



The highly decomposed body of a baleen whale being retrieved by the Singapore Salvage Engineers crew in waters near Marina Bay Cruise Centre on Sept 12. PHOTO: LEE KONG CHIAN NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM, NUS

## 6.3m-long baleen whale carcass found in waters off Tanjong Pagar

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The 6.3m-long carcass of a baleen whale was found in the waters off Tanjong Pagar on Sept 6.

Announcing the discovery in a statement on Sept 16, the Lee Kong Chian National History Museum at NUS said the cause of the whale's death is unclear.

The carcass was in an advanced stage of decomposition, and research is under way to find out more about the animal, said the museum's curator of mammals Marcus Chua.

The incomplete specimen is identified as a rorqual whale of the genus *Balaenoptera*, a group of filter-feeding baleen whales that includes the blue whale, the world's largest.

The carcass is estimated to weigh about six tonnes, according to the museum.

Officers from the National Parks Board had alerted the museum's

researchers to the carcass, which was missing half its body. The museum's scientists estimate that the whale would have been 9m to 12m long when it was alive.

While preparations were under way to recover the delicate carcass, it was reported on Sept 12 to have drifted towards Marina Bay Cruise Centre.

To prevent it from being lost to the open sea, museum staff worked with Singapore Salvage Engineers, which specialises in maritime emergency, salvage, rescue and support services, to secure the remains.

The carcass is now safely secured in a restricted area for processing and further study by a team led by Dr Chua.

"Whale encounters in Singapore waters are rare. Hence, each stranding provides unique opportunities to study these large marine mammals," he said.

Dr Chua told *The Straits Times* that there is no risk of the decomposed whale exploding due to a build-up of gases as its abdominal

cavity was already open when it was found.

But one challenge for the team is the carcass' stench.

"Several team members have varyingly described it as decaying dried fish or dried squid, even durian," said Dr Chua. "For me, it's... ammonia with decaying flesh and musty leather seats, topped with a sharp acrid odour when the wind blows."

The whale's age and sex have yet to be determined, and tissue samples have been collected for future genetic analysis.

The museum said it will share the dissection process and subsequent findings with the public when ready.

Baleen whales lack teeth and instead have comb-like baleen plates in their upper jaws, which filter zooplankton and other small prey from the water.

They range from the 6.5m-long pygmy whale to the 30m-long blue whale.

Although the whales are seldom seen in Singapore waters, carcass-

es were discovered off Pulau Bukom in 1980 and in the South China Sea near Pedra Branca in 2009.

Many species of baleen whales undertake long annual migrations between polar feeding grounds and tropical breeding areas, making them widespread across the world's oceans, according to the museum.

The discovery also marks a decade since the museum last encountered and studied a whale carcass found in Singapore waters.

Months after the museum opened in 2015, the carcass of a sperm whale, later named Jubilee, washed up near Jurong Island.

Head of the museum Darren Yeo said: "It is both moving and serendipitous that another whale carcass should arrive in our waters during our 10th anniversary year – exactly 10 years after the museum's launch and the discovery of Jubilee – just as we have been reflecting on a decade of research, public engagement, and conservation."

The 2015 specimen, which measures 10.6m in length, is now displayed at the museum.

The female whale was the first recorded sperm whale in Singapore, and confirmed the presence of the species in coastal waters around Peninsular Malaysia.

Its carcass suggested that it could have originated from a population in the Indian Ocean near the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in Australia or western Indonesia. The whale's gut revealed a wide variety of deep-sea prey, which indicated that it was feeding well outside Singapore waters before it likely died from a ship strike, as indicated by a large wound with broken backbones.

The latest baleen whale find echoes an earlier chapter of Singapore's natural history, when the skeleton of another baleen whale was displayed here, the museum noted.

The Raffles Museum in Stamford Road, now the National Museum of Singapore, displayed the skeleton of a 13.4m-long blue whale that was stranded near Melaka in 1892.

The skeleton, once dubbed the Singapore Whale, was exhibited from 1907 to 1974, before it was gifted to the National Museum of Malaysia. It can be found today at the Labuan Marine Museum in Malaysia.

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