

The deaths of two sea giants a mystery, for now, and may be linked

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Beachgoers gather around an oarfish that washed up near Oceanside, Calif. This rare, snakelike creature measured nearly 14 feet long. According to the Catalina Island Marine Institute, oarfish can grow to more than 50 feet, making them the longest bony fish in the world. AP Photo/Mark Bussey

LOS ANGELES — Two enormous snakelike fish washed up on Southern California beaches last week. The rare finds have puzzled and excited scientists who know little about the creature that inspired sea serpent legends.

The oarfish remain mostly mysterious to researchers. They've only been seen underwater a handful of times. They are deep-sea dwellers, and what little is known comes from the few dead ones that have washed ashore.

“If all you knew about deer was roadkill ... how much would you actually know about deer?” said Milton Love, a research biologist at the Marine Science Institute at the University of California. “That’s kind of where we are with oarfish.”

The 18-foot giant found off Santa Catalina Island on Oct. 13 was among the largest oarfish reported in nearly 20 years. A 14-foot fish beached in Oceanside on Friday was cut open and

examined by scientists on Monday.

A Creature Fearsome Of Face

Love said he believes that the deaths of the two fish are probably linked. The most likely cause was a current that carried the creatures from still waters into a more turbulent area near the shore. Oarfish are weak swimmers who aren't adapted to surviving in rough water.

The oarfish looks much more fearsome than it really is. The serpentine, silver fish is toothless and heavy, with weak, flabby muscles. It glows slightly underwater. A ribbon-like fin along its back waves as it sucks down plankton and jellyfish, said Russ Vetter, a biologist. Vetter was one of the biologists who examined the 14-foot fish as it was cut open.

Samples of the fish will be divided and sent to laboratories around the world. Scientists will examine them to look for clues about the creature and its habitat. Its eyes, gills, heart and liver will be studied. Its genes will be studied to understand the fish's evolution. The scientists will examine its ear bones to determine its age.

Tissue from the fish's body will be tested for toxins. The data from those tests, which could indicate low oxygen levels in the water, will be examined as they become available, Vetter said.

But, results from the research could take years to complete, scientists said.

"People from all around the world are desperate for a piece of tissue," Vetter said.

Photos Surfacing On Internet

Staff members at the Catalina Island Marine Institute considered burying their 18-foot oarfish carcass, which was too large to refrigerate. But experts at the Natural History Museum said the bones are too fine. They would be crushed by the weight of the sand, said Jeff Chace of the Marine Institute. The fish was divided among various research institutions because there was so much interest, he said.

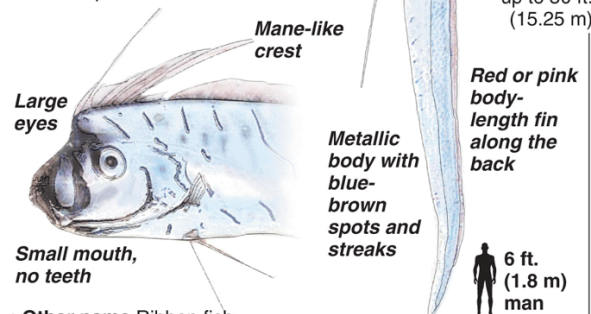
The institute, which educates about 40,000 children a year, hopes to keep the skeleton on display, he added.

"One of the neat things for kids is the unknown factor," he said. "These discoveries are happening all the time, and it gets kids excited about science."

Cellphones and social media are leading to new discoveries in marine biology. With more people snapping cellphone photos and posting videos of "strange fish and fish doing strange things," both the public and scientists are more aware of these rare events, said Philip Hastings, who works at the Scripps Marine Vertebrate Collection at the University of California.

Exotic oarfish

With its surreal, elongated body, misshapen head and red, body-length dorsal fin, the rarely seen oarfish has been the subject of sea serpent tales.



- **Other name** Ribbon fish
- **Scientific name** Regalecus glesne
- **Weight** 100 lb. (45.4 kg) or more
- **Depth range** Down to 3,000 ft. (915 m)

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Graphic: Los Angeles Times

- **Habitat** All temperate or tropical oceans
- **Diet** Zooplankton, crustaceans
- **Predators** Oceanic whitetip shark

“Everyone has a cellphone with a camera on it,” Hastings said. “Social media allows us to distribute those, and get information back to scientists.”

As photos of the huge fish have made their way across the Internet, many theories have been offered as to why they died. One claim is that an oarfish dying is a sign of a coming earthquake.

Experts, however, stressed that they have not yet pinpointed a cause of death.

“With a rare event like this, it is a bit troubling, but it’s a total mystery,” Vetter said.

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the article that provides the most evidence that oarfish are a mystery to scientists.
- 2 How does the text say an oarfish is like a ribbon?
 - (A) They are shaped similar to a ribbon.
 - (B) They have a curled fin like a ribbon.
 - (C) They are brightly colored like ribbons.
 - (D) They have a ribbon-like fin on their back.
- 3 Scientists will discover toxins in the water by studying the oarfish's:
 - (A) gills
 - (B) heart
 - (C) tissue
 - (D) genes
- 4 Look at the diagram and answer the question. What evidence does the drawing provide that the oarfish are not threatening to humans?
 - (A) They weigh the same as humans.
 - (B) They are not as tall as humans.
 - (C) They do not have any teeth.
 - (D) Their predators are sharks.