

Skeleton of blue whale is reconstructed in Victoria for UBC museum

BY GRANIA LITWIN

VICTORIA - A team of about 15 sculptors, technicians, students and scientists is working overtime in a workshop on Harbour Road to repair and reassemble 500 broken bones that belonged to one of the largest creatures on earth -- a blue whale.

One of the final tasks in the year-long project is to finish the giant head, which had shattered into 25 major pieces and about 40 smaller fragments.

"We replicated it in fibreglass and foam and have now coated it with a durable, lightweight layer of plasti-paste," said artist David Hunwick, stirring the mucky mix with a trowel.

The six-metre-long cranium and two jawbones were reassembled by a company in Drumheller, Alta., then moulded here.

Hunwick, who teaches sculpture at the Victoria College of Art and is being assisted by its students, said that luckily the crew didn't have to mould any vertebrae, although all the pieces needed repairs.

They were likely broken when the giant washed up on Prince Edward Island in 1987, or was buried above the tide line for later use. The carcass was dug up two years ago and the skeleton is going to the University of B.C.'s new Beaty Biodiversity Museum. It's being shipped April 7, and final installation will take a month.

The museum's official opening has been postponed until September, but the skeleton can be seen after mid-May, in its glass atrium.

Hunwick said the project has been challenging and fascinating, bringing together natural history, biology, artistic technique and engineering.

There were many surprises, such as the relatively tiny foot-long pelvic bones that resemble two boomerangs, and the large ossicles -- inner ear bones. About the size of a man's fist, they look like delicate seashells and help whales hear sounds 1,600 km away.

"They were very difficult to mould because of all this negative space," he said, pointing to the deep cavity.

Having the giant spinal sections in the workshop was a challenge, like working around four large buses.

The blue whale is the largest creature in the world, far bigger than was the largest dinosaur. This 26-metre specimen would have had a heart the size of a car and an appetite for about four tons of krill a day.

Project manager and master skeleton articulator Mike de Roos said it will be the largest skeleton in the world, "suspended without external armature. Other skeletons this size have been mounted, but require lots

of steel structure. We wanted something more natural."

Every single vertebra was broken and needed repairs, but he has managed to string them like pearls onto four invisible steel armatures in a flexing pose.

"I've learned a lot about putting a skeleton together. My first looked like a dead animal -- which it was.

"This whale will be in the midst of a huge lunge, a gulping, feeding manoeuvre with jaws open and tail up as it powers forward."

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