00:00:07:10 - 00:00:18:09

Alena Poulin

Welcome to F.R.Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee Lunch, , the official podcast of the Food and Resource Economics Department at the University of Florida. I'm Alena Poulin, a marketing and communications specialist with the department.

00:00:18:12 - 00:00:33:04

Caleb Stair

I'm Caleb Stair, assistant instructional professor of Food and Resource Economics and the coordinator for undergraduate research in the department. Meaning I get to interact regularly with the members of our FRE community and see all the cool and interesting topics being explored.

00:00:33:07 - 00:00:48:07

Alena Poulin

That's why we made this podcast! To showcase the many ways students and faculty are using economic research to understand and address the complex issues facing agricultural and natural resource industries.

00:00:48:09 - 00:01:14:19

Caleb Stair

From Dracula to Dog Man, cryptids continue to fascinate the average person. That fascination drives people to visit many areas, and when they visit these areas, they are bringing their spending power with them. We call this phenomenon cryptid tourism, and it just so happens to be the topic of today's special Halloween edition of FRE Lunch.

00:01:14:21 - 00:01:21:08

Alena Poulin

That's right. Whether you're a big Bigfoot believer or a skunk ape skeptic, this episode has something for you.

00:01:21:09 - 00:01:41:00

Caleb Stair

Cryptid tourism is somewhat of a subset of paranormal tourism, which broadly includes visits to any setting or locale for the explicit purpose of potentially encountering or learning about paranormal phenomena. This could be for leisure, investigation, or conventions. Doesn't matter. People are coming to these areas in droves.

00:01:41:00 - 00:01:56:01

Alena Poulin

And while they're there, people are participating and a wide range of activities. This ranges from things like ghost tours to Bigfoot searches or squatching as it is colloquially known. The popularity of these activities has been influenced greatly by social media marketing and the internet.

00:01:56:02 - 00:02:08:22

Caleb Stair

With it being Halloween, some of these enthusiasts, such as myself, may even find themselves purchasing a Sasquatch costume. This year, about 72% of Americans were planning to participate in Halloween celebrations of some sort.

00:02:09:00 - 00:02:16:11

Alena Poulin

This includes, of course, things like Trick-Or-Treating, carving pumpkins, attending local fall festival, and of course, dressing for the occasion.

00:02:16:13 - 00:02:31:06

Caleb Stair

This year, Americans were planning to spend about $3.8 billion on Halloween costumes for a little over $30 per person. While this includes a wide range of characters, from scarecrows to superheroes. It also includes your local urban legends.

00:02:31:08 - 00:02:34:15

Alena Poulin

Well, how much did your cryptid costume cost, Caleb?

00:02:34:17 - 00:02:41:19

Caleb Stair

Well it depends. This one costs $120, but it's not for Halloween. I plan on wearing this baby year-round

00:02:41:19 - 00:02:48:07

Alena Poulin

Here in swampy Florida, our resident cryptid is the Skunk Ape. It's kind of like Bigfoot only. It's a whole lot smellier.

00:02:48:07 - 00:02:58:03

Caleb Stair

Exactly. But there are people who come from all over the world to look for it. Some people even make it a business, an event, or even a way to market an activity.

00:02:58:07 - 00:03:15:18

Alena Poulin

If you ever find yourself in Florida and you're headed south down towards the Everglades, you might end up at the official Skunk Ape Research Headquarters. Just this past year, this Squatch Searcher’s Sanctuary secured the second highest ranking amongst top roadside attractions in the country, according to USA today's Top 10 Reader Choice rankings.

00:03:15:20 - 00:03:26:03

Caleb Stair

In October of last year, Charlotte County's land management team got in on the fun, using the Skunk Ape to encourage visitors to get up, get out and get active in their local parks.

00:03:26:05 - 00:03:31:08

Alena Poulin

As part of a scavenger hunt. Skunk ape prints were hidden throughout several of the parks in West Charlotte County.

00:03:31:09 - 00:03:34:06

Caleb Stair

They were even pink! Gor Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

00:03:34:08 - 00:03:58:12

Alena Poulin

Yes, it's clear that the skunk ape may sometimes scare, but it also cares.

Even outside of the cryptid loving community. Sasquatch are used to market things in useful and innovative ways. Regardless of where you land, on the whole, exists or doesn't exist. Debate. To learn more about this, we're joined today by the marketing geniuses behind UF’s Smather’s Library latest campaign and mascot, the SASC-watch, that's spelled SASC.

