

BRUTAL DEATH OF A BLUE WHALE

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FOREWORD

As part of the growing awareness about environmental issues, Gabriel Iqbal has researched and campaigned in various corners of the world. He has organised and delivered lectures in Britain, India, Africa and the Middle East.

Iqbal was born in Kashmir in 1970 and migrated to England in 1990 to pursue his educational interests. He attained a BSc. (Hon's) in Biology and a Post Graduation in Science Education from the University of Leeds. He aims to continue his research in History and Philosophy of Science by gaining a doctorate. After year's of research and collection of source material Iqbal aims to publish his findings in a book titled, "**To Humanity**".

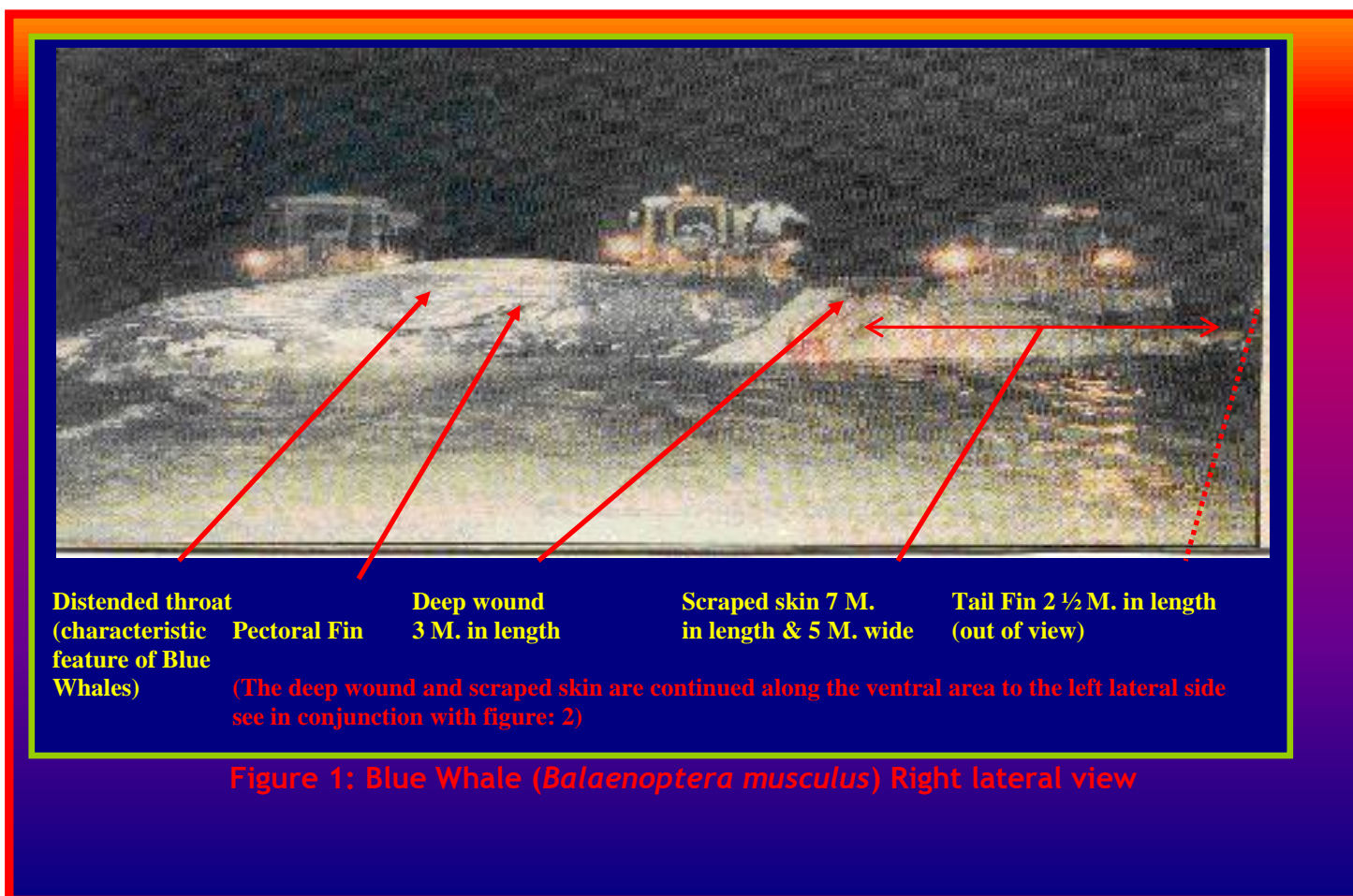
At about 6:00 P.M. on Thursday the 23rd of November 2000, I heard a flash news report on the radio stating that a whale had been swept off on the shores of Ajman, a small town situated in the west coast of United Arab Emirates.

