

New whale species to be named after Mātauranga Māori whale expert

November 11 2021



Ramari Steward and nihongore skeleton Credit: Tanya Cumberland

Whales are often named after Western scientists and after men, but that tradition is about to change, as a newly discovered species of whale will carry an Indigenous name and the name of a woman.

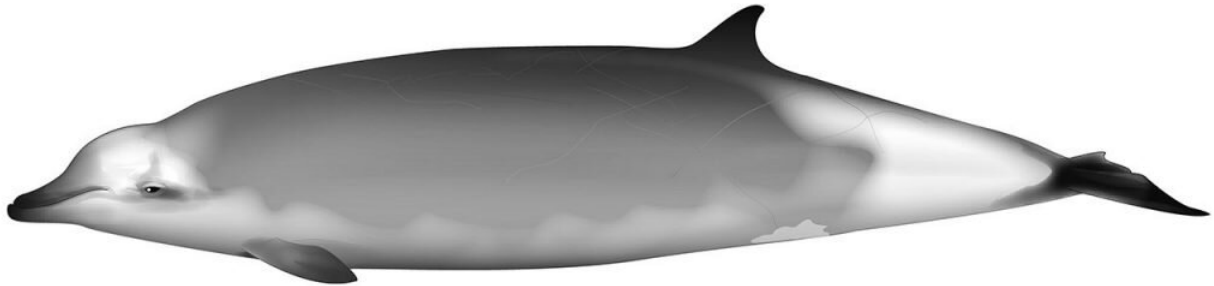
Its scientific name will be *Mesoplodon eueu*, referring to its Indigenous roots in South Africa, and its common name Ramari's beaked whale

after Ramari Stewart, a Mātauranga Māori whale expert.

Until now, this beaked whale was thought to be the True's beaked whale but almost a decade ago, a female washed ashore on the west coast of Te Waipounamu (South Island), Aotearoa New Zealand. She was 5 meters long and pregnant. The local iwi (tribe) of Ngāti Māhaki named her Nihongore and her bones were sent to Te Papa Tongarewa Museum in Wellington-New Zealand for preservation.

"When Nihongore turned up I knew that she was something different, I knew it was special because I hadn't seen it before," says Ramari Stewart.

Ramari Stewart is a renowned Tohunga Tohorā (whale expert) who was raised by her elders in the traditional Māori knowledge of the moana (sea). Together with biologist Dr. Emma Carroll from the University of Auckland, Waipapa Taumata Rau, they would bring the world of Mātauranga Māori and science together to explore the nature and origins of this whale.



Artists impression of beaked whale. Credit: Vivian Ward

"Ramari brought extensive knowledge to the project, including leading work preparing Nihongore for Te Papa. It's brilliant that Ramari accepted the honor of having this species named after her, in recognition of Ramari's Mātauranga and Western knowledge on whales and dolphins. As 'Ramari' also means a rare event in Te Reo (Māori language) it is also a fitting tribute to the elusive nature of most beaked whales," Dr. Carroll says.

Initially the New Zealand research team thought this was the first True's beaked whale found in the country, but that changed during their work with a global network of researchers. They soon realized that the genetics and skull shape of the True's beaked whales in the Northern Hemisphere were very different to the 'True's' beaked whales in the Southern Hemisphere. They have been separated for around half a

million years, probably because they don't like the warm water near the equator. It's clear that they are different species.

"It's wonderful that Western science is starting to recognize that Mātauranga Māori is as equally great as Western science and the two can work together. Rather than just bridging a relationship and taking knowledge from Indigenous practitioners, it is better that we both sit at the table," Ramari Stewart says.

This discovery brings the total number of beaked whale species to 24. These are the most visible inhabitants of the deep ocean due to their large size and need to surface to breathe. The group includes the deepest diving mammals, which can dive 100s or 1000s of meters to find their prey. Ramari's beaked whale probably spends a lot of time offshore in deep waters given so few specimens have been discovered.

The scientific name *Mesoplodon eueu* connects the male specimens used in this research to their origins in South Africa, a territory inhabited by the Khoisan peoples. Guided by the Khoisan Council, the name *eueu* was given, meaning 'big fish' in the Khwedam language. This is representative of languages from the region, as the languages of people that inhabited the coast, where the [whales](#) stranded, are now mostly extinct.

In collaboration with an international team of over 30 scientists, research led by Dr. Emma Carroll will be published in the international journal *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*.

More information: Emma L. Carroll et al, Speciation in the deep: genomics and morphology reveal a new species of beaked whale *Mesoplodon eueu*, *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1098/rspb.2021.1213](https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2021.1213)

Provided by University of Auckland

Citation: New whale species to be named after Mātauranga Māori whale expert (2021, November 11) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-11-whale-species-mtauranga-mori-expert.html>

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