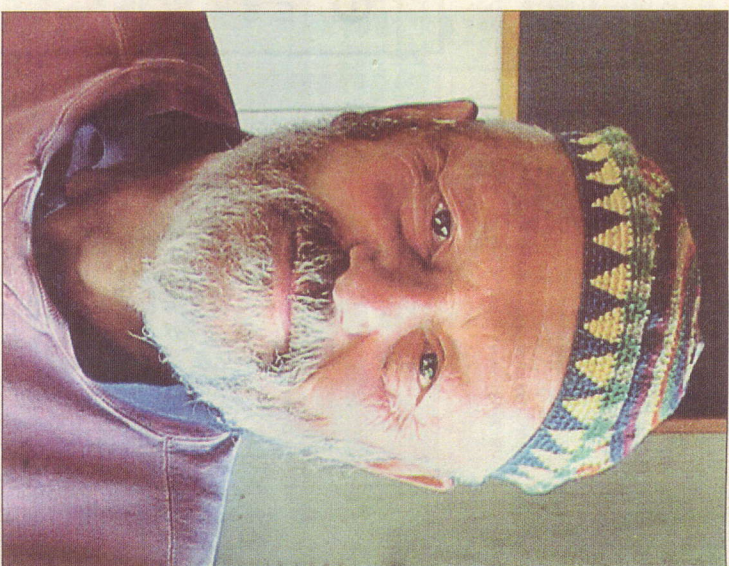


# Quebec



MICHEL PETERSON PHOTOS

Human skulls obtained from a dealer are just a part of the creepy but fascinating collection at the Skeleton Museum run by biologist Pierre-Henry Fontaine, right. The collection also includes a dinosaur skull and many marine mammals from the St. Lawrence River.



# No bones about it . . . museum has a message

## Collection focuses on conservation

## Skulls include whales, humans

MICHEL PETERSON SPECIAL TO THE STAR

LEVERTE, QUE—Boiling skulls in a vat might sound like something out of a Brothers Grimm fairy-tale.

Yet on any given summer day on an island in the middle of the St. Lawrence River, Pierre-Henry Fontaine gets out a big pot, throws in a few bones and starts cooking.

"Sometimes, I have to boil them for two weeks to get them completely clean," says Fontaine. "But if I have enough

time, I prefer to put a whole carcass in an unused freezer out back and let it rot until the maggots pick the bones clean."

Despite the gruesome nature of his duties, it's just another day on the job for Fontaine, a biologist and author of the book, *Whales of the North Atlantic*.

After retiring from teaching in 1996, he took his passion for whales and opened a marine museum on Île Verte, a 10-kilometre-long spot of dirt south of Rimouski and north of Rivière-du-Loup, on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River, opposite Saguenay National Park.

Now, his Musée du Squelette (Skeleton Museum) has expanded and includes bones from many other mammals. Its purpose is to educate visitors on the importance of environmental

## Just the facts

- Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park: [www.parcs-nada.gc.ca](http://www.parcs-nada.gc.ca) or [www.parcs-squebec.com](http://www.parcs-squebec.com)
- General information: [www.illeverte.net](http://www.illeverte.net) (French only) and [www.quebec-maritime.gc.ca](http://www.quebec-maritime.gc.ca)
- Skeleton Museum is open from May to October. Admission is \$5.

## stewardship.

"Have you ever killed a whale?" he asks visitors, who invariably answer no.

"Are you sure?" he says pointing to a photo of a whale with a stomach clogged full of plastic bags. "You have never let a plas-

## tic bag blow away?"

It's all part of his lesson on how small actions can have big environmental consequences.

Fontaine has a good point. Île Verte is within the Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park, Quebec's first marine conservation area. It covers the north half of the St. Lawrence Estuary as well as two thirds of the Saguenay Fjord.

Each spring, once the waters are free of ice, whales migrate here to feast on the swarms of krill and plankton carried up-stream in the deep icy saltwater from the Atlantic.

From the smallest (the harbour porpoise) to the largest (the blue whale), 13 different species of whales inhabit these waters.

Visitors are regularly reward-

ed with sightings of fin whales, belugas or dolphins — even while standing on shore.

Yet, despite the creation of the marine park, the whales of the St. Lawrence are struggling. Fishing, industrial pollution and collisions with any of the 20,000 ships that pass through here each year, all present risks.

So when the inevitable happens and a dead whale washes to shore, Fontaine springs into action and gathers its bones for research.

He's even been known to climb inside and disappear halfway into the carcass of a blue whale for the sake of science.

"It's the only way to examine the heart and other organs," he explains.

When he can't get enough carcasses to examine through natural sources, Fontaine goes hunting among the bone dealers.

His most expensive acquisition? A dinosaur skull purchased four years ago for \$1,500 (U.S.). "It was a steal at half-price," he says. Other acquisitions include the skull of a Stella Sea Cow, first discovered in 1720 and hunted to extinction by 1764.

"Humans are not attached to one prey," he explains, simulating the smashing of a seal skull. "Historically, when one species became extinct, we just moved on and eliminated another."

His museum even contains human skulls — and they're not all replicas. Many come from Oklahoma-based Skulls Unlimited, the world's largest dealer in le-

► Please see **Bones**, K17