00:03:58:16 - 00:04:02:23

Alex Avelino

Hi, I'm Alex Avelino, and I'm the director of marketing communications for the Smathers Libraries.

00:04:02:23 - 00:04:06:16

Rae Riiska

And I'm Rae Riiska. I'm the communications assistant for this. Smathers libraries.

00:04:06:16 - 00:04:10:14

Alena Poulin

And so what exactly is the SASC-watch and how did you guys come up with it?

00:04:10:14 - 00:04:17:22

Alex Avelino

Yeah, the Sasquatch is a large non-gendered Yeti or skunk ape, depending on what region of the country you're from.

00:04:18:04 - 00:04:20:08

Alex Avelino

And the idea actually came from Rae's father.

00:04:20:08 - 00:04:39:19

Rae Riiska

Yeah. So our curators, it's spelled SASC-watch, which is Special Area Studies Collection. They had a sticker that had a little Sasquatch on it, and I ended up bringing it home to my dad. And he loves everything Sasquatch, everything Bigfoot. And he said, why don't you guys do a social media series on this?

00:04:39:19 - 00:04:42:17

Rae Riiska

And so that's kind of where the idea began and started.

00:04:42:17 - 00:04:55:00

Alex Avelino

Yeah. So Rae said that and I went on Amazon and found the official Jack Links Sasquatch costume. I think he's a Yeti online and we bought it. If anything is less than like $200, I think it's a good idea and you may as well just shoot your shot.

00:04:55:01 - 00:05:04:03

Caleb Stair

So from your dad giving you this idea to, let’s say kicking it off, was that like a two day sort of thing? How long did it take to develop the idea?

00:05:04:07 - 00:05:28:16

Alex Avelino

We had a summer intern who's fabulous, and we needed to give her projects, so she had a specific June project and a July project, but we didn't know what we were doing for August. And we said, well, we're going to ask her if she's willing to put on the suit. And so we decided, why don't we have her put on the suit, go into the Special Area Studies Collections over in the Smathers Library building and identify some interviews, some of the curators, and just teach the students about the different areas.

00:05:28:18 - 00:05:33:06

Alex Avelino

So she put the suit on. Rae, you filmed, and she edited.

00:05:33:06 - 00:05:47:22

Rae Riiska

Yeah, I would say from beginning to end, once we actually got the suit, it was maybe like a two-week timeline, and then we filmed everything, and then I passed it off to her, and she edited everything in Premiere, and we were able to get them up, you know, and like, scheduled maybe within a month.

00:05:48:02 - 00:06:03:15

Alex Avelino

Right. And the target audience originally was students. So if you watch the reels, they they're a little unhinged. Like there's random humorous moments, the Sasquatch can be very sassy. So that was designed for our audience on Instagram, but it's become very popular for everybody.

00:06:03:16 - 00:06:08:04

Caleb Stair

So once the students started seeing these, what was the response like?

00:06:08:06 - 00:06:29:21

Rae Riiska

So at first, the student seemed like a little bit wary of SASC-watch because it is kind of an odd suit to look at, but then once we kind of hit our, I think it was our fourth video, which is the Grand Reading room, it really got a bigger response than, you know, like I was even expecting. Like it has over 400 likes and over 70 shares, which for our account size is pretty good.

00:06:29:21 - 00:06:49:10

Rae Riiska

And from that point on, the students and the curators seemed to get really excited about it. And, you know, we've had requests for SASC-watch to come in and film with some people. And actually, we had our fall fest event yesterday, and we had Sasquatch walking around. And every single time that we would go to take a break with the SASC-watch, people were coming up to the Fall Fest teacher table asking, where did he go?

00:06:49:10 - 00:06:59:02

Rae Riiska

I want to take a picture with him. And so that was a really fun surprise to see students get super involved and be really excited to see the SASC-watch and actually want to take pictures with it.

00:06:59:02 - 00:07:02:15

Alena Poulin

So full disclosure, we were some of those people, being like where is the sasquatch.

00:07:02:15 - 00:07:03:10

Caleb Stair

Yeah!

00:07:03:10 - 00:07:05:22

Rae Riiska

We had to give SASC-watch his beauty breaks.

00:07:05:22 - 00:07:06:20

Alex Avelino

Beauty breaks.

00:07:06:20 - 00:07:08:23

Rae Riiska

Take a second step back and then get back and then get back into action

00:07:08:23 - 00:07:10:09

Caleb Stair

Get a fan on under that suit.

