

# Dead whales once a treasure

Carcass was a treat for bears, whalers, Indians

By KATHY KREIGER  
Sentinel staff writer

CAPITOLA — A dead whale on the beach today means something for scientists to study and a whale of a disposal problem for whichever local government is unlucky enough to have it in their jurisdiction.

But that hasn't always been the case, said local historian Sandy Lydon. Past residents of the Monterey Bay area, he said, have had a different reaction.

A hundred years ago, Lydon said, the local whalers would have rendered it for blubber. Two hundred years ago, the Mission padres would have run to get out of the way of the grizzly bears charging down to the beach. And three hundred years ago, the natives — Ohlone Indians — would have declared a feast day.

"The Ohlone even had a prayer to call a dead whale onto the beach," said Lydon. "For the Ohlone, a dead whale was like Saturday dropping out of the sky."

Lydon said that 200 years ago, in the California Mission era, "A dead whale was extremely dangerous, because the grizzly bears could come charging from miles around. The damn bears would get side the carcass, and live in it for days. A dead whale and a grizzly bear were a match made in heaven."

A hundred years ago, Lydon said, whalers would have taken it apart on the spot. The bay area had an active period of shore whaling from 1860 to 1890, when 24-foot whale boats would hunt the whales, row them back to shore and render the blubber to whale

"Harpoons had names on them. A rule of thumb was the first one in got the carcass," said Lydon. "It was extremely dangerous," he said.

Sight whales and humpback whales were the favored catch. Gray whales were nasty," said Lydon. "The whalers called them filthy."

Sperm whales were rarely found here, and weren't in great demand. They're almost all head and not much blubber," said Lydon.

However, sperm whales had some highly-prized products: spermaceti, ambergris and teeth.

Lydon said spermaceti, a waxy substance that separated out from the sperm oil, was known as the finest lubricants, especially among shipmakers and jewelers. Amber-



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

The Coast Guard prepares to haul the carcass of a baby sperm whale off the beach.

## If you see a beached animal ...

Michael Magaw, rescue coordinator of the Stranding Network, an organization that helps beached marine animals, described what to do if you spot one.

"The natural response is to push it back into the water," said Magaw, "and that's the last thing to do. It can't swim, or it wouldn't be on the beach."

If the animal is alive, Magaw said the best thing to do is to "keep it wet, keep people away, and contact the Stranding Network."

gris, another waxy substance, was used in making perfume. Lydon said that the teeth of a sperm whale were so coveted for making scrimshaw that whalers would fight over who got them, with some captains actually counting them out before they were taken from the animal's jaw.

Whaling in the bay area died out as the price of petroleum oil got cheap enough to replace whale oil.

The problem of disposal is not a new one. "The whalers had the same problem as the city of Capitola. Once they got the blubber, they

"An animal can live on the beach for a while, as long as its skin stays damp," said Magaw. "Pushing it back, it could drown, or it could get bashed on the rocks." He warned that beached animals should be approached with caution. Though they're in distress, he said, they can injure or even kill people with their tails.

People who want to volunteer, or who have spotted a stranded animal can call the network at either 459-2062 or 459-3135.

had this mountain of meat going bad very fast," said Lydon.

"Towing out to sea is a traditional method of disposal," he said. "However, the caveat is you don't always know where it will end up."

In the 19th century, Lydon said, "There were literally forests of whale bones between Marina and Monterey."

Lydon said dead whales were also a considerable tourist attraction through history.

