

## Monster Moby Dick chomped on whales

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**Scientists have reported the discovery of an extinct predator sperm whale with jaws and teeth so huge it probably hunted other whales not less than half its size.**

Named in honour of Herman Melville, the author of Moby Dick, *Leviathan melvillei* lived some 12 to 13 million years ago and was a 14-metre behemoth sharing top billing in the ocean food chain with giant sharks.

The prehistoric sperm whale gripped large prey with its interlocking teeth, inflicting deep wounds and tearing large pieces from the body of its victims, the researchers said.

Palaeontologists have long suspected that some such air-breathing monster once roamed ancient seas, but until now only a few gigantic teeth had turned up in the fossil record.

The new find in Peru's Pisco basin, reported in the British journal *Nature*, leaves no doubt that *Leviathan* existed, terrorising major marine fauna of the Miocene epoch.

Olivier Lambert of Belgium's Royal Institute of Natural Sciences and colleagues unearthed the animal's skull and jaw, lined top and bottom with teeth each as long and thick as a man's forearm.

"It must have eaten very large animals, and the most common prey at the site are baleen whales about seven or eight metres long. It was a super-predator," Mr Lambert said.

Present-day sperm whales are also formidable, deep-diving hunters.

But because their teeth are relatively small and restricted to the lower jaw, they use suction to ingest their prey, mainly squid.

*Leviathan* more closely resembles modern orcas, or killer whales - except it was three or four times as big.

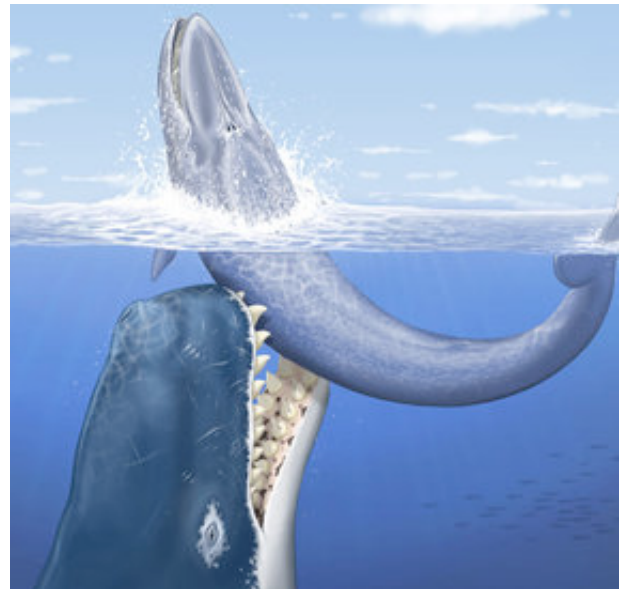
Its tusk-like teeth must have been very robust and resistant in order to hang on to a mega-prey trying desperately to escape, Mr Lambert said.

"Baleen whales have hugely powerful tails, and when they struggle the tension would be enormous for the predator in whose jaws it has been caught," he explained.

- AFP

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*An artist's impression of the giant whale, which researchers say gripped large prey with its interlocking teeth. (MNHN/Nature)*



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