

Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus by Matthew Shirley

The endangered “Octopus paxarbolis” of the Olympic National Forest is a hoax. Though the moist boughs of northwestern trees serves as the primary habitat of this non-existent cephalopod, it is said to spawn in the local rivers. Its primary predator is the high climbing Sasquatch. However, unlike our beloved local cryptid, the fictitious octopus’s ability to simulate bark and leaf patterns has left no evidence of their existence behind.

Invented in 1998 as an internet hoax, the tree octopus has taken on a life of its own as a sample website for internet literacy classes. The studies have used the imagined threat to the octopi as means of assessing people's ability to judge the reliability of websites, especially when emotions are pulled into play. A 2007 study found that about half of the sampled school children found the site reliable, and only 11% saw it as unreliable.

This was seen as an indication that greater effort was required to help children wade through the often misleading information on the internet. Perhaps, however, the results were influenced by wishful thinking. The idea of a shapeshifting, tree-climbing, amphibious creature certainly stirs the imagination.