00:07:10:09 - 00:07:25:15

Alex Avelino

And in the beginning, like Rae said, people weren’t sure. I was getting a lot of folks messaging me who are friends on the account and saying, what is this? They didn't. People were a little bit like, what are y'all trying? And I'm like, I don't care. Like, it's not, it's social media. I'm okay with it if it fails.

00:07:25:17 - 00:07:29:14

Alex Avelino

But over time, it certainly did not. The SASC-watch has become very popular.

00:07:29:14 - 00:07:43:12

Rae Riiska

And it spans really well over a bunch of generations. Like I've seen people from the boomer generation all the way to Gen Z get really excited about it. And I think like very few things have that effect on people, especially when it comes to social media.

00:07:43:14 - 00:07:49:18

Alena Poulin

And so we talk a little bit about what student responses like, what has curator or librarian response then to this campaign?

00:07:49:18 - 00:07:50:12

Alex Avelino

It's been a journey.

00:07:50:12 - 00:08:05:13

Rae Riiska

Yeah. At first they were wary, but then once people started actually seeing the videos, they got really excited about it. And so we've actually had a few different requests to continue the series and actually have a SASC-watch go into some of our more niche special collections.

00:08:05:13 - 00:08:10:07

Rae Riiska

So I think like overall, it's been a positive response from the curators.

00:08:10:07 - 00:08:29:00

Alex Avelino

Every department on campus has a different personality. So the libraries, we really value our brand, everybody values their brand, but we really want to make sure that folks know who we are and understand who we are. And so when we pitch this idea of we're going to bring this Yeti into the Grand Reading room, there was a little bit of resistance.

00:08:29:00 - 00:08:43:17

Alex Avelino

If I could do it again, I think I wouldn't have told anybody. I would have just had Rae film it with a curator who was really excited about it, and then shown it to them so that they could know what it was about. It did create a little anxiety, just it was something new that we had never done before.

00:08:43:17 - 00:08:57:15

Alec Avelino

And previously, you know, academic libraries don't necessarily have the most unhinged social media presence, but we do, and it's really working for us because that's what students want to see. So bringing a skunk ape into a beautiful room really works for us.

00:08:57:15 - 00:09:09:09

Rae Riiska

And I think also seeing such like a weird and wacky character in such kind of a research or academia environment makes it a lot more approachable for people, and that is something that curators really want.

00:09:09:09 - 00:09:30:06

Rae Riiska

I've talked to some people in SASC, and they want to make sure that they're being approachable, and that students are not afraid to come up and ask them questions. And I think seeing that anybody can go in the grand reading room, even a Sasquatch, really makes that something that puts students at ease and makes it a lot easier for them to go in and, you know, not have such a scary experience when they walk into that room.

00:09:30:07 - 00:09:41:20

Alena Poulin

So shifting a little bit away from the campaign and into the library as a whole, can you provide a little bit of an overview? How big is the library? What types of resources does it provide? Is it just for students or can anybody come in?

00:09:41:20 - 00:09:45:18

Alex Avelino

We're super proud that we are the largest academic resource system in the state.

00:09:45:23 - 00:10:14:01

Alex Avelino

So, the Smathers Libraries are six on-campus libraries. We have satellite branches in Saint Augustine, Jacksonville, Jupiter. We have almost 300 employees. A good chunk of those are full-time librarians, and they are subject specialists. So you can ask them specific things about your major or your area of research. We have a dedicated team to academic research, consulting services, so that's for faculty and students working on a research project.

00:10:14:03 - 00:10:37:17

Alex Avelino

Anybody can come in the library. So even my folks in the public could come in the library, but they might not be able to borrow something because you do have to have a Santa Fe or UF ID to do that. But like students should feel like it's theirs. We are arguably one of the main resources for the students, other than maybe like the gym, that every student, no matter their major, is coming in and out on a daily basis.

00:10:37:17 - 00:10:55:04

Alex Avelino

So the students can identify which branch is their favorite based on the vibes. I think students don't realize that there are six on-campus branches too, and we really try to make that known. Yeah. Staff, do you know that you have access to the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times for free through the libraries? You do.

00:10:55:06 - 00:11:14:17

Alex Avelino

You guys don't know that? I didn’t think so. You can find that out on our website. You can find that if you have HR’s UF at Work. So faculty, staff and students, the libraries are for you. We are illuminating your excellence. So you should feel like we can provide for you virtually or in person. Answers, resources, space for whatever you need.

