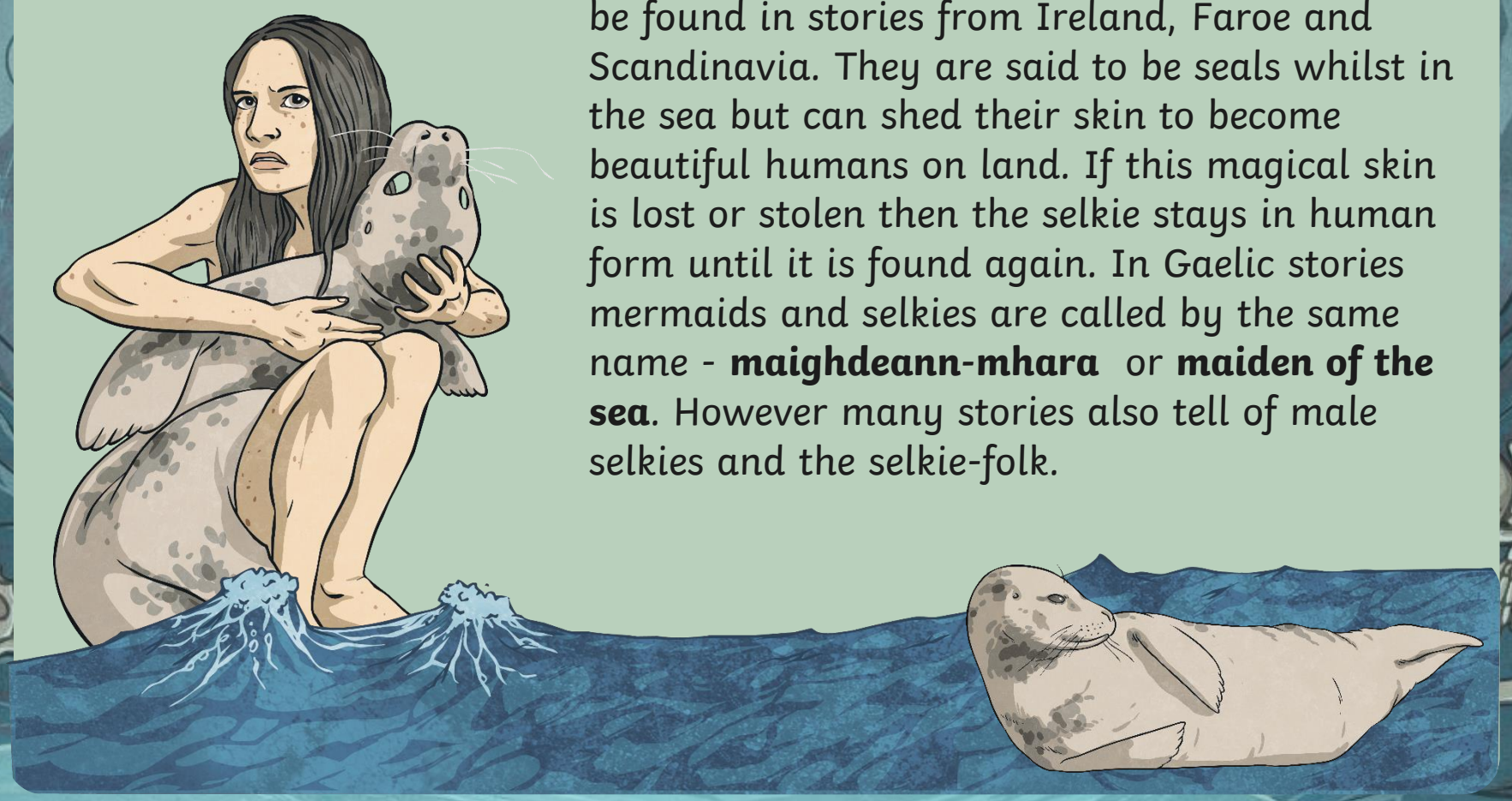


Today, the kelpies are well known because of the horse head sculptures that have been made to celebrate both these mythical water horses and the heavy horses used for industry in the early 20th century. The kelpies can be seen next to the Forth and Clyde Canal near Falkirk.

