

BIG BONES

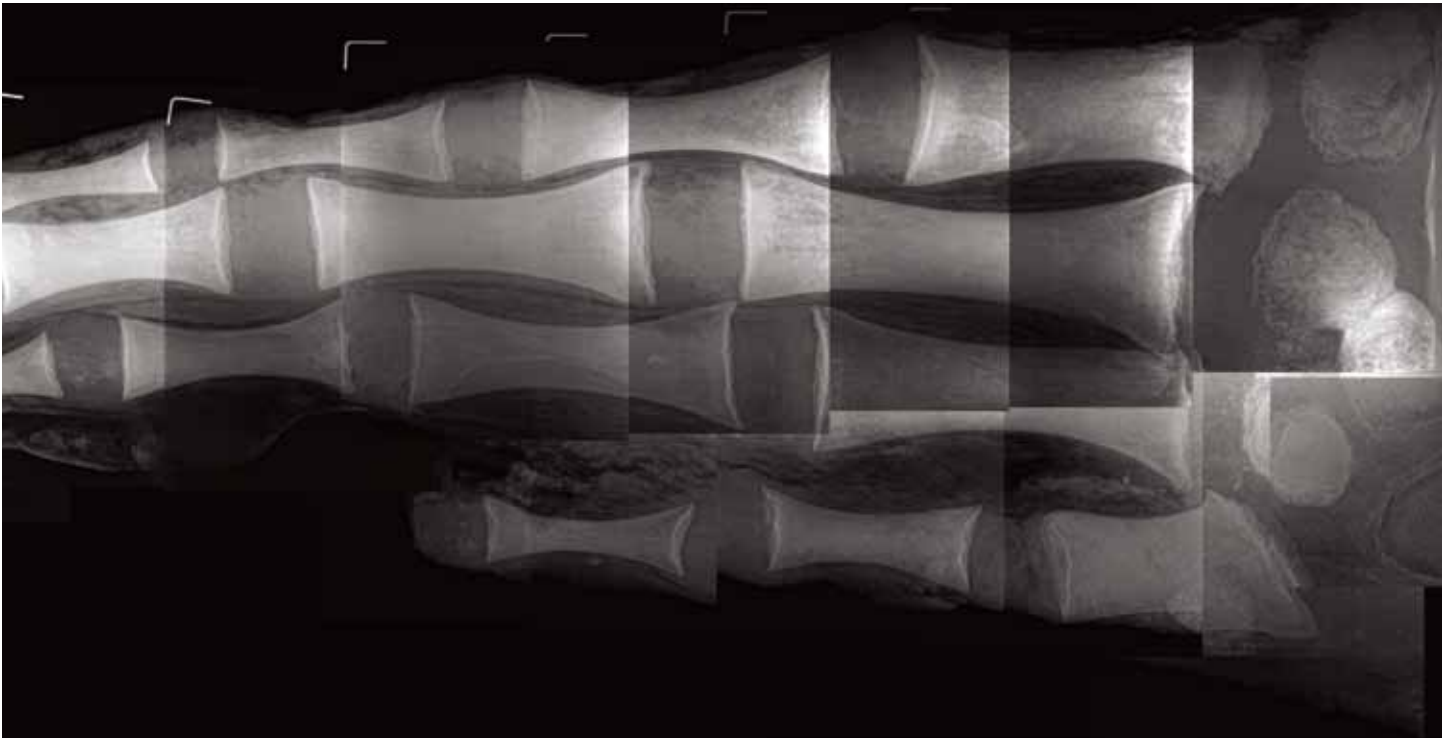


Photo > Courtesy of Andrew Trites

A blue whale that once lurked in the ocean's depths will soon live on as the centrepiece of UBC's Beaty Biodiversity Museum and a testament to the connection between humans and leviathans.

The skeleton of the 25-metre-long whale will serve as an icon of biodiversity, a gigantic poster child reminding us that even the world's largest creature can be threatened with extinction. The blue whale skeleton display will be the largest in Canada and one of only six such exhibits in North America.

Blue whales inhabit both the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. UBC's specimen beached and died on Prince Edward Island in 1987 and the Canadian Museum of Nature arranged for its remains to be buried in situ to help render the carcass into a skeleton. Exhumed in 2008, the skeleton's preparation and reassembly has been overseen by Prof. Andrew Trites, a biodiversity researcher and Director of the Marine Mammal Research Unit at UBC's Fisheries Centre.

Despite their enormous size and range, little is known about these gentle giants.

Using CFI-funded equipment at the Vancouver Aquarium, where Trites conducts some of his research, he and Aquarium researchers took X-rays of one of the 100-kg flippers. It was the first time a flipper had been so closely examined, and the images he obtained were eerily familiar.

"It is startling, even to experienced researchers, to see how similar their bone structure is to us humans," says Trites. "It's like you're looking at a huge, distorted human hand."

Michael deRoos, a master skeleton articulator and former student of Trites, is preparing the skeleton for display – a difficult and approximate task that involves working from a bucket of bones. The information from the X-ray will help scientists better understand the mammal's structure and provides a blueprint for the flippers' reassembly.

Home to the UBC Fisheries Centre, the Aquatic Ecosystems Research Laboratory (AERL) building is next door to the Museum and features an atrium display of skeletons of a minke whale, a killer whale, two Steller sea lions, and three Pacific

white-sided dolphins. "We can do good research in huts," says Trites, referring to the aging army huts donated to UBC following the Second World War that have historically accommodated marine and fisheries researchers. "But our new facilities bring us all together, enable discussion and allow the public to hear about and see research first-hand." ■

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The marine mammal display in the AERL building is made possible through support from Petro-Canada. AERL has received major support from the Canada Foundation for Innovation and the B.C. Government.