

Giant predatory whale named for 'Moby Dick' author

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This artists' rendering provided by the journal Nature shows a raptorial sperm whale *Leviathan melvillei* attacking a medium-size baleen whale off the coast of the area now occupied by Peru. Scientists have discovered an ancient whale whose bite ripped huge chunks of flesh out of other whales about 12 million years ago, and they've named it after the author of "Moby Dick." (AP Photo/Nature, C. Letenneur)

(AP) -- Scientists have discovered an ancient whale whose bite ripped huge chunks of flesh out of other whales about 12 million years ago - and they've named it after the author of "Moby Dick."

The prehistoric sperm whale grew to between 13 and 18 meters (up to 60 feet) long, not unusual by today's standards. But unlike modern [sperm](#)

[whales](#), *Leviathan melvillei*, named for Herman Melville, sported vicious, tusk-like teeth some 36 centimeters (14 inches) long.

The ancient beast evidently dined on other whales, researchers said in Thursday's issue of the journal *Nature*. They report finding a skull of the beast in a Peruvian desert.

The researchers named it in tribute to the 19th-century author and his classic tale of the great white whale, which includes frequent digressions on natural history that punctuate the action.

"There is a chapter about fossils," one of the paper's authors, Olivier Lambert of the Natural History Museum in Paris, said. "Melville even mentions some of the fossils that I studied for my PhD thesis."

Anthony Friscia, a [paleontologist](#) at the University of California, Los Angeles, who wasn't involved in the discovery, said scattered finds of huge fossilized teeth had long hinted at the ancient whale's existence. But without a skull to fit them in, the creature's shape, size and feeding habits remained a mystery.

"The fact that they have found the entire jaw - well, almost the entire skull - is what's pretty unprecedented," he said.

The ancient beasts "were the killer [whales](#) of their time, although on a much grander scale," Friscia said. "They were close to the biggest things around."

Friscia said he thought the choice of a name was fantastic.

"You gotta love any time you get a nod to literature in taxonomy," he said. "It was a big whale, so why not?"

More information: <http://www.nature.com/nature>

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