

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release
October 20, 2003

10,500 Year Old Pleistocene Beluga and St. Lawrence Gas Team Up to Benefit SLAEC

Massena NY --- For the first time ever in New York State, a fossil white beluga whale skeleton was unearthed near Norfolk while a local farmer was digging a pond back on August 23, 1987. The once in a lifetime discovery – a late Pleistocene female white beluga whale – was indigenous to the Champlain Sea which covered northern St. Lawrence County and southern Ontario and Quebec provinces in the Pleistocene era.

Under the direction of SUNY Potsdam Geology Professor William T. Kirchgasser, Ph.D., a positive identification of *Delphinapterus leucas* was made. Scientifically dating the sixty three bones, teeth and matter found at the site proved the whale lived around 10,500 B.P., thus confirming the beluga's existence in what was the Champlain Sea in Norfolk.

Since nearly the aquarium's inception, a set of replicated bones were earmarked to be displayed as an exhibit. And now, NYSM #5095, as she is referred to in geological circles, the beluga whale will be recreated and displayed at the new aquarium. Visitors to the aquarium will learn about this incredible fossil discovery by partaking in a state of the art hands-on exhibit courtesy of St. Lawrence Gas of Massena.

Fossil Dig is the interactive exhibit where visitors will be able to experience discovering fossils by brushing away sand and dirt from the cast bones. The exhibit gives the visitor an actual sense of taking part in an archaeological dig. Young and old will be encouraged to sift through time and bring prehistoric fossils to the surface of the exhibit.

Julia Rose, Interim CEO of the aquarium states, "After meeting with representatives of St. Lawrence Gas, we felt a natural connection with the fossil. The opportunity to resurrect the story of the beluga's discovery and the importance of fossil fuels in modern times creates an intriguing link between the past and the present."

Rose adds, "There are local kids and adults who are too young to recall the

discovery 16 years ago. Through the generosity of St. Lawrence Gas, this important part of our local history will reach a new audience. We feel the out of town visitor will be surprised to find that this region was covered by a small sea in prehistoric time. That is sure to renew the interest in the beluga's discovery as well as showing people the magnitude of saving our current St. Lawrence white beluga whale."

The prehistoric mammals retreated to the Atlantic Ocean when the glacial melt covered the region with fresh water. According the Professor Kirchgasser, the modern white beluga whale is an Arctic species, but still travels into the St. Lawrence – about as far as the tidal regions near Quebec City. Teaching the general public about the modern day beluga is important as their numbers are dwindling. The population of the whale in the St. Lawrence was around 5,000 in 1900. Commercial and sport hunting of the whale was outlawed in the 1950's, but the presence of chemical pollutants and other contaminations have contributed to their decline. It was last estimated in the mid-1980's that the population was as small as 500 white beluga whales in the St. Lawrence River which signifies the risk of a total loss of the whales in the region.

The St. Lawrence Aquarium and Ecological Center promotes awareness of the St. Lawrence River watershed through research, education and interpretation. For information about the aquarium, telephone 315-769-0787 or www.slaec.org on the web.

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Photo opportunity: Plaster casts of Pleistocene Beluga at SUNY Potsdam

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