00:11:14:19 - 00:11:15:18

Caleb Stair

As a faculty member, that's new information to me.

00:11:15:23 - 00:11:17:16

Alex Avelino

So isn’t that amazing?

00:11:17:19 - 00:11:18:08

Caleb Stair

Yes it is.

00:11:18:08 - 00:11:30:08

Alex Avelino

It is! So we have like the amount of journals that we pay for, please use them. So, what I would recommend is if you're interested in anything, what are you guys interested in. Tell me what's that like a hobby. The weirder the better.

00:11:30:08 - 00:11:31:03

Alena Poulin

Well yours is Cryptids.

00:11:31:04 - 00:11:33:02

Caleb Stair

Yeah, Cryptids, but Hunting!

00:11:33:04 - 00:11:47:12

Alex Avelino

Okay. Hunting. Do you know that you can borrow trail cam from the libraries and so we have equipment, we have sewing machines, the Marston makerspace. If you're like, I feel like getting into sewing, you don't have to go buy a bunch of stuff, like try it before you buy it. That's our big thing. Borrow before you buy.

00:11:47:12 - 00:12:11:18

Rae Riiska

Yes and honestly, the fact that it's not major specific makes a really huge difference because I know specifically with the makerspace, people go in there to 3D print, whereas like, you don't have to be an architecture major and it's actually a lot cheaper than the architecture printing. And so it opens that world up to so many more students and so many more interest than you normally would be able to have if you were just relying on what your major provides to you.

00:12:11:19 - 00:12:32:02

Alex Avelino

Sure. And faculty, you know, a lot of us have some remote work days built into the week. Now, if you are don't feel like going to a coffee shop, pick one of the six on campus library's free AC, free Wi-Fi, resources. Good energy. Be among the students, pretty much whatever you like. We either have text databases, journals, or librarians who can answer questions for you.

00:12:32:04 - 00:12:34:16

Alena Poulin

Do you guys have any other final thoughts that you want to leave us with?

00:12:34:16 - 00:12:48:08

Alex Avelino

@UFLib! Please follow us everywhere, we can be found 24/7 online. I recommend if you're on campus, whether you're new or old, try to visit every library. Just it'll be a fun little quest. Walk into all six and see which one you like the most.

00:12:48:08 - 00:12:49:17

Rae Riiska

It makes a great 5k.

00:12:49:17 - 00:12:54:22

Rae Riiska

I have walked the entire library's route, and it is almost exactly a 5K.

00:12:54:22 - 00:12:57:04

Alex Avelino

We have a Smathers 5k now. There's five K, we'll send you the route.

00:12:57:04 - 00:12:57:14

Caleb Stair

Yeah,

00:12:57:14 - 00:13:00:18

Caleb Stair

I'm teaching an Intro class again. I'm going to have my students do something like this.

00:13:00:20 - 00:13:01:03

Alex Avelino

Yeah.

00:13:01:08 - 00:13:02:01

Caleb Stair

Scavenger hunt.

00:13:02:03 - 00:13:06:02

Alex Avelino

It's really good. It gets you out in nature and you get to see all six libraries

00:13:06:02 - 00:13:06:20

Rae Riiska

Go gators.

00:13:06:20 - 00:13:10:19

Alena Poulin

Go gators. Thanks so much for joining us.

00:13:10:19 - 00:13:13:05

Christa Court

Ooooooooooooooh

00:13:13:08 - 00:13:14:09

Caleb Stair

What was that?

00:13:14:11 - 00:13:21:16

Alena Poulin

Oh, didn't I tell you? Since it's a spooky time of year, I figured it was the perfect time to introduce our guest host, Christa Court.

00:13:21:16 - 00:13:24:15

Christa Court

You mean ghost host?

00:13:24:15 - 00:13:36:03

Alena Poulin

So for those of you who've listened to episode one, you might remember Doctor Christa Court. She's an associate professor of food and resource economics whose focus is on regional economics, and she often does a lot of economic impact analysis.

00:13:36:03 - 00:13:48:23

Alena Poulin

She's also a cryptid curious person who enjoys learning about these supernatural creatures. So, Christa, can you tell us why people looking for cryptids or visiting houses that are haunted might be good for a local area economy?

