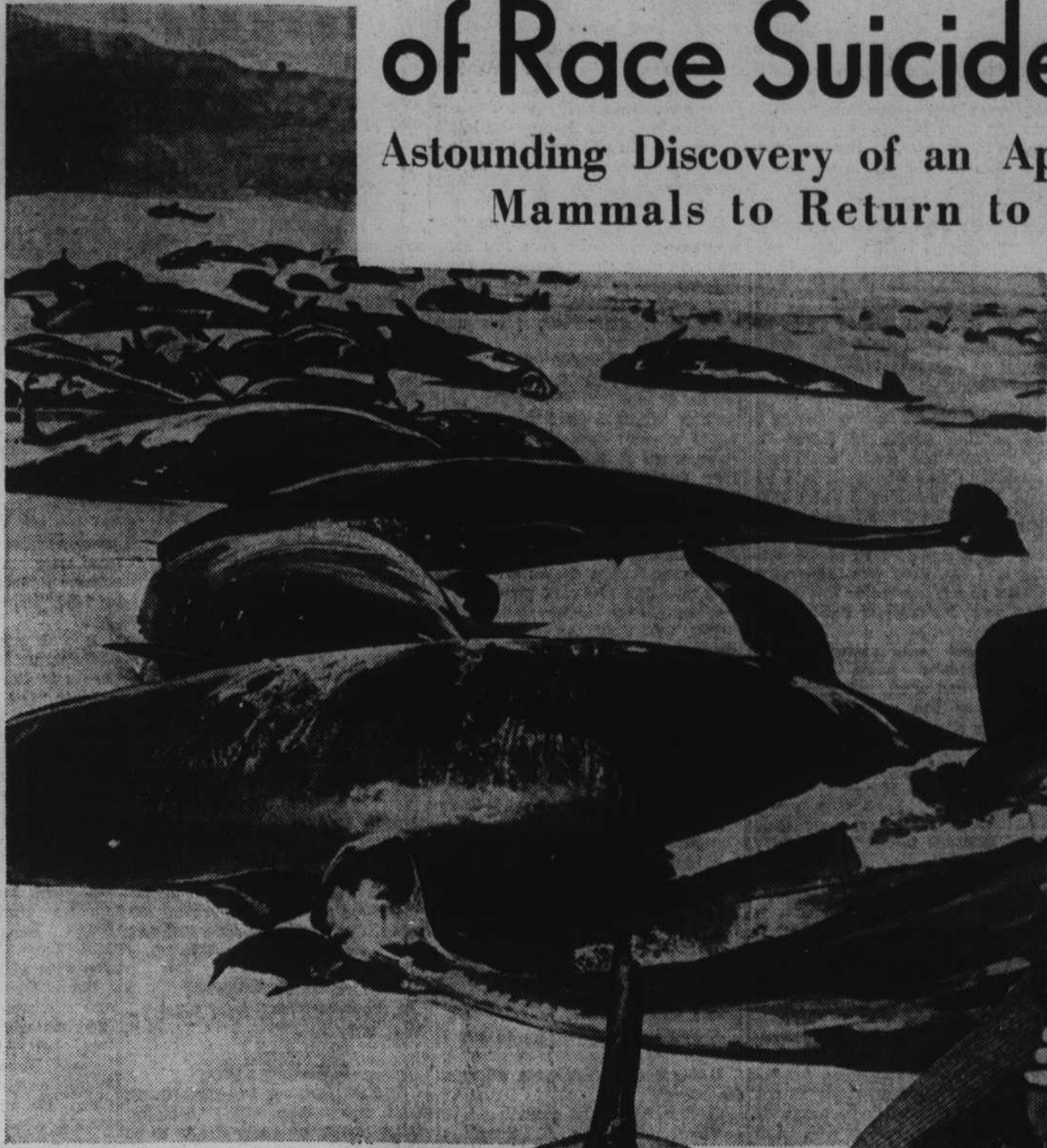


# Science Puzzling Over a New Epidemic of Race Suicide by Whales

## Astounding Discovery of an Apparent Desire of Sea Mammals to Return to Land That Was Once Their Home



Part of a Huge School of False Killer Whales Stranded and Dying on the Beach at Kommetjie, Near Cape Town, South Africa, Where They Had Cast Themselves.

By Lawrence G. Green  
Author of "Great African Mysteries"

"WHALES are hurling themselves onto the rocks at the Grotto—hundreds of whales," said a voice over the country telephone line. It sounded incredible. I drove 50 miles northwards up the coast from Cape Town, struggled through heavy sand to the spot.