Bearing a few rudimentary equipages for conducting an investigation, I immediately rushed on to the site. I spent a few hours examining the dead carcass of a young blue whale (see figure: 2). I had been searching for whales and dolphins within the waters of Emirates for a few months. Just the other week I had spent nearly 2 days to find them off the east coast of UAE. I ventured offshore as far as Lima Island in the Musandam Peninsula, in the Gulf of Oman, but nonetheless found no sign of any whales (see figure: 3). Least was I to know that my first experience of seeing a wild whale would be to see a dead one. I was full of emotion as my throat turned dry due to anguish at the scene of this dead whale. I started to identify, measure and investigate this magnificent creature. The first touch was an unforgettable experience, as I tried emphatically and sorrowfully to express my remorse and say sorry to its soul. While the tragic drama was revealing itself, I recalled the graceful motion and soothing songs of whales, which transcended my consciousness into an uncanny calm. How I wished if I could have seen it alive.

The blue whales (*Balaenoptera musculus*) belong to a family of whales known as the mysticetes, commonly known as the baleem whales. The baleem whales are

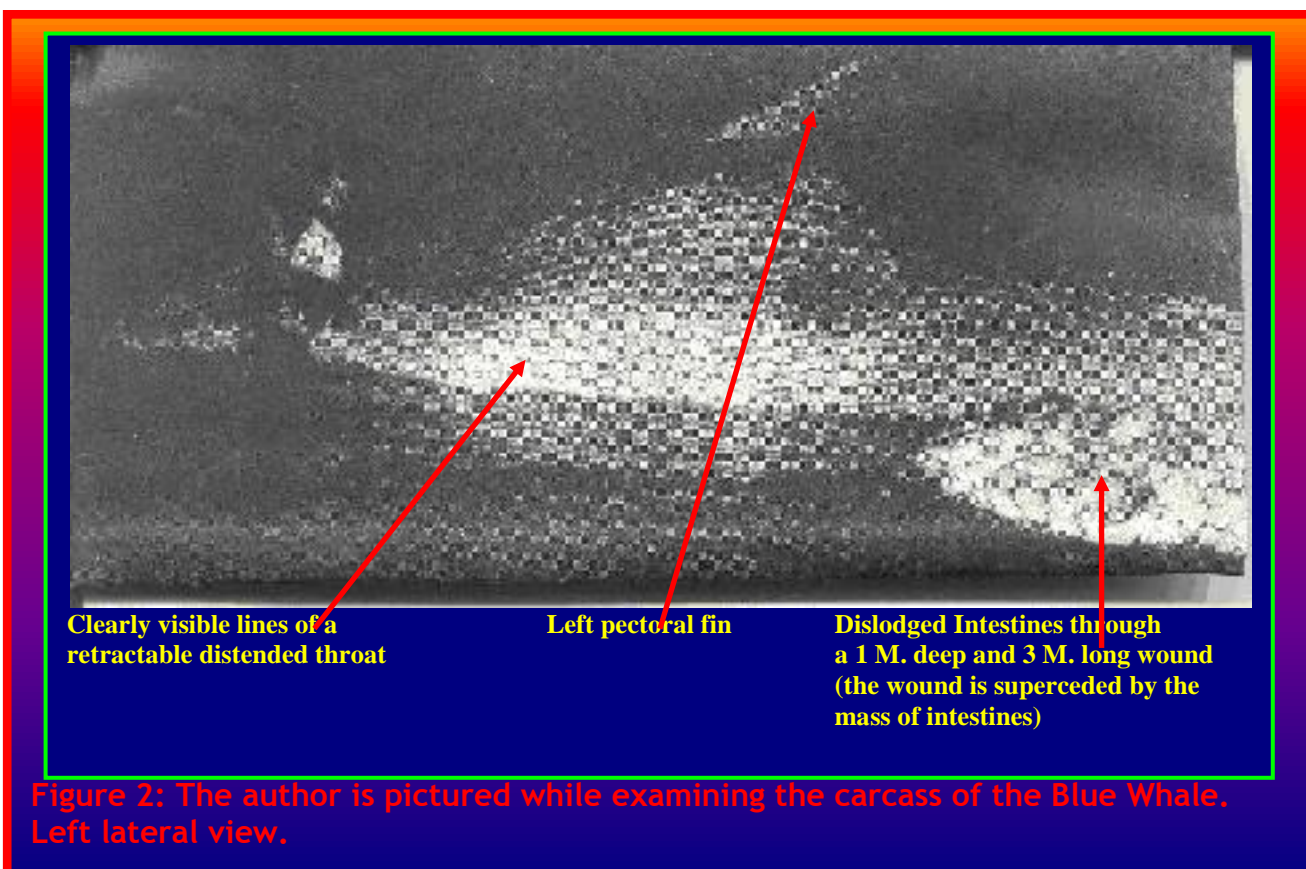
named after the comb-like plates of baleem, which are used by the whale to filter prey from the water. The blue whales major diet consists of large amounts of plankton, which they filter feed through their baleems. The baleem is estimated by scientists to hold an astonishing 60 tons of water and food (Baldwin, 1995). The blue whale that had stranded on the coast of Ajman had a distended throat that resembled a huge retractable elastic balloon (see figure 1 and 2). This retractable elastic throat is a common feature of blue whales.

