

PLOD ESSAY:

WONTHAGGI'S WAS BIGGER; Whales Watching in Wonthaggi

A small article in the *Argus* on 23 April 1955 was headlined "Wonthaggi's was bigger!" The previous day the *Argus* had featured a 69-foot whale washed up on the beach near Anglesea, but many Wonthaggiens wrote in with memories of *their* 75-foot whale that washed up on Wreck Beach on 4 July 1923. The article says it is one of the largest whales ever seen in Victoria.



We in the Historical Society can attest to the fact that Wonthaggiens have long memories, but one of the reasons the Wreck Beach Whale is such a fond memory is because the jawbones of that whale still stand on the verandah of Taberners Wonthaggi Hotel. According to the article, "They are almost 20ft. high and 15ft. wide." It goes on to say that, "hundreds of visitors have carved their names and initials on the bones, which are one of the 'sites' of the town."



Two days after the whale washed up on the beach in 1923, the *Powlett Express* reported, "I Monster whale was washed ashore on the beach at 'The Wreck' about four miles from Wonthaggi. It was first noticed by Mr J.P. Collins, Manager of Alex.

Scot and Co.'s property, who was mustering cattle in the vicinity. He was surprised to see such a huge monster lying on the beach. It was apparent that the whale, which was of the sulphur bottom variety, had been washed in during the recent



heavy gales. Some idea of the magnitude of this monster can be gauged by the following measurements: He measured 74ft. 6in., the width of the tail was 13ft, circumference 35 ft and the mouth – which is large enough to take a bullock – was 17ft in diameter. The remains have already been tampered with, but claims for anything of this nature found on the beach must be made to the Fisheries Department."

(Hmmm... I wonder if the person who procured that back bone and used it as a chopping block for many years before depositing it in the Railway Museum had permission from the Fisheries Department.)

The *Argus* gave a slightly different report and set of measurements when they reported the whale on 7 July one day after the *Express* report, "A whale, 72ft long and 9ft in girth was washed up at Coal Creek, Cape Paterson."

They said that, "Hundreds of people are going out daily from Wonthaggi to see it, and large crowds are intending to visit the scene at the weekend. Sharks are plentiful around the dead monster."

Whales have been a part of our coastal environment from time immemorial. The only thing amazing about the whale at Wreck Beach was the size of it, not that it was there. Over the years the papers have reported incidents involving whales. On 25 November 1940, a truly extraordinary site was reported in the *Argus*: "Watchers from the foreshore at Cape Paterson yesterday afternoon saw a unique battle between a huge whale and three or four thresher sharks a quarter of a mile from the shore. The sharks could be clearly seen as they hung like bulldogs to their prey. Time and time again the whale heaved its huge bulk three-quarters out of the water in a effort to dislodge its attackers. Each time a spray of water shot up like a mine, but nothing could shake off the

sharks. After an hour and a half he was still moving slowly around the coast with the sharks hanging on tenaciously.”



Here is another one from the Argus in 1955, headlined “Dying 21 ft Whale ‘anchored’ in creek.” It said that a dying whale was anchored in the main channel at Pound Creek in Anderson’s Inlet by fisherman Albert Treadwell to prevent it washing up on the beach below his home.” The final sentence of the article says it all: “When the wind and tide are favourable, the monster will be released to float back to the ocean to decompose on somebody else’s beach.”



Ever since the environmental effects statement published by the government to justify putting the Desal Plant where it is, stating that “there were virtually no whales in the area and it was not significant habitat (the EES said only a couple of whales had visited the area over the last five years)”, citizens of the coastal towns have set up a whale watch because they knew it couldn’t be true.

In 2010, the first year of the watch, 42 separate whales were sighted within 10 kilometres of the desal site. In 2011 Watershed Victoria say they have received reports of around 100 whale sightings off the Bass Coast so far this winter.

“They first seem to start appearing in the western entrance of Western Port Bay, between Cowes and The Nobbies, out near the penguin area and then they seem to be working their way around the coast. The local charter boat operator has been sighting them for many, many years,” Mark Roberston says.

He says anecdotally, numbers of whales in the Bass Coast area seem to be increasing.

“There have always been whales around here. People have sighted them for years, mainly people who are on the beach regularly, the beach walkers, the fisherman, a lot of surfers, but the last couple of years there seem to have been very common, passing through and hanging around quite a bit.”

Despite the efforts of whale watchers, in February 2012, the Federal Environment Minister, Tony Burke, rejected calls for a comprehensive survey of migratory whales in the waters off the Bass Coast.