The sand and the rock pools were red with the blood of 300 dead and dying whales. Some lay breathing stentorously under the sun. Round others the greedy seabirds were crying and settling for the feast.

"They came in suddenly through the breakers, leaping over the rocks," a farmer told me. "It was a determined dash, and those that survived the battering threw themselves on and on, until they reached the sand. Not one tried to return to open sea. They made tremendous efforts to jump over all obstacles—something drove them on shore. I would never have imagined such a thing if I had not seen it."

The farmer is one of few men who have seen the death agony of the False Killer Whales, a thing which no scientist can explain. Scientists, when they heard of it, hurried to the lonely beach. Among them was G. W. Rayner, marine biologist of the whaling research ship, *William Scoresby*. He related the few, weird facts that are known about False Killer Whales.

It is, in spite of its name, a true whale—a miniature whale, perhaps, but nevertheless a mammal that suckles its young and belongs to the great family of cetacea. All whales are not giants, and the False Killers, like the pilot whales and the killers, may be classed with the dolphin group.

In the second century, the Greek writer Oppian declared:

"This other excellent deed of the Dolphins have I heard and admire. When fell disease and fatal draws nigh to them, they fail not to know it but are aware of the end of life. Then they flee the sea and the wide waters of the deep and come aground on the shallow shores. And there they give up their breath and receive their doom upon the land. . . . Excellence and majesty attend them even when they perish, nor do they shame their glory even when they die."

Scientists, however, saw no reason to accept this "excellent deed" as a fact until the year 1927. Until then, the False Killer Whale was regarded as an extinct species. A fossilized skull had been found in the Lincoln-



A Biologist from the South African Museum at Cape Town Examining the Teeth of a Dead Whale on the Rocks at the Grotto Beach, Fifty Miles North of Cape Town, Where Three Hundred False Killers Deliberately Came Ashore to Die.

shire fens late last century. Then in 1927 a school of about a hundred whales was stranded on the coast of Scotland. British Museum officials were staggered by the discovery that these whales were of the identical species represented by the skull.

The False Killer Whale thrust itself for the first time on the attention of a world entirely ignorant of its presence. Then only were marked differences between the killer and the False Killer discovered. The killer is conspicuously marked with creamy patches over the eye and along the

flank. The False Killer is black all over. Both species have formidable teeth. These are to be expected in the killer, which attacks larger whales and tears away the blubber for food. In the False Killer, feeding on cuttlefish and squids, such large teeth are remarkable.

A great deal of research was done, but the mystery of the stranding itself did not arouse much speculation at the time. Since then, however, False Killer Whales have been racing to death in

Once Their Home



Marine Biologists Assert That the Rudimentary Knuckles and Finger Bones of the Whale Proves That These Animals Once Lived on Land. At Left Mr. P. Stammwitz, the Famous Explorer, Exhibits the Knuckled Flipper of a Whale.

mass suicide on beaches as far apart as South Africa, Zanzibar and Tasmania, and forced science to take heed. For even the largest of the cetacea (whale species) are often stranded, and heretofore those strandings have been regarded as accidents.

On Christmas Eve, 1928, about a hundred False Killer Whales (note the similarity in numbers to the Scottish stranding) flung themselves on the beach at Kommetjie, near the Cape of Good Hope. Kindly people tried to save the lives of a few of the smaller whales—six and seven footers—by dragging them back to the sea. The whales would have none of it. No sooner did they recover the use of their powerful bodies than they leapt once more to the beach. Repeated attempts were made to carry out this fantastic "life-saving," but it was evident that the whales preferred the beach.

The False Killers revealed no signs of illness. They were not cast ashore by heavy weather, for it was a calm night with no wind.

First and most obvious is the possibility of the leader of the school finding itself in surf or shallow water, losing its head, and leading a flurried rush in the wrong direction. But I found one lying far up on a sandy beach a full mile from the rest of the school at the Grotto. It was plain that it had followed no leader and that it had not been swept there by the tide.

An interesting idea, advanced by one scientist who linked the two South African strandings, was this: the sea once covered large areas of the Cape Peninsula, including both the narrow



Dead and Dying Whales on the Rocks Along the South African Coast Where They Came Ashore Again After the Natives Had Put Them Back in the Water.