The length of the blue whale was close to 20 meters. The world maximum length from the pre-whaling era is 31 meters (Baldwin, 1995). The tail fin was about 3 meters in length. The skin was ripped off like a fine large superficial chunk along most of its ventral and lateral sides starting from about halfway between the right pectoral fin all the way close to the tail fin. The length of the superficial scraped wound was about 7 meters. The width around from the left lateral side all along until the right lateral side was close to 5 meters. A deep wound of about 2 meters in length lay about 5 meters away from its left pectoral fin towards the posterior area of the left lateral side. The wound was about a meter deep and ran transversely along its left lateral side and became progressively less deeper as it proceeded towards the ventral area and then the right lateral side. On the left lateral side the deep wound had punctured its intestines and forced them to rupture out of the body cavity (see figure: 2). As the mass of intestines lay hanging out, the constituents of digested food were pouring out through lacerations within the intestines.



It is difficult to assess the cause of this fatal injury. Whales don't have any natural predators and usually die due to natural causes. Very rarely if ever do they get accidentally attacked by a white shark. As per my assessment the wound that I have described was not the resultant of a shark attack. There are no reports of big white sharks in the Arabian Gulf. The white shark prefers cooler waters. Our speculation leads us to believe that the injury was a resultant of a giant propeller blade from a large ship. The nature of the injury suggests an impact 5 meters away from the pectoral fin on the left lateral side continuing into the ventral side and disappearing into the right lateral side caused due to a menacingly propelling blade and then a superficial scraped cut all along the left and right lateral and ventral side ending half a meter away from the tail fin. The compelling evidence impinges upon us to postulate that the blade of the propeller had first punctured it and then ripped of its skin like a fine sword.

