

Scientists figure out how largest animals on the planet got to be so big

By Nicola Davis, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.26.17

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A humpback whale, a type of baleen whale, breaches. Photo by: Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary/Wikimedia Commons

The blue whale is as long as an airplane. Its heart is the size of a car. The blue whale's tongue weighs as much as an elephant.

The massive whales are part of the baleen whale group. The whale group contains the largest animals on the planet.

The whales haven't always been this large though.

A few million years ago, these whales were likely only 6 to 10 feet long. Today they are three times that size. Scientists say they might know why the whales grew.

They say it has to do with the way whales eat. It is likely that food became easier for the whales to get to. Whales eat small fish. They also eat tiny shrimp called krill.

Whales Became Larger Over Time

Graham Slater is a scientist. He is part of a team that studied the whales.

The team studied 63 baleen whales. They looked at some skulls of whales that are no longer living. They also studied 13 types of whales that are living.

Then, they looked at the whale family tree.

The scientists wanted to know when these whales lived. They also wanted to know how big they were. This helped them see when the whales started to become bigger.

They found that it was not just the largest whales that became bigger. Even small whales became larger over time.

The Gigantism Trait

Scientists think this size change took many million of years.

Unusually large size is a trait. Animals get traits from their parents' DNA. The trait of huge size is called gigantism.

Scientists think gigantism in whales happened because of changes in the water movement. The water movement pushed cold water with nutrients toward land. This caused sea life to live in clusters. With food in one place, it was easier for whales to eat.

Important Research

Olivier Lambert is also a scientist. He did not work on this whale study. Still, Lambert said this research is important. He says it helps us understand what is happening now.

The future is a little scary for baleen whales. They could be harmed by climate change. Climate change means changes in the Earth's temperatures. These temperatures can affect the oceans. They can kill off the prey whales eat.