

Ancient toothed whale remains found near Santa Cruz

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A 1,000-pound slab of sandstone lifted off a beach in Santa Cruz County, Calif., Wednesday may provide a better glimpse of what plied the seas 5 million years ago.

Within the rock, says a county-contracted excavation crew, are the partial remains of an ancient toothed whale, dating to a time when a shallow ocean covered most of the region and sea life was not what it is today.

The exact location of the excavation has been withheld, at the request of paleontologists, to protect the historic nature of the area.

The discovery of what is thought to be a six- to 10-foot animal, coming amid construction at the site, follows a find earlier this year of a similarly aged whale nearby -- that one, though, is believed to have been a baleen whale that unlike its counterpart fed on plants, not meat.

While whale bones are not uncommon along the Monterey Bay, the size of the intact section of animal excavated this week, say paleontologists, is unusual and could shed new light on life at the time.

"If you have a relatively whole skeleton, there are things you can learn about what else has been found from the past," said Frank Perry, a paleontologist at the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History. "This could be a very important part of the jigsaw puzzle of what life was like millions of years ago."

The excavation crew has yet to identify the species of small toothed whale found on the beach, but they hope to.

The block of sandstone cut out of the shoreline contains at least a partial skull, in addition to several vertebrae, which makes identification possible, says David Haasl, senior paleontologist with PaleoResource Consultants, which performed the excavation.

Only after the rock is trucked to the company's laboratory in Auburn, Calif., and chiseled apart, will scientists know just how much of the skeleton exists and how easy it will be to identify. They hope to complete the work in the next couple of weeks.

"This could be something that hasn't been reported; it could be something new," said Haasl. Or, he said, the whale could be one of the few known species of small toothed whales already identified from that age.

Toothed whales from 5 million years ago don't exist today. Their descendents, though, include the modern-day dolphin, orca, porpoise and pilot whale.

The ancient whales, like their more recent incarnations, are believed to have fed on fish, squid and sometimes marine mammals.

The age of the recently discovered animal is linked to the rock the fossils were found in. The sandstone dates somewhere between the end of the Miocene and beginning of the Pliocene epochs, the excavators say.

Since the site is county property, county administrators contracted the Auburn-based excavation crew to remove the whale bones. They have not decided what they will ultimately do with them.

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