

Dead whale found in waters here among most elusive of its kind

Little is known about the Omura's whale, described as new species to science in 2003

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The carcass of a whale found in the waters off Tanjong Pagar on Sept 6, 2025, has been identified as an Omura's whale, or *Balaenoptera omurai*, which is among the world's most elusive baleen whale species.

Its biology, population, habitat and ecology "are largely unknown or poorly known", Marcus Chua, assistant senior curator of mammalia of the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum (LKCNHM) at the science faculty of the National University of Singapore, told The Sunday Times on June 6.

He noted that the Omura's whale was described as a new species to science only in 2003, and scientists know so little about it that in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List classification of species extinction threat, it is listed as "data deficient".

There is no information about how many of these whales exist in the wild, and little is known about their migration patterns.

They are found primarily in warm and shallow coastal waters, across the Indo-west Pacific, including South-east Asian waters, the Indian Ocean, the north-west Pacific Ocean and Oceania, said

the museum.

The recovered whale, identified as a sub-adult male, was likely in its late teens, said Chua, adding that an Omura's whale reaches adulthood at about 20 years. There is no information about their lifespan.

When it was recovered in Singapore in 2025, the whale was missing half its body and measured about 6.3m. At full length, a 10.6m-long baleen whale would weigh about 5,000kg to 7,000kg when alive, he said.

Found in an advanced stage of decomposition, the whale likely died between several days and two weeks prior to discovery, he said.

The Sept 6 incident is the first record of an Omura's whale washing up in local waters.

And while Chua called it "unfortunate", he also said the recovery allows researchers to learn as much as possible about the cause of death and biology of the Omura's whale.

"This will allow us to contribute to the knowledge and conservation assessment of the species," he added.

He said identification of the whale was based on analyses of DNA and skull features. A portion of its DNA was a perfect match with the reference individual of the species, he told ST.



The skull of the Omura's whale whose carcass was found in waters off Tanjong Pagar on Sept 6, 2025. The mammal was likely in its late teens, and may have died of a ship strike. PHOTO: LEE KONG CHIAN NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

"The shape and arrangement of bones near the nose were also a match of the characteristic features of the Omura's whale," Chua said, adding that while they were clear identifying marks, they were rather "esoteric".

Injuries on the carcass were consistent with a ship strike, which

was the likely cause of death, said the museum. However, researchers had found that the whale was previously injured, with Chua noting that there was a fracture that healed.

"Life as a whale out at sea is tough," he said.

Once the whale carcass was re-

covered, degreasing works to remove oils naturally present in the bones began, said the museum. This was achieved with hydrogen peroxide and industrial heating equipment. If not removed, the natural oils can turn rancid and attract pests over time, it said.

It added that the whale's

2.6m-long skull was too large to fit into the museum's degreasing pots and had to be treated separately in a specially prepared tank.

Several bones also required multiple rounds of degreasing, with the skull undergoing six treatment cycles before the process was halted because of increasing fragility.

While most of the degreasing and defleshing works have been completed, oil is still present in some parts of the skull and will have to be treated locally, said Chua.

"People involved described the smell from the carcass as rotten salted fish and rancid oil," he said.

The smell changed from day to day, he noted, adding that the 34-strong staff wore standard personal protection equipment such as face masks, gloves, coveralls and safety boots.

"Some staff working on it put medicated oils or ointment on the insides of their face mask," he said.

During the recovery process, the right mandible, or lower jaw, of the whale dislodged and fell into the water, said the museum. It was recovered the following day.

The museum team will now have to put the whale skeleton together like a massive jigsaw puzzle, said Chua.

A museum spokesperson told ST that it aims to have the skeleton on display before June 2027. This coincides with the 120th anniversary of the first baleen whale being displayed at the Raffles Museum and Library in Stamford Road in 1907.

The spokesperson said the museum is seeking \$1 million to support the display of the skeleton and the development of an education programme for schools.

Contributions will also support ongoing research on Singapore's marine and coastal environments, she said.

The fund-raising link can be found on the NUS Giving site.

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