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## **Five million year old baleen whales from the West Coast of South Africa**

Today, whales are quite an attraction along our coastline. A new study, recently published in *Australasian Journal of Palaeontology*, Alcheringa, confirms that baleen whales were also part of the biodiversity in the waters along our coast, between 5-7million years ago. These fossilised whale bones are significant because there are only a few whale fossils known from Africa.

Partnerships between academic institutions and museums highlight the value of museum collections in generating new knowledge. The research, on the fossilised whale bones from the Langebaanweg fossil locality (better known as the West Coast Fossil Park), about 120 KM from Cape Town, was conducted by Iziko Curator Cenozoic Palaeontology, Dr. Romala Govender; UCT palaeobiologist, Professor Anusuya Chinsamy-Turan; and whale biologist, Dr Michelangelo Bisconti from the Natural History Museum of San Diego, California. This collaboration forms part of a greater research partnership between Iziko Museums of South Africa and the University of Cape Town.

By studying the distinctive morphology of the distinctive ear bones (called the tympanic bullae) preserved from this site, the research revealed that these five million year old whale bones were very similar to fossil whales from the Mediterranean. It also indicated that they were baleen whales (like the humpback whale found along our South African coast). Previous studies by Govender and Chinsamy-Turan described distinctive tooth marks on many of the whale bones that were made by sharks as they fed on the whale carcasses.

Several seal and penguin bones were also recovered from this locality. Thus, already 5 million years ago whales, seals, sharks and penguins were part of the marine ecosystem

along the West Coast of South Africa. This is in stark contrast to the drastic changes in the biodiversity of the land flora and fauna over the 5-7 million year period.

**About Iziko Museums of South Africa (Iziko)**

*Iziko operates 11 national museums, the Planetarium, the Social History Centre and three collection-specific libraries in Cape Town. The museums that make up Iziko have their own history and character, presenting extensive art, social and natural history collections that reflect our diverse African heritage. Iziko is a public entity and non-profit organisation that brings together these museums under a single governance and leadership structure. The organisation allows \*free access to all individuals on commemorative days, (\*excluding the Castle of Good Hope and Planetarium).*

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