

Melbourne Fossil Find Reveals Giant Killer Sperm Whales Stalked Australia's Ancient Seas

Melbourne's Prehistoric Answer to Moby Dick—the Largest Tooth Ever Found in Australia—Unveiled at Melbourne Museum Today!



21.04.16 Long walks on the beach will never be quite the same for **local Melbourne man Murray Orr**. The keen-eyed fossil enthusiast has collected the **largest tooth ever found in Australia** at **Beaumaris Bay**, a renowned fossil site in Melbourne's south east.

"After I found the tooth I just sat down and stared at it in disbelief. I knew this was an important find that needed to be shared with everyone," recounts Mr Orr.

The tooth – of an **extinct species of sperm whale** closely related to *Livyatan melvillei* from Peru– is of **international significance** and represents the **only example of its size and kind ever to be discovered in Australia**. Indeed, the new discovery from Beaumaris is the first evidence of such a **gigantic 'killer sperm whale'** outside of the Americas.

At about **30 cm long** and dating from the Pliocene epoch (**approximately 5 million years ago**), the tooth is larger than the teeth from a living sperm whale and even **exceeds the dental dimensions of the mighty *Tyrannosaurus rex***. The Beaumaris tooth originated from an extinct sperm whale up to **18 metres long** and weighing perhaps **40 tonnes (40,000 kgs)**.

Recognising the significance of the discovery, **Murray Orr** contacted **Dr Erich Fitzgerald, Senior Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology** at **Museum Victoria** with an offer to **donate the tooth to the Museum collection** – an offer gratefully accepted by **Dr Fitzgerald**:

"By donating his discovery to Museum Victoria, Murray has ensured that this unique fossil is available for scientific research and education both now and for generations to come. This is absolutely essential for documenting and preserving Australia's fossil heritage."

Unlike the living sperm whale, which lives off a diet of squid and fish, the extinct ‘killer sperm whales’ (including *Livyatan* and the Beaumaris fossil) probably **preyed upon much larger animals such as other whales**. This is suggested by the size and shape of their teeth, which in the Peruvian fossils of *Livyatan* are set in large jaw bones indicating powerful jaw-closing muscles.

As **Dr Fitzgerald** explains, these fossils provide an important perspective on today’s sperm whales:

“If we only had today’s deep-diving, squid-sucking sperm whales to go on, we could not predict that just 5 million years ago there were **giant predatory sperm whales with immense teeth that hunted other whales**. **Most sperm whales for the past 20 million years have been of the whale-killing kind**. So, the fossil record reveals the living species to in fact be the exception to the rule, the oddball of the sperm whale family.”

The new discovery cements **Beaumaris Bay** as one of Australia’s premier fossil sites, explains Dr Fitzgerald:

*“In all of the 34,000 km of Australia’s coastline, **Beaumaris Bay is unique**. Nowhere else on this continent produces the fossils being found at Beaumaris and provides such astonishing insights into the deep history of Australia’s marine megafauna. **It is a national treasure.**”*

The tooth will be unveiled to the general public at a special media event at Melbourne Museum **TODAY – 11 am Thursday 21 April, Melbourne Museum**.

A media event will be held today at **10:45AM for 11AM start at Melbourne Museum**. **Murray Orr** and **Dr Fitzgerald** will be present and will speak on the discovery and reveal the tooth – a great pic and interview opportunity.

For those unable to attend, high-res images of the tooth plus associated graphics, and interviews with Dr Erich Fitzgerald are available.

To attend the event, receive images or to arrange an interview please get in touch.

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Pictured: Dr Erich Fitzgerald with the extinct Sperm Whale tooth.