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Tracking the Chupacabra: Twenty-Five Years Later

Q:

What's new with the chupacabra? I know you wrote the book on it, but what's happened since then? Are there any new developments or sightings?

—R. Vanover

A:

Monsters and cryptozoological curiosities are strange enough, but even among that elusive lot (Bigfoot, Nessie, Champ, etc.), the chupacabra is an odd duck (-sucking thing). Not only is it the only vampire among them (said to drain the blood of goats, fowl, and other animals), but it's also the only one that has significantly changed shape over the years, appearing in at least three distinct forms (humanoid alien, canid, and varied "other," including raccoons).

It's also a strapping young pup of twenty-five. The original eyewitness, a Puerto Rican woman named Madelyne Tolentino (Figure 1), described the creature (see Figure 2) in August 1995 based on a monster she'd seen in the sci-fi/horror film *Species*. In the months after her sighting, the island was abuzz with rumors, tabloid stories, and reports about the beast. Armed mobs patrolled streets searching for the creature, and the mayor of Canóvanas, Jose "Chemo" Soto, courted local press (and votes) promising to protect the public from

the terrifying menace.

However, as the years passed and no hard evidence of the monster surfaced, interest waned. The chupacabra was culturally appropriated by the rest of the world via *The X-Files*, tabloids, and television shows, and by the time the first dead canid version appeared on a ranch in Nicaragua in 2000, it had largely faded from Puerto Rico as a threat. The

chupacabra was soon commodified, resembling Tolentino's original sighting less and less with each passing year.¹

I recently revisited Puerto Rico, shooting an episode of the Discovery Channel show *Expedition Unknown* (season 6, episode 605) with Josh Gates (Figure 3). While there, I was curious to see what the creature's status was; I had last been there in 2010, interview-

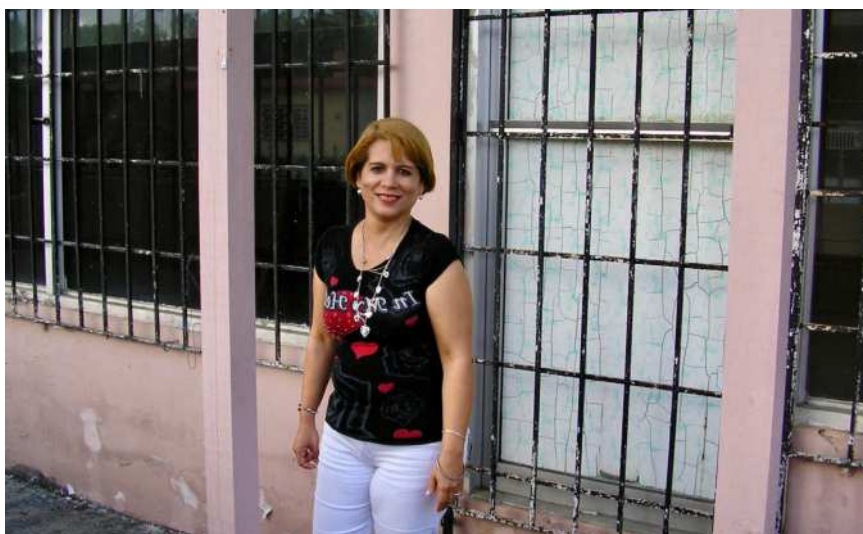


Figure 1. Original chupacabra eyewitness Madelyne Tolentino at her former home in Canóvanas, Puerto Rico, where she reported seeing the creature in 1995. Photo by the author.



Figure 2. Illustration by the author depicting the chupacabra that Tolentino reported seeing.

ing Tolentino and researching my 2011 book *Tracking the Chupacabra: The Vampire Beast in Fact, Fiction, and Folklore*. I was told that the show's producers had sought an interview with the mayor of Canóvanas, Lornna Soto Villanueva, to talk about what is arguably the island's most famous export (aside from rum) and what is certainly the single most famous event to happen in that municipality.

Unlike her father Jose Soto—who eagerly promoted the chupacabra and used fear of the creature as a political platform—Soto Villanueva refused to have anything to do with the topic. She didn't want to be interviewed or comment on it at all; I got the sense that she was embarrassed by it and saw no political or personal benefit in bringing it up. That's understandable given the myriad disasters the island has faced in recent years, including economic ruin, mismanagement, hurricanes, presidential visits, earthquakes, crumbling infrastructure, and so on. Puerto Ricans have far graver concerns than decades-old legendary vampire monsters.

In chatting with locals in a few small towns and the capital of San Juan, I asked in several tourist shops for any chupacabra merchandise. The fears and chuckles I'd encountered in 2010 were replaced by shrugs and blank stares. One man behind the counter said he hadn't heard about it in years; I realized he'd have been a toddler during the chupacabra's heyday. I might as well have

asked if they sold any T-shirts featuring Vanilla Ice shouting "Loose the Juice!" while doing the Macarena.

These days the chupacabra is mainly of interest to mystery lovers and cryptozoologists (those who search for unknown or hidden animals). What was once a feared beast has become a fading footnote, a calcified curiosity. Like all mysteries (including comparably debunked ones such as the Bermuda Triangle), it will never be forgotten but—like any vampire worth its garlic salt—instead resurrected now and then.

I get Google news alerts for *chupacabra* and thus still hear about it a few times a year when some unknown animal (usually a mangy dog or coyote) is spotted and makes the news somewhere in the world. It's briefly discussed, typically with no real investigation or scientific follow-up, and soon forgotten until reappearing as discussion fodder for Facebook mystery forums. Plus, of course, cable TV perpetually recycles topics—more often than not without a hint of skepticism (*Expedition Unknown* being a welcome exception in this case)—thus ensuring rerun revivals.

I've jokingly referred to myself as the chupacabra slayer, though my goal was never to destroy or debunk the creature or its story but instead to explain and understand it—whether as a folkloric figure or Fortean reality. It was a sat-

isfying, multifaceted mystery, and I'm glad to have tackled it. Mysteries don't lose their intrigue or value merely for having been solved. Examining specific solved mysteries and deconstructing how and why they emerged can tell us much about mysteries in general, as well as give insights into psychology and sociology. This is why reading skeptical investigations remains rewarding years and decades later—and back issues of *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* often remain relevant and informative.

If chupacabras (or Bigfoot, Nessie, and their brethren) are real animals, then any day now—maybe next week or next year—hard evidence will be found in the form of a body, which will spur scientific discoveries (and require extensive revisions to my book). Until then, that's what the chupacabra has been up to—and always will be. ■

Note

1. Some have wrongly claimed that the chupacabra predates 1995 by years or decades (or even centuries; see my article "Mistaken Memories of Vampires: Pseudohistories of the Chupacabra" in the January/February 2016 issue of *SI*). However, this is mistaken; there were, of course, pre-1995 reports and stories of vampires, both in Puerto Rico and around the world. However, the specific version that would become the chupacabra—with that unique name, location, and description—first appeared in 1995. Or, for those who prefer a more technically accurate version, "a type of vampire called the 'chupacabra,' with several distinct characteristics associated with it, both at the time and later" was first reported in 1995.



Figure 3. The author and Josh Gates interviewing an eyewitness in rural Puerto Rico while shooting an episode of *Expedition Unknown* in 2019.