

EPISODE 5

HOW I ONCE OWNED A DEAD SPERM WHALE

ON WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 1979 I was a listless underworked fisheries bureaucrat at the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service waiting for something interesting to happen. And it did — via a telephone call from Dr. Edward Shallenberger, the Vice President of Sea Life Park. Ed said there had been another marine mammal stranding and this one is very unusual. A large sperm whale had stranded on the outer reef edge in front of the U.S. Naval Air Station located a bit west of the Honolulu International Airport. When marine mammals strand, Ed Shallenberger was usually the first to be notified, even before government agencies. Ed and his Sea Life Park porpoise trainer wife Ingrid Kang had been out to the Naval Air Station and talked with its Commanding Officer, a Captain Wright, in order to assess the situation. Captain Wright wanted the whale off his beach. Ed Shallenberger called me because the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is supposed to take charge of stranded marine mammals as set forth in the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 (MMPA), and so he wanted to get me involved. I agreed with him. My job as the Regional Representative of the NMFS Regional Office in California — a non-scientific part of the NMFS — meant it was up to me to figure out what to do with this sperm whale. I took charge but not in the way called for in the MMPA regulations. Looking back at what I did, I think I am lucky I did not get fired. Ed was on the beach with Ingrid and watching the stranded whale, so I told I told him

I would get out to the Naval Air Station as soon as I could. There he told me the U.S. Coast Guard had tried to tow the whale offshore to let nature take care of a decomposing whale. I was told the Coast Guard was only allowed one attempt to do this, and if it did not work, it was somebody else's problem. This was news to me. The Coast Guard had left the scene. Its attempt failed when the towing rope broke, and the whale washed back onto the reef. The logical place to place a tow rope was the area at the end of the whale's body where it tapers and where the tail flukes start. English Surgeon Thomas Beale's well known 1835 book on the natural history of the sperm whale^{1,2} says that the body "... contracts so much as to become not thicker than the body of a man..." Perhaps the rope cut through this area and the whale's body almost broke into two pieces or the rope was not strong enough and broke. Ed said the rope did not break into two pieces. My recollection is that there was only one piece of rope attached to the whale.

Captain Wright wanted the whale off his reef because blood from the whale could attract sharks. His officers and men and their families were using the beach for swimming — and because of this he closed the beach to swimming for about one-half a mile on either side of the whale. I had not made up my mind on what to do about the whale when Ed suggested that he and I and Ingrid walk out to the whale and have a look around. It was about 100 yards offshore and on its side. They told me something large was protruding from a vent on the underside of the whale. First, we thought it might be an aborted foetus protruding from a vent on the underside of the female whale. But most females are smaller than our whale, so we thought was a

¹ Beale, Thomas. 1835. *A few observations on the natural history of the sperm whale*. Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange: London. 58 pp.

² Beale, Thomas. 1839. *The natural history of the sperm whale*. John Van Voost, London. ca. 350 pp. Both of these books can be obtained at <https://mysite.du.edu/~tyler/ploughboy/bealeold.htm>. The 1839 book is sold by Amazon.com

male and 40 to 50 feet long. We decided we did not know what the large protruding thing was, so off we went to examine the whale. The first thing we noticed was that the ventral protrusion was six or seven or eight feet long, round, and about two feet in diameter. It was fully inflated in its entire length, something like a giant cucumber. We finally matched it with a description in the literature on the penis of sperm whales. Our guess was that the whale may have had an internal infection in its genital area, and this caused the expulsion of its penis.

In writing this episode in February 2019, I learned there is a museum in Reykjavik, Iceland called the Phallogical Museum that studies the penises of land and marine mammals, including humans. On its website is a photo of a preserved penis of a sperm whale. The base is quite broad, but it narrows and ends in a small tip at the end. This makes sense, for a sperm whale in mating dress would need a relatively narrow penis to insert into a female sperm whale. I don't know what happened to the photos Ed took of the whale, but one photo he was not able to get was a photo of Ingrid holding the whale's penis. She refused.

Captain Wright, a most accommodating officer, got his operations officer to mobilize a large bulldozer with tracks for wheels. The bulldozer came to the water's edge and a very strong rope was payed out to the whale and fastened just in front of the flukes. This time the rope did not break, and the bulldozer brought the whale up on the sandy part of the beach and then turned it sideways so it was broadside to the water. This is where the plot thickens. Ed had outfitted four or five men to help him flense the whale. He even turned down half a dozen volunteers with wheelbarrows and cutting knives who had arrived at the Naval Air Station's gate, claiming that they were eco-friendly and wanted to help. Their entry was refused. Ed took me aside and said what he really wanted to do was to completely flense (remove all the flesh from) the whale, gather up all the bones, and do something with them of a scientific nature.

