

# Idiocracy is Upon Us -- August 11, 2013

After my father retired, he and my mother purchased property in London, Kentucky, and moved there in 1985. As I was a teenager and still living at home, I moved with them. Over-the-air television reception was pretty poor, so we got cable television. I'd never had cable TV as I was growing up, so it was an interesting experience. Being a teenager, I loved stations like MTV and VH1, but I also remember really enjoying the nature and science channels, like The Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel, History Channel, and Animal Planet. It was great, because it was real science, even some hard science. It didn't feel dumbed down.

Over the years, though, I've seen a troubling trend. The content has shifted relentlessly from the smart to the sensationalistic. Here's a sampling (as of August 2013) of some of the fine fare you can now find on these networks:

- "Amish Mafia", on Discovery
- "Extreme Cougar Wives", on TLC
- "Fast n' Loud", on Discovery
- "Finding Bigfoot", on Animal Planet
- "Hatfields and McCoys: White Lightning", on History
- "Here Comes Honey Boo Boo", on TLC
- "The Haunted", on Animal Planet
- "Long Island Medium", on TLC
- "Mermaids: The Body Found", on Animal Planet
- "Moonshiners", on Discovery
- "Sister Wives", on TLC
- "Swamp People", on History
- "Top Shot", on History

There are bright spots (Mythbusters on Discovery comes to mind), but they are hard to find.

So, what happened?

It seems that while these channels started with clear programming goals in mind, they are still commercial channels, which means they're at the mercy of the demographic profiles that advertisers crave. The number one demographic happens to be 18 - 31 year old males. (I'll leave it to you to guess which shows in the list above are catering to that crowd.) I find this even more troubling. It's less a matter of the the networks trying to shove this garbage in our faces, and more that (most) people actually seem to want this stuff.

Why? Personally, I crave being informed. I like to learn things. But, I like to learn things that have a basis in reality. I have no interest in pseudoscience. I know I'm not the only person who feels this way, but I do feel like I'm part of a minority.

So, what prompted this post? Shark Week. Shark Week is when the Discovery channel pulls any and all programming they have related to sharks, and run it for a week. In the past, there's been some pretty interesting stuff in there. But what did they open with this year?

## **"Megalodon: The Monster Shark"**

The megalodon (specifically, *Carcharocles megalodon*) is an extinct species of shark that lived from approximately 23 to 2.6 million years ago. It was immense. Fossil remains suggest that this shark

reached a maximum length of around 60 feet, and was widely distributed throughout the world's oceans. It was an incredible creature, and is certainly deserving of a comprehensive documentary treatment, but that's not what Discovery provided.

The "Megalodon: The Monster Shark" show broadcast during shark week was purely fictitious, giving us two hours of things like fake footage of a large shark attacking a boat, more fake footage of a whale supposedly bitten by one, and "scientists" played by actors. The show is highly suggestive that megalodon sharks have survived to the present day, with only the faintest of disclaimers regarding the nature of the show itself:

None of the institutions or agencies that appear in the film are affiliated with it in any way, nor have approved its contents. Though certain events and characters in this film have been dramatized, sightings of [the giant creature] continue to this day. Megalodon was a real shark. Legends of giant sharks persist all over the world. There is still debate about what they might be.

No, there isn't any debate at all. This shark disappeared from the fossil record millions of years ago. If it were still around, it could not remain hidden. There are deep sea creatures that live at abysmal depths, but sharks are not one of these creatures. They live in relatively shallow waters where oxygen content is high enough to support them, and where there is sufficient food. If they existed today, there would absolutely be definitive evidence of them.

If I'm looking for this kind of junk, I'll just go over to the Syfy channel where I know what I'm getting.

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Last update: **2024/01/01 16:30**