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The Selkie

The selkie is a creature found in stories from the northern isles of Scotland but they can also be found in stories from Ireland, Faroe and Scandinavia. They are said to be seals whilst in the sea but can shed their skin to become beautiful humans on land. If this magical skin is lost or stolen then the selkie stays in human form until it is found again. In Gaelic stories mermaids and selkies are called by the same name - **maighdeann-mhara** or **maiden of the sea**. However many stories also tell of male selkies and the selkie-folk.



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The Selkie

While most mythological sea or water creatures were thought to be nasty and evil, the selkies were not; perhaps the kind and soulful eyes of the seal have allowed the character of the selkie to develop this way.

Selkie stories are often romantic tragedies that never end happily. If you had hidden a selkie's skin in order to keep them in human form as your husband or wife, once the skin is discovered, the selkie cannot resist the call of the sea and a heartbroken family are left behind. Stories are also told about women who have disappeared; gone to be the wife of a male selkie under the sea.

Some legends say that selkies can only shed their skin and transform from a seal to a human once a year, on Midsummer's Eve, whilst other stories differ.



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Blue Men of Minch

The Blue Men of Minch, also known as storm kelpies, were known as blue-skinned men who lived in the water between the island of Lewis and mainland Scotland. This stretch of water is known as The Minch. The Blue Men of Minch spent their time looking for sailors to drown and boats to sink.