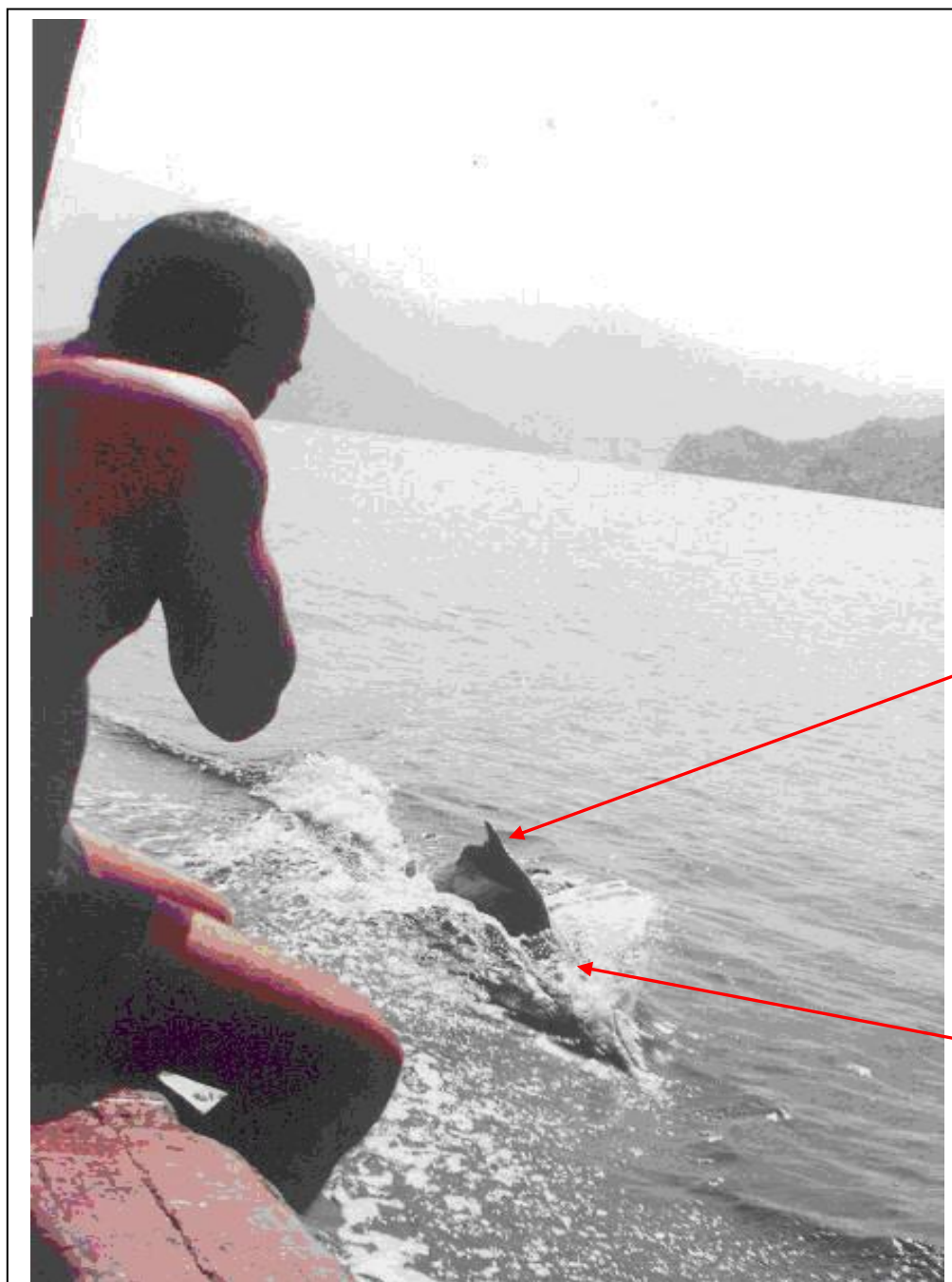
Whales are often seen performing around ships as they find them inquisitive. However the fate of this blue whale seems to have been drawn to an end by the suction created at the back of the ships propeller that could have drawn it in and cut it like a meat grinder and then thrown it away. Whales are highly evolved mammals and perhaps due to their superior sonar system can avoid moving into the direction of a menacingly rotating propeller. However this blue whale could have been a victim to an unfortunate array of unfavorable conditions. These unfavorable conditions could be: (1) impairment of sonar system due to an infection; (2) loss of speed and maneuverability due to decrease of muscular function caused by overall weakness as a result of high toxicity levels; (3) and if the tide was also working against it, it could have be an added factor in drawing it towards the propeller.