00:13:48:23 - 00:14:03:01

Christa Court

Yeah. Cryptid and paranormal-related tourism and recreational activities such as cryptid hunting, haunted activities, ghost tours, paranormal or cryptid-themed books, movies, souvenirs, and marketing campaigns all generate revenue for a local economy.

00:14:03:01 - 00:14:15:06

Christa Court

The spending associated with these activities supports businesses, sustains jobs, and boosts the overall economy, particularly in regions where reports of paranormal activity or cryptid sightings are found in large numbers.

00:14:15:06 - 00:14:16:08

Alena Poulin

And does it stop there?

00:14:16:08 - 00:14:40:07

Christa Court

No it doesn't. The sales, revenues and jobs associated with the activities I just mentioned are considered direct effects. There are also indirect effects, which captures things like the purchases of input supplies and services to keep a Bigfoot museum up and running for visitors, and induced Effects, which captures economic activity supported through the spending of employee income on things like food, medical expenses, housing in the local economy.

00:14:40:07 - 00:14:44:21

Alena Poulin

And so you're kind of interested in this topic. Have you ever done any cryptid tourism yourself?

00:14:44:21 - 00:15:07:20

Christa Court

Yes. In fact, I've visited the expedition Bigfoot, the Sasquatch Museum in Blue Ridge, Georgia, twice, maybe three times. And we've also both times that I was a visiting scholar at a university in Scotland. We made sure to make a visit up to the Highlands and to Loch Ness, and so we went to the Loch Ness Center, which is in Drumnadrochit, Scotland twice.

00:15:08:02 - 00:15:11:09

Christa Court

And once we went on a boat tour of Loch Ness to look for Nessie,

00:15:11:09 - 00:15:12:07

Alena Poulin

And did you find her?

00:15:12:07 - 00:15:13:03

Christa Court

We didn’t.

00:15:13:03 - 00:15:19:07

Alena Poulin

You know, Caleb and I actually went to a conference that’s kind of like that, too. Do you remember Caleb, that Bigfoot conference we went to?

00:15:19:11 - 00:15:20:21

Caleb Stair

Oh, yeah. It was awesome.

00:15:21:01 - 00:15:33:07

Alena Poulin

So it was called the Great Florida Bigfoot Conference, and it happens every year in Ocala, Florida. While we were there, Caleb and I created some economic impacts of our own. We bought souvenirs, and then we also visited a local restaurant for some food.

00:15:33:09 - 00:15:48:22

Caleb Stair

Oh, yeah. The souvenir I bought sits in Christa's office. It's a Bigfoot blanket. And that's just the Florida version. Bigfoot reportedly generates more than $140 million a year for the American economy, according to the International Cryptozoology Museum in Portland, Maine.

00:15:48:22 - 00:16:06:06

Alena Poulin

Other cryptids also generate a spooky amount of economic activity. The 2022 UFO Festival generated about $2 million in direct sales revenue for Roswell, New Mexico. It also brought over 40,000 visitors to the city, according to estimates and data compilations created by city staff.

00:16:06:06 - 00:16:28:04

Caleb Stair

And if you are a Nessie fan, like Doctor Court, Castle Cruises in Loch Ness believes that over 70% of their visitors come in search of Nessie. These visits amount to an industry that is worth up to 41 million pounds, so it seems to be the case that whether you believe or not, paranormal activities definitely have an impact on local areas.

00:16:28:05 - 00:16:39:10

Caleb Stair

And this fall, if you are inclined, go seek out your own local cryptids and haunted places. You might be thrilled or surprised and maybe learn something along the way.

00:16:39:12 - 00:16:51:16

Alena Poulin

For those of you who are currently students, faculty, or staff at the University of Florida, go check out their library, engage with the SASCwatch on social media, and make sure that you're taking full advantage of the resources available to you during your time here.

00:16:51:18 - 00:16:55:10

Caleb Stair

So, is our ghost host gone?

00:16:55:15 - 00:16:57:07

Alena Poulin

I think so?

00:16:57:09 - 00:16:59:08

Caleb Stair

Good stuff of nightmares.

00:16:59:08 - 00:16:59:20

Christa Court

BOO

00:16:59:20 - 00:17:01:01

Caleb Stair

AHHHHHHHH

00:17:01:01 - 00:17:31:13

Caleb Stair

if you've made it this far, you've finished the entire episode, and we thank you for that. Tune in next time for more food for thought. Thanks again for joining us on this episode of Free Lunch. We hope you'll come back again for a second.