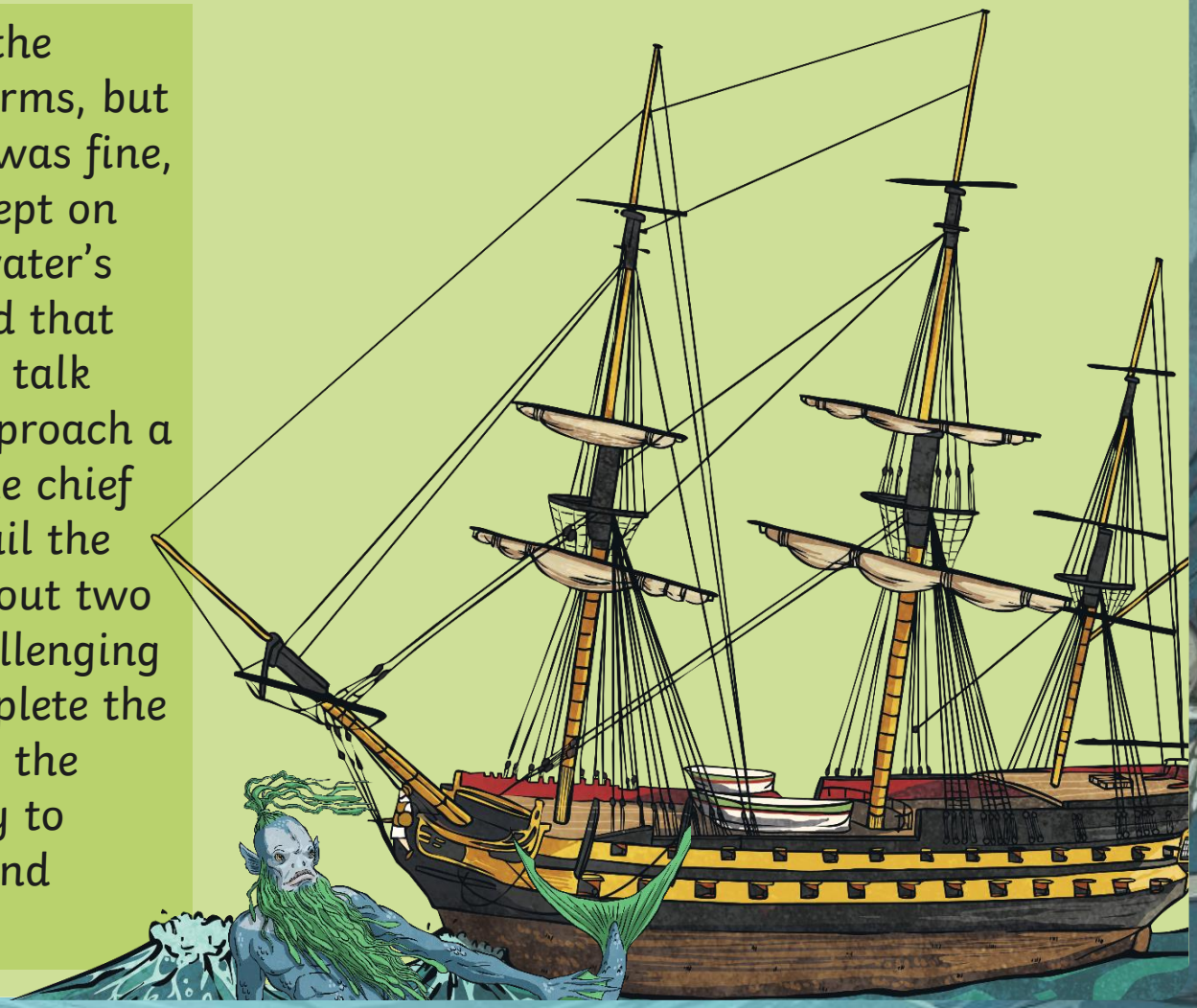


These men were the size of a human but their skins were said to be blue. Their faces were long and grey and their hair and beards were curly and green. The Blue Mens' eyes were small, their noses flat and their mouths were large. Their arms were long and they had fish-tails instead of legs. Stories described them as being very, very strong.

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Blue Men of Minch

The Blue Men had the power to create storms, but when the weather was fine, they floated and slept on or just below the water's surface. Stories said that the Blue Men could talk and they would approach a ship as a group. The chief Blue Man would hail the captain and shout out two lines of poetry, challenging the captain to complete the rhyme. If he failed, the Blue Men would try to overturn the ship and sink it.



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Blue Men of Minch

An encounter with the Blue Men might go like this:

Chief Blue Man:	Captain of the ship where are you bound, As your ship crosses this fine sea?
Captain:	My port is on the horizon found, Now leave my good ship be!
Chief Blue Man:	My men stand by, my men are here, To take you to a watery grave.
Captain:	My ship is strong, I have no fear, and my crew are fierce and brave!

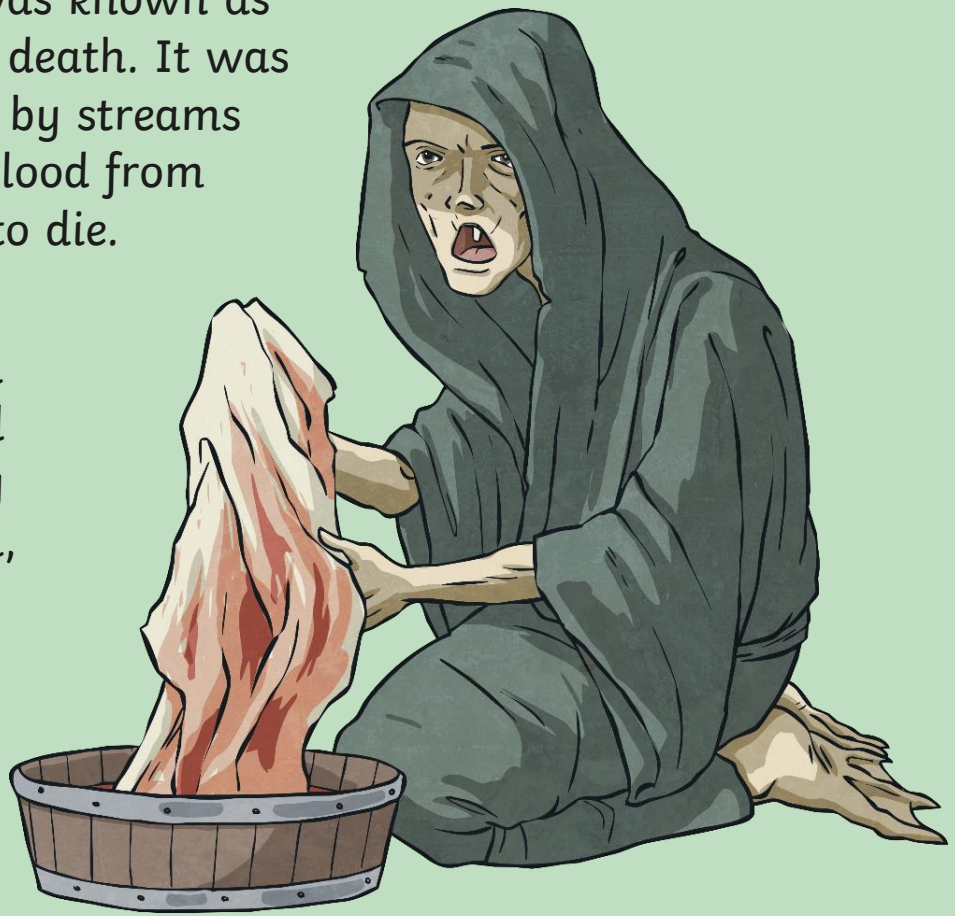
If the Blue Men were defated by a quick-witted and sharp-tongued captain, they were said to leave the ship to go on its way safely! The Blue Men have also inspired many sea shanties.

