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SINGAPORE – When the skeleton of the dead sperm whale that washed up near Jurong Island eventually goes on display at the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, visitors could be treated to much more than a set of bones.

They could be using interactive tools to explore what is inside sperm whales' bodies, and watching videos of living whales and how the carcass was recovered after it was discovered on July 10.

The museum is looking to raise S\$1 million for the project and donations will go towards the preparation, mounting, exhibition and maintenance of the whale, it announced yesterday.

Two donations have already been made. The museum's main contractor Expand Construction is contributing S\$50,000, while Mr Joseph Koh Kok Hong and his wife, Mrs Koh Pei-fen, are contributing an undisclosed amount.

Mr Koh, a retired diplomat, is an honorary research affiliate of the museum and an expert on spiders. He and his wife, both 66, were inspired by the collective effort of the public, the museum team, government agencies and the media in retrieving the carcass for research and education.

The specimen would be a poignant gift to future generations, Mr Koh told reporters yesterday.

Expand Construction's deputy managing director Edwin Soh said it was a "good cause for us to take on". Both parties have previously donated to the museum.

Asked about the sum of money needed, the museum's deputy head Rudolf Meier said: "If you want to do a big exhibit, you don't just want to show a skeleton. You want to also show the recovery effort and you have to have media for that. You may want to have interactive tools to allow kids

IT WANTS VISITORS TO ENJOY INTERACTIVE DISPLAYS, VIDEOS

Museum hopes donors will make a whale of a difference



(From left) Mr Foo Maosheng, curator at Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, Ms Kate Pocklington, a conservator at the museum, and Mr Marcus Chua, also a curator, demonstrating to the media how they retrieved the sperm whale's discs, which are in between the vertebrae. PHOTO: LOW WEI XIN

HOW TO DONATE

● Donations to the sperm whale project can be made at lkcnhm.nus.edu.sg.

to explore the inside of the body of the sperm whale. And there are ways of doing this now very convincingly."

Professor Meier added: "But if ... you only have funding for just showing the skeleton, then it's a much less effective, a much less interesting exhibit."

The museum is also looking to hold a temporary exhibition of parts of the sperm whale — the first recorded in Singapore waters and the third in South-east Asia — before the full-fledged exhibit is ready.

It would be "a miracle" if the temporary exhibition could happen by this year, said curator of birds and mammals Marcus Chua.

Cleaning of the whale bones is 70 per cent complete, said conservator Kate Pocklington. The bones could be transported from Tuas Marine Transfer Station to the museum by the end of August, but it would still be "far from the display stage", said Prof Meier.

Unlike some other whale skeletons that have been preserved, the team is salvaging 30 to 35 discs, which are near the sperm whale's spine, although scraping the meat off is tedious. Among other steps, the bones have to be boiled and soaked in industrial degreaser.

It is not known what killed the 10.6m-long adult female whale, although it was likely to have been hit by a propeller.

Singapore's old Raffles Museum and National Museum were previously home to a baleen whale skeleton from around 1907 to 1974, when it was given to Malaysia's Muzium Negara. The skeleton, from a whale stranded in Malacca in 1892, is now with the Maritime Museum in Labuan, off Sabah.