



July 24, 2013

Whale of a celebration in the season of hunting Big Fish

ISLAMABAD, July 23: In the midst of our daily diet of stinking 'Big Fish' caught by NAB, or FIA or the media, the biggest one landed, of all the places, at the Pakistan Museum of Natural History here on Tuesday.

Naturally, the event provoked a big celebration, with cultured people applauding, **led by UNESCO's deputy chief Dr Qian Tang.**

"The specimen belongs to the world. For me, this is very special," an excited Prof Manzoor H. Soomro, Chairman of Pakistan Science Foundation, said presenting the catch to the distinguished gathering. "Not even the best natural history museum in the world has a wholly preserved Whale Shark specimen," he added.

Big screen LCD televisions, huge wall-size posters and dramatic music made the inauguration of the fish a little more interesting. Tiny blue lights shined on the fish to create a sea-like display.

The whale shark was a rare species and declared vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). It was specified as whale not just because of its size but also because of its feeding habits that resembled with whales.

Found alive but motionless in the Pakistani waters of the Arabian Sea in February last year by the people of Gora Bari fishing village, the 40-foot-long and 16-ton whale of a fish was the biggest specimen recorded yet, according to the Pakistan Museum of Natural History (PMNH).

It was 50 years old when captured off the coast of Karachi and died while being dragged towards the shore.

Once on the shore, it was skinned and the skin sent to the PMNH for preservation. The process lasted almost 18 months after which the specimen was mounted on the bone cage for display, with the help of UNESCO.

It is hoped the display would prove education and be popular with children. Dr M. Rafiq, the director of the zoological science division at PMNH, who oversaw the long preservation process, explained the difficulties faced in separating fat and other biological material from its four-inch thick skin, to restoring it to its three-dimensional look.

"We had the expertise to preserve the whale shark but no specimen of this category before. Its huge size was the biggest challenge," said Dr Rafiq, explaining how PMNH had dedicated the second floor of the building to display the ocean life.

The setting would be such that visitors walking in would feel as if they were under water. The entire project cost Rs2 million.

According to Dr Rafiq, the whale shark flesh was a delicacy mostly in the Taiwanese restaurant trade. And its liver oil has been used for treating boat hulls and as a shoeshine.

“That is why the species has become extremely vulnerable to hunters who have reduced it to a rarity, though the exact number of the whale shark in the world oceans is not known,” said Dr Rafiq.

The whale shark is found in the tropical and warm oceans. Their habitats are open seas off the coasts of South Africa, Western Australia, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Philippines, Mozambique and Tanzania.