"In August of 1895, a whale washed up in Santa Monica," he

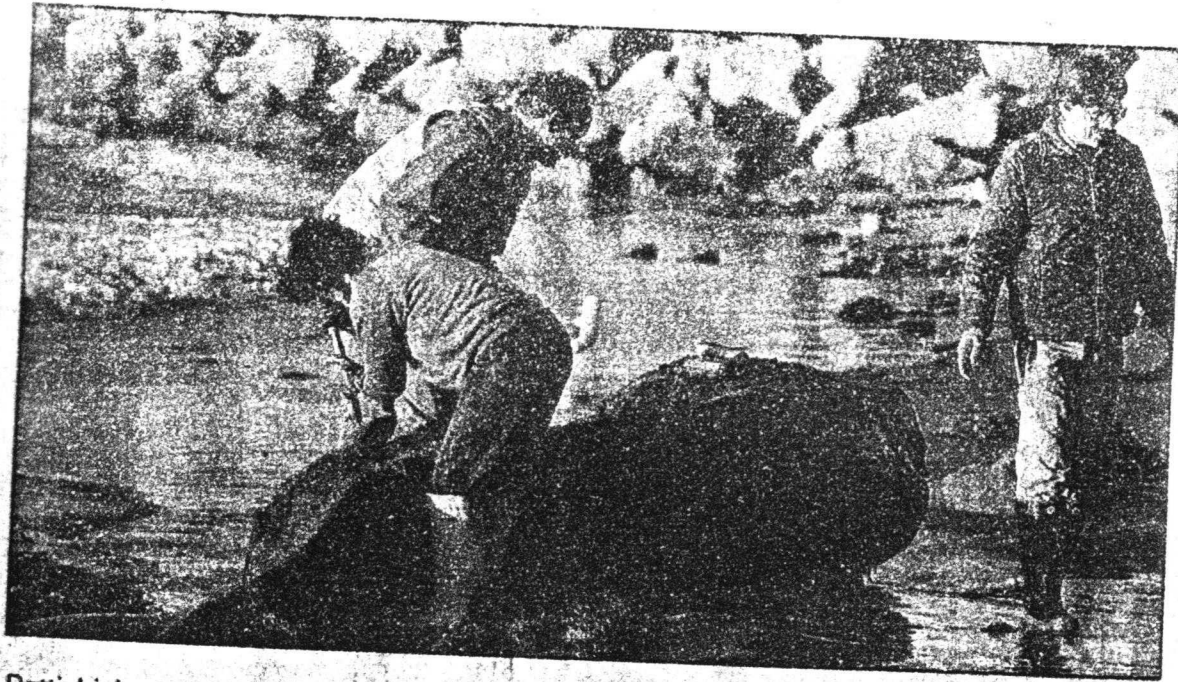
said. "Southern Pacific Railroad bought 50 dollars of advertising and 40,000 people came to see it. Southern Pacific made \$20,000 before the stench got too bad."

The stench, said Lydon, "is apparently one of those never-forgotten smells."

Much like dogs, "grizzly bears loved to roll in it," he said.

In the interest of historical information, Lydon has sought out the smell. So far, thanks to the special disposal of beached whales, been unsuccessful. "The irony is that when whales had value, there wasn't a disposal problem," Lydon.

REFERENCE



Patti Liebert, with knife, and vet David Caspar take samples from whale's carcass.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

## A whale of a problem

By KATHY KREIGER  
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**CAPITOLA** — As the sun came up on Hooper's Beach Monday morning, the incoming tide was licking at the carcass of the baby sperm whale that washed up early Sunday morning, and seagulls were already feeding on the no-longer-moveable feast.

What was once a highly complex and mysterious creature of the deep seas was now just one ton of dead whale meat littering one of the area's most popular beach areas.

Representatives from UC Santa Cruz's Long Marine Lab showed up by 6 a.m. to take tissue samples from the tail and to cut off

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## Dead whale

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the head for further study. They had agreed not to open the body cavity and to finish their work by the time the Coast Guard showed up at high tide, around 10 a.m., to tow the animal off the beach.

The city of Capitola loaned its front loader to scoop up the whale's head, which workers estimated weighed between 500 and 600 pounds, on to a truck which took it the marine lab.

Many came down to the beach Sunday and Monday to glimpse the whale which was first sighted alive, but in distress, near the cement ship by Seaclyff Beach over Thanksgiving weekend.

The lab's volunteer vet, Dave Casper, said cause of the whale's death could not be determined without an autopsy.

"Pneumonia is a common cause of death in cetaceans," said Casper. Casper said the whale had lost weight since he saw it a week ago Sunday. At that time, it was listing so far to the left side that something was obviously affecting its buoyancy, he said, and pneumonia would be a likely cause.

The head was severed with an

ordinary butcher's knife by graduate student Ted Cranford. Cranford said the whale's head, plus sound recordings of the clicks it made before it died, will provide valuable information to scientists on how the toothed whales make their clicks. "We have the recorded sounds and the anatomy, so we can correlate the sound with the structures," he said.

Cranford said that after he's done taking photos and measurements of the head, it will be shipped off to the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco.

By 9 a.m., the 41-foot Coast Guard boat was in sight and two men from the Coast Guard were in the water, tying a thick rope to the whale's tail.

About 30 people stood on shore, watching as the boat towed the whale out to sea.

Coast Guard Second Class Boatswain's Mate Dan Kilburger said the whale would be towed outside the bay and dropped off somewhere between Point Santa Cruz and Point Pinos where it may sink, float with the currents or possibly wash up on a beach again.

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