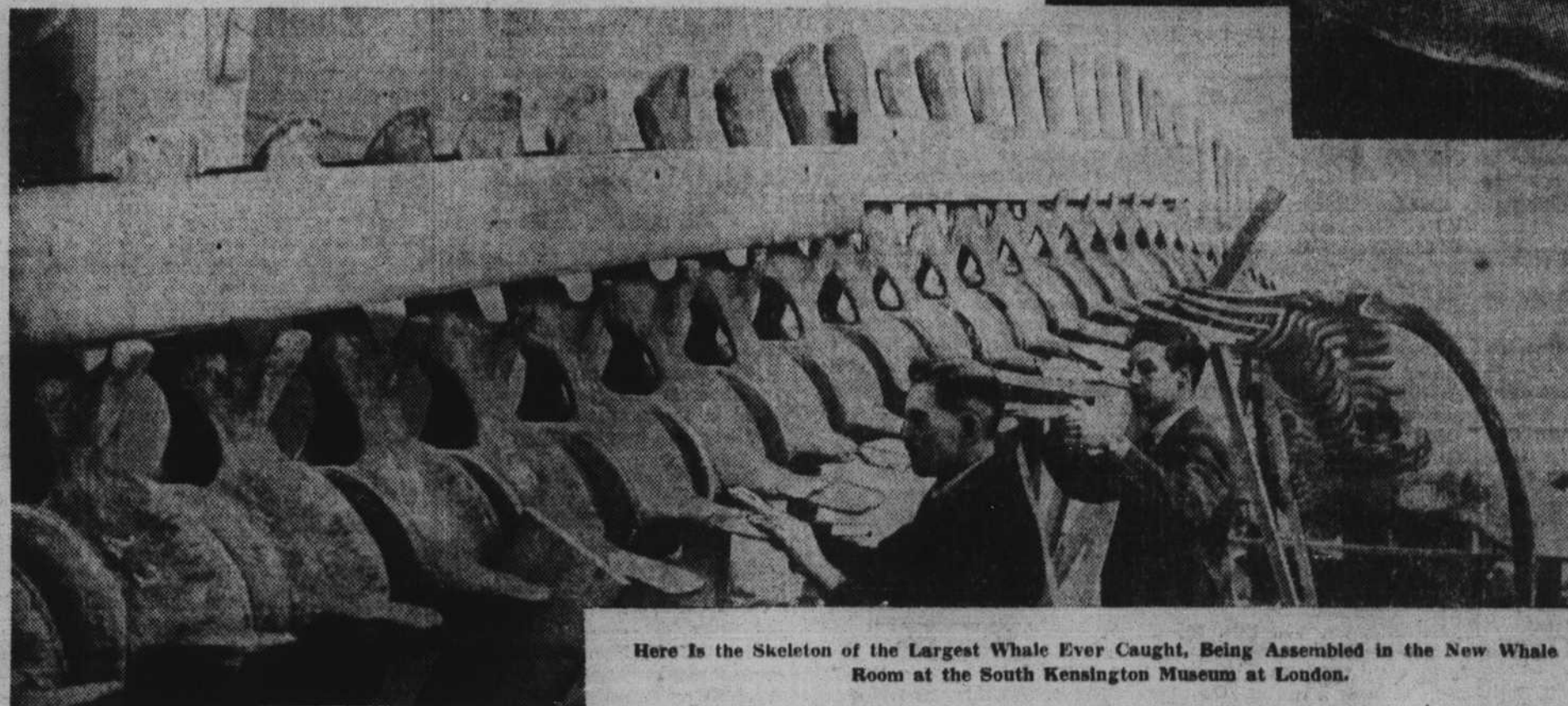
neck of land at Kommetjie, and the low coast where Grotto beach lies. The leaders of the two lost schools might have been seeking an old passage, an ancient sea route followed by schools of long ago. Whales do not find their way round the world by chance. They pass on their knowledge as an instinct to their young.

It must not be forgotten that eels migrate all the way across the Atlantic, from Europe, to freshwaters of America, to spawn and die. When the young have reached maturity, they are guided by unerring instinct back across the Atlantic to Europe, where they remain until it is their time, too, to spawn and die.

And we have the cases of the salmon of the Columbia River which surmount incredible obstacles to make their way to the headwaters which they left as young, to reproduce.

Science would have to revise the whole doctrine of the preservation of the species if a suicidal instinct—even

The Eel Manifests a Mysterious Inborn Instinct to Travel Across the Ocean to Spawn and to Die.



Here Is the Skeleton of the Largest Whale Ever Caught, Being Assembled in the New Whale Room at the South Kensington Museum at London.

in the smallest insect could be proved. No; animals on land or in sea do not commit suicide, however foolish the manner of their death may seem. The lemmings, which plunge into the sea by the thousands, doomed to die because they cannot swim, are driven by instinct to regain the element that was the natural home of their ancestors before they evolved into land mammals.

Whales once lived on land; the inner whale still displays rudimentary knuckles and finger bones. So that if we say the False Killers were merely returning to the earth where their ancestors once wallowed, we may be as near the truth as any baffled scientist.