Whales and dolphins are highly evolved mammals. Due to similarity in many features, the whales and dolphins are classified under a common group called *Cetaceans*. In recent times the *Cetaceans* nemesis has been commercial whaling and accumulation of toxins due to increased levels of environmental pollution by modern man (John, 1994; Joseph, 1996). Due to high fat content, the *Cetaceans* act as reservoirs for accumulation of environmental pollutants induced by human activity, such as petrochemical substances, heavy metals (mercury, cadmium, lead), radioactive elements (uranium, plutonium) etc (John, 1994; Joseph, 1996). The high fat content acts as reservoir for the substances mentioned and hence prevents them from being readily hydrolyzed. Some scientists have already investigated this fact and have classified the *Cetaceans* as “nuclear dumps” (Dudley, 1999). Evidence indicates that nursing *Cetaceans* transfer the mentioned pollutants to their offspring’s through their milk. (John, 1994)



Figure 3: The author is depicted while prospecting for Cetaceans around Lima Island, off Musandam Peninsula, in the Gulf of Oman.



The picture clearly depicts the large **Hump** under the dorsal fin of the dolphin. It is believed that this hump acts as a conductor of heat so that the animal may regulate its body temperature by dispersing the extra heat generated in the warm waters of the Arabian Gulf.

The **Blowhole** is a common feature of cetaceans. It is a respiratory organ used like a snorkel.

Figure 4: The author is observing the behaviour of Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphins in Khor Sham, in the Musandam Peninsula of Oman. Very little is known about the behaviour of these resident pods that are often seen in the shallow waters of the Musandam Fjords.

The local fisherman call the whales as *Hout* and the dolphins as *Fima*. As per my conversations with the local fishermen, they consider the *Hout* and *Fima* to be signs of good luck and hence they honor their presence. My acquaintances with the local fisherman indicate that they do agree that there has been a drastic decline in the populations of *Hout* and *Fima*. I had the pleasure of meeting a 75 year old man called Muhammad Al Ghaneem, a local fisherman from an east coast town in UAE called Khorfakkan. Mr. Ghaneem is an almanac on the history of UAE's *Cetaceans*. His testimonials bear the fact that only 20 to 30 years ago the *Hout* and *Fima* used to be a common sight off the coasts of UAE, however now they are very rare. Mr. Ghaneem stated that during the winter season the *Hout* and *Fima* used to roam around close inside the Bay of Khorfakkan. He further remarked that it has been over 20 years since he has seen such a scene.

The blue whale is the largest animal to ever inhabit the earth. As a biologist I feel that we have missed a good chance to study the possible causes of this whales death. If we humans consider ourselves to be civilized then perhaps we must reevaluate the manner in which this issue was dealt with. Are we to see them die in such a deplorable way? Is it perhaps possible that a grill around propellers could avoid such accidents? International laws that limit the amount of pollutants to be expelled into the environment must be strictly reinforced (Nybakken, 1995). The awe-inspiring blue whale is a gentle giant and must be protected or else future generations may know of them as we know the dinosaurs. International laws for the protection of whales must be reinforced at all levels (Nybakken, 1995; Dudley, 1999). Due to human activities the whales have become a threatened species. Time is an impending factor and change is necessary. Public awareness and the resultant opinion is the key to initiating the change that must come.

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