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Bean-Nighe

Bean-Nighe (pronounced bee-nee-yeh) is Gaelic for washerwoman. She was known as a fairy only seen as an omen of death. It was said she could be found wailing by streams and pools, whilst washing the blood from clothes of those who are about to die.

Bean-Nighe was said to be the spirit of a woman who had died at a young age. She is described in some stories as being an ugly hag, small with only one nostril, one big tooth, webbed feet and dressed all in green. In other stories she can appear as a beautiful young woman.



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Bean-Nighe

It was said that if you were careful enough when approaching the Bean-Nighe, you could ask her politely and she would tell you the name of who was going to die.

The Bean-Nighe did not actually cause the death of the person whose clothes she washed, she was only the messenger. Still, people did not want to come across her and they usually kept walking if they heard unusual sounds coming from nearby waters.



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Wulver

The wulver was a kind of werewolf told about in stories from the Shetland Islands.



The wulver was not an evil or aggressive creature if it was left alone. It was said to have the body of a man with a wolf's head and was covered in short brown hair. It did not change its shape from human to wolf like other mythical werewolves. It would live in a cave on a hill. The wulver liked fishing and would sit fishing for hours on a flat rock (known as the Wulver's Stane).

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Wulver

Wulvers were known to be very helpful. If someone was lost, a wulver would lead them to the nearest town or village. Families that were poor or had someone who was sick might find that the wulver had left some fish on their windowsill. If someone was about to die in the house, the wulver would sit sadly outside. wulvers were similar to the Irish werewolf, the falodh, that was said to look after children and guard the wounded.



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Ghillie Dhu

The Ghillie Dhu was a male fairy. There are many Scottish fairy stories and the Ghillie Dhu is probably one of the most well known.

The Ghillie Dhu was said to live in the forests of the North West Highlands of Scotland. He was described as being little or wee at only one metre tall. He had black hair and dark brown eyes. His skin changed from green to brown to green with the seasons. His clothes were woven leaves and moss. The Ghillie Dhu didn't eat meat but preferred berries and nuts from the forest. He was thought to be the protector of the trees.



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Ghillie Dhu

The Ghillie Dhu was said to be shy, sometimes wild but kind to children. They were not so kind to adults who lost their way in the dark Scottish forests at night! Stories said that if you offended a Ghillie Dhu, he would crush you in his long leafy arms or he might kidnap you and drag you off to fairy land to be a prisoner there.



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Redcap

Redcaps, also known as **powries** or **dunters**, were known as evil, murdering dwarves or goblins. Stories about them come from the Scottish Borders.

Redcaps were said to look like short old men, with wrinkled faces, red eyes and pointed teeth. They also had long messy hair and beards. They wore caps, stained red with the blood of their victims. They carried heavy iron spears and they were thought to be very fast runners, even though they wore iron boots. Stories said you could never outrun a redcap!

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Redcap

Redcaps were thought to have lived in old, ruined castles and watch towers on the border between Scotland and England. These ruins were usually where evil events had taken place or battles had been fought or where lots of blood had been shed in the past. Redcaps were thought to murder anyone who accidentally wandered into their homes.



Redcaps had to keep killing so they could dip their caps in the blood of their victims. If the colour started to fade they would die.

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Now that you know more about some Scottish myths and legends, can you think why some of these stories were told?

You could find out if there are any stories about mythical creatures in the area where you live!

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