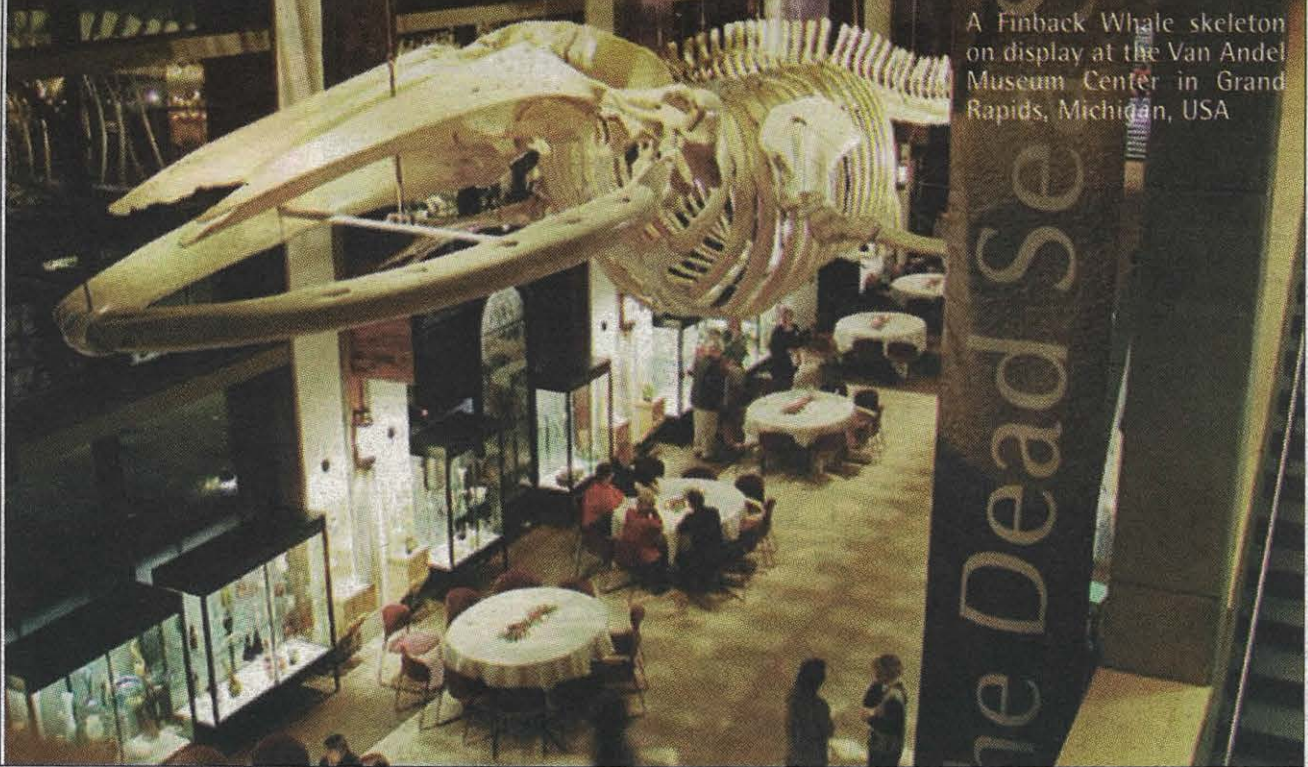




A Finback Whale skeleton on display at the Van Andel Museum Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

A whale of a problem

The death of the Bryde's whale stranded off Sabah's coast has left state fisheries and museum officials wondering what to do next with its carcass

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KOTA KINABALU: A task force to rescue stranded marine mammals in Sabah waters is being proposed as state fisheries and museum officials are mulling what to do with the carcass of the Bryde's whale.

The carcass is now anchored in a net in the open sea.

Sabah Fisheries Department director Rayner Stuel Galid said the 20.6-m long carcass was wrapped in 35m-long nylon netting and towed to a sheltered spot in the South China Sea during a eight-hour operation that ended at 1am yesterday.

He said state officials were deciding whether to leave the carcass to decompose naturally and to allow sea creatures to feed on its flesh or to take it back to land and "de-flesh" it.

"De-fleshing it will make the skeletal remains more manageable to handle," said Rayner who personally supervised the operation to wrap the

whale carcass with the netting and towing from a reef near Pulau Tiga to the open sea since Wednesday.

Meanwhile, Universiti Malaysia Sabah Borneo Marine Research Institute director Prof Dr Saleem Mustafa said that by allowing the Bryde's whale carcass to decay in the sea was a preferable alternative than taking back to shore to be buried.

He said the Bryde's whale carcass could take up eight years to decay, based on the institute's experience with a 6.1m Cuvier's beaked whale recovered in Tuaran near here in 1997.

Dr Saleem said the skeletal remains of the beaked whale that was now on display at UMS was only recoverable two years after it was buried in the sand.

He said UMS vice chancellor Datuk Dr Mohd Noh Dalimin would be meeting Chief Minister Datuk Seri Musa Haji Aman on a decision as to how the skeletal remains of the

Bryde's whale should be preserved.

He said the stranding of the Bryde's whale in shallow waters near Pulau Gaya on Dec 14, its subsequent rescue a day later and discovery of the carcass at almost the same spot on Dec 17 had raised interests about marine mammals.

In this regard, Dr Saleem said the time had come for the setting up of a task force for the rescue and rehabilitation of such animals as well as guidelines for their rescue.

"We also need a crowd management arrangement. Turning away onlookers is not a good idea as there is natural curiosity when a rare animal of such a size appears.

"Moreover, some in the crowd could be volunteers should be welcomed," he said in adding that there was also a need for guidelines for conducting post-mortem on the carcass and methods of its disposal.