

A Whale of a Tail

Ranger Jim Serpa

The smell was overwhelming. How sad I felt to see this once magnificent animal reduced to a huge lump of rotting flesh. At one point I thought Volunteer Coordinator Bill Brooks was going to lose it. The trick was to stay just upwind of the carcass as Bill learned the hard way. Before going on, let's start from the beginning of this tale.

On Tuesday, August 25, just three hours prior to my leaving for the Laguna Beach Pageant of the Masters, Ranger Jim Long called to let me know there was a whale on the beach at San Onofre. If you know me, and my wife does, there was no question what I was going to do. I jumped in the car with my trusty hound Xena, and headed for the trails area of San Onofre State Beach. As I drove up to the kiosk I asked the park aide if she knew where the beached whale was. She pinched her nose and said it was at the bottom of Trail One; and it was stinky and gross. Not a good sign.

When I hear there is a dead whale the first thing I think about is baleen. Baleen is the material that hangs from the roof of certain whales and allows them to filter their prey from the water. Doheny has some great examples of gray whale baleen but I had heard this might be a blue whale and the thought of a large sample of baleen from that animal was exciting.



When we reached the bluff overlooking the Trail One area, the unmistakable smell was already in the air. Xena, my dog, had her nose pointed skyward trying to decipher what was generating the odor. Now, remember we were still a quarter mile or more away and the smell was unmistakable. As I stood at the bluff top I was disappointed to see the whale was in an advanced stage of decomposition, which meant there was going to be no baleen recovery for me. Baleen tends to fall out of the whales mouth relatively quickly after death. I watched the whale's head rock back and forth with the relentless wave action.

What truly amazed me though was the fact there were two surfers in the water not 50 yards from the whale. With the whale still in the surf and decaying at a rapid rate, the scent trail it was laying down could have been picked up by even the poorest smelling species of shark. Many of us thought this was the whale that had been in the news recently. Lifeguards had towed that whale away from the coast while a multitude of sharks dined on it. Those sharks were a rogue's gallery of scary sea critters from the local waters, including two huge White Sharks, some Mako's and numerous Blues. Trail One was definitely not the place you wanted to be in the water.

After satisfying myself further investigation could wait until tomorrow, I drove to Chief Ranger Don Monahan's office. As I walked in he looked up and remarked, "I wondered

how long it would take you to show up.” My reputation precedes me, I guess. Most people in the district know if there is some poor beast washed up on one of our beaches and there is a chance for an exhibit or interpretive tool to be had, I’m their man. Several years ago I came upon a beached White Shark in much the same way.

Bill Brooks and I met with representatives from the National Marine Fisheries who said they spotted the location of the dead whale while driving on the freeway by the 20 or so Turkey Vultures that were circling high in the sky above the carcass. We drove them down to the whale where they took samples of tissue and blubber for species identification and toxicology.

One of the scientists pulled out a couple of sharp knives and a wetting stone to keep the knife blades sharp. Cutting on a whale quickly dulls a knife blade. The tissue seems to have the tensile strength of the cables stretching across the Golden Gate Bridge. After much slicing, sawing and cutting he managed to free the jawbone but not without the help of the six of us twisting the jaw so that it would free itself from its socket.

That evening Lifeguard Greg Booth spearheaded a group of people and machinery to



bury the whale, which by that time had tentatively been identified as a fin whale. The fin whale is the second largest of all the whales second only to the regal blue whale.

The next morning I spoke to Joe Cordaro of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). NOAA has exclusive rights to all whale specimens. Joe informed me

we could have the extricated jawbone. Yahoo, another cool exhibit for the Visitor Center!

Now, we had to get the jawbone to Doheny. The best vehicle for the job was Warehouse Manager Laura Griggs’ truck with a lift on the rear. Laura graciously offered its use and the two park aides who were with it at the time. Jeff Miller and Mike Searls were troopers, shouldering most of the work getting the huge whale jaw back to Doheny. It was quite a sight cruising up the I-5 freeway.

We looked for a suitable spot to put the huge jaw and decided the top of the interpretive storage container was suitable temporarily. The problem was the jaw was beginning to leach whale oil and was now less than fragrant. Landscaper Tom Perkins offered his services as a tractor driver. We looped the straps already on the bone and Tom expertly lifted the jawbone high enough for Ranger Brent Hufford and I to slide it onto the top of the container.

Now came the waiting period, but after several months of drying we placed the jawbone in front of the Visitor Center. It’s a great exhibit!