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"Bigfoot" fever grips rainforest

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KUALA LUMPUR (Reuters) - Bigfoot fever is gripping Malaysia, with local newspapers and the official news agency reporting sightings of a huge ape in southern rainforests.

In one reported sighting, an indigenous man claimed he saw a 10-foot-tall (300-cm-tall) ape standing on two legs beside a river in heavy rainforest in Johor state, the director of the state's national-parks service told Reuters on Sunday.

"He said it was hairy all over, like a gorilla," said Hashim Yusoff, director of Johor National Parks Corp.

Hashim took and a group of park rangers and journalists into the Sungai Madek forest reserve last week in four-wheel-drive vehicles to ask indigenous people in the area about the reported sightings.

He said he was keeping an open mind and wanted to enlist scientists to prove whether the beast was fact or fantasy. "We are collecting a database on the sightings," he added.

Hashim denied he was staging a publicity stunt to lure more visitors to the area. But with latest remake of the movie "King Kong" and bigfoot-spotting almost an industry in itself, there are bound to be suspicions.

"No way. If there's any suggestion that we are using this one to get publicity, it's not true," Hashim said.

The Malaysian press is enjoying the story, running headlines like "Rangers on the trail of Bigfoot" and "Villagers' close encounter with Bigfoot".

One newspaper published a picture of a large but vague impression in mud, calling it a footprint.

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