He realized this would take several days, but he assured Captain Wright and me that all the carcass's leftovers would be taken to the Waipahu dump. I don't know how he convinced Captain Wright of his plan, but he convinced me when he said that he had made a deal with another person that the bones would be used for a legitimate purpose. I realized that I was skating on thin ice when I said, "Okay, that's all right with me." Then I went to read the MMPA Act regulations.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 says,

The MMPA prohibits the take and exploitation of any marine mammal without appropriate authorization, which may only be given by the *Service* (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service). Permits may be issued for scientific research, public display, and the importation/exportation of marine mammal parts and products to be determined by the *Service* that the issuance is consistent with the MMPA's regulations.³

It was clear that I was not following the MMPA regulations, so I took a deep breath and told Ed that I had placed my future in his hands, and if I got in trouble, he would have to tell my boss that my agreement for him to collect all the bones was a common-sense approach when they would be used for scientific purposes. Going through the permit process would have taken days with nothing accomplished except having a decomposing whale on Captain Wright's beach.

Everything was going well; Ed's gang was cutting and putting all the bones in a pile. Sperm whale jawbones are 12 to 16 feet long, so it was a large pile. I would go

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marine_Mammal_Protection_Act.

out to see the whale rendering gang every other day, and by about day four, most of the butchering had ended and several trucks full of whale blubber, meat, and offal had been sent to the Waipahu dump. Captain Wright was pleased. In order to walk around where the cutting was going on, I wore a pair of rubber boots that extended 12 inches up my leg. If I had not, whale blubber and oily bits of meat would have squished down inside my boots. I asked Ed to show me the dorsal aorta of the whale. He pointed it out and it looked like it was 10 or 12 inches in diameter. The one thing I remember about dead whales being cut into pieces is that they are extremely oily. Oil and grease were everywhere, especially on the clothes of Ed and his rendering gang.

One of his cutters, a young lady who lived in Kailua, asked me if I would give her a ride home. I said okay, but asked her to degrease herself as much as possible. She tried, but not very successfully. I was driving a pickup truck, and I would have preferred the young lady to ride in the cab to her home. When she tried to ride up front with me, I told her she would have to ride in the back. She did that, and when we arrived at her home in Kailua, she left a large amount of whale grease where she had been sitting. I had to use soap and water to get rid of it.

After the whale had been dismembered, the bones collected, and the offal sent to the dump, Ed and I parted ways. I did not see him again because I was very busy flying up the Hawaiian Archipelago with the Coast Guard looking for illegal foreign fishing boats and getting involved when we found them — twice. Later, in 1979, I was selected to be the new Fisheries Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, so I did not know what Ed had done with the whale's bones. I returned to work in Hawaii in 1983, and one day after that, I went to Sea Life Park with my family. In the gift shop, hanging elegantly from the ceiling, I found the skeleton of the sperm whale that Ed had dismembered in February 1979. It looked beautiful — or if not beautiful, it had an overwhelming presence. I never had a chance to talk with Ed again about the

whale, so I never found out how he had arranged to get the skeleton hung at Sea Life Park. I moved to Australia in 1994, and about 10 years later I took my wife and niece to Sea Life Park for an outing. When I went to see the whale skeleton, it was not there. Nobody seems to know what had happened to it. I think Dr. Ed Shallenberger may have died, as my emails to him have bounced back 'rejected.' I will still try to locate Ed and see if I can tie up the loose ends of this episode.

In retrospect, I probably would not have given Dr. Ed Shallenberger the whale's bones until I knew where they were going. My leaving to work at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo prevented my finding where the bones were going, but that is not an excuse.

SWIMMING WITH FISHES



At age 27, with a degree in Liberal Arts from Georgetown University, and without any scientific background, Bob Iversen decided to become a marine biologist by studying fisheries at the University of Hawaii. The U.S. Navy had positioned him to do this by sending him to Hawaii after recalling him to active duty as a Petty Officer Third Class when the Korean War started in 1950.

While at the University of Hawaii he was a good student but when offered a job as a biological technician with the U.S. Bureau of Commercial Fisheries he said yes and started going to sea on the Bureau's small oceanographic research vessels. He studied the tuna species the laboratory was studying, especially the hearing ability of Yellowfin Tuna. He trained one to swim through a maze to get a reward after hearing sounds. After several decades as a marine biologist, Bob was seconded to the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo as Fisheries Attache for three years. Bob's various jobs, at sea and on shore, introduced him to many unusual events that have become the 28 episodes in this book, including several shark stories.

He hopes that his career will be a spur to young men and women not to wait if they wish to become a marine biologist.

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BOB IVERSEN

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