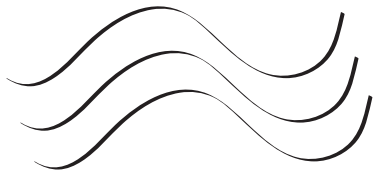


THE NARWHAL

Solving the mystery of the “unicorn” whale!



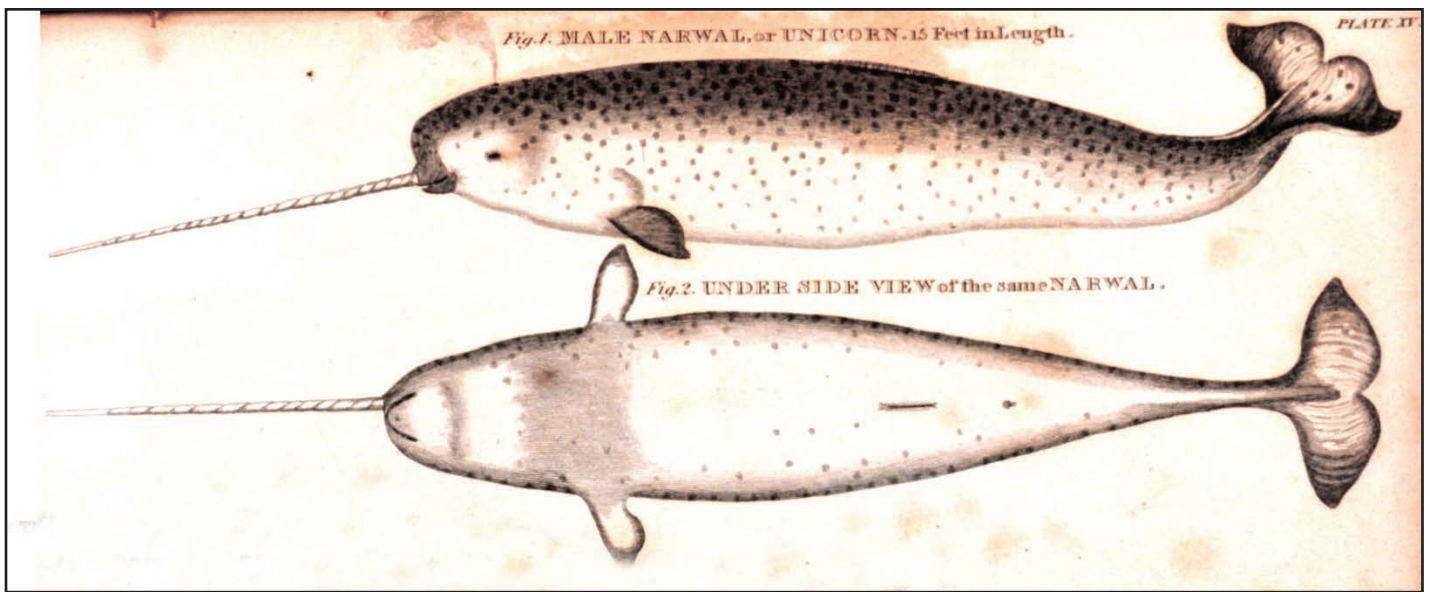
The narwhal, or the “unicorn whale” is one of nature’s most mysterious animals. It lives in the arctic waters of the North Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of Canada and sometimes as far as Greenland and Russia.

It is famous for its single tusk, or “unicorn”, which sticks out just above its mouth. The tusk is even stranger because it’s not centered on the whale’s head; it is offset a little to the left.

The tusk is made of the same material as its teeth, and it’s actually considered to be an extra tooth. It grows out to almost eight feet long and has a spiral shape.

There are no other mammals that have anything like it. Some mammals, such as walruses and elephants, have tusks, but none are as strange as the narwhal’s. It has a spiral shape and is hollow on the inside. About one in every 500 narwhals have two tusks, but most narwhals only have one long tusk on the left side, and a much smaller tooth grows in on the right side.

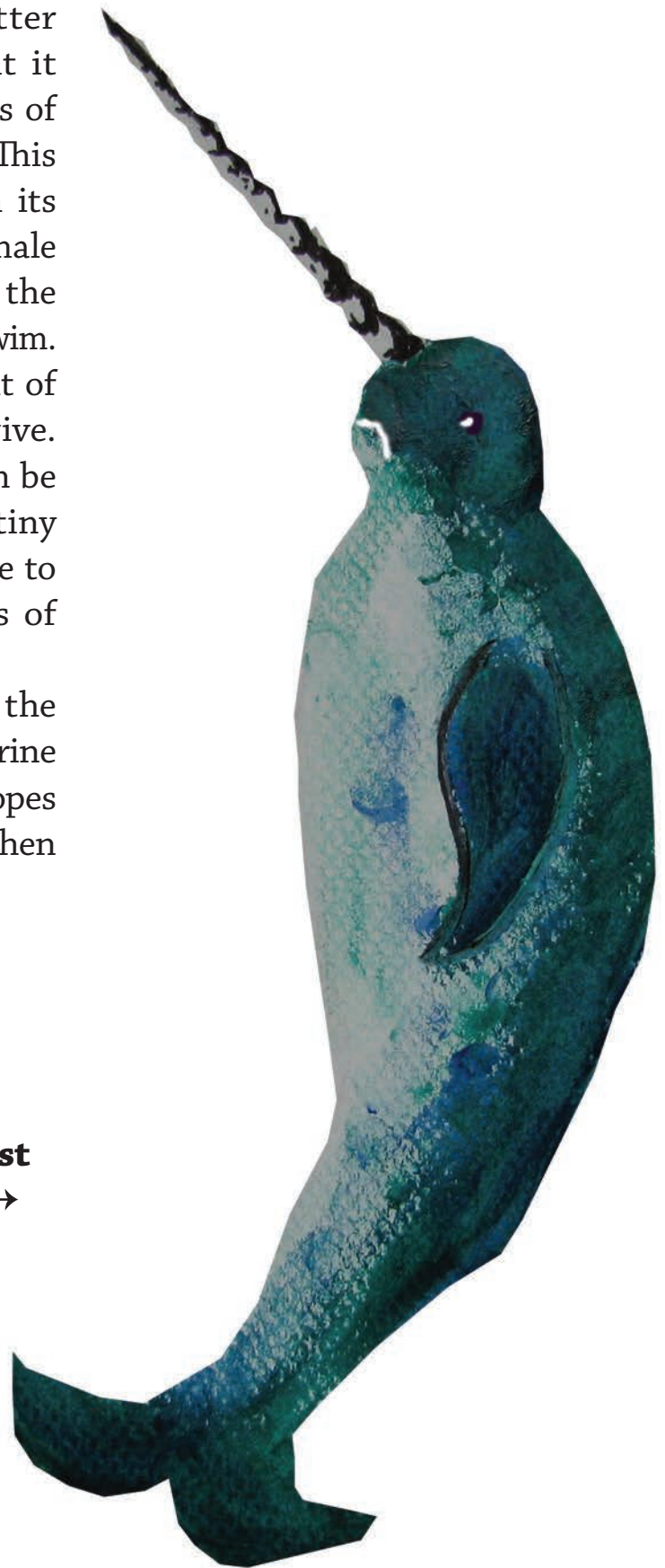
The whales have been seen using it to compete with one another, but the tusk is actually more than just a tooth. Until recently, no one has been sure why the animal has this tusk. A group of scientists from Harvard University’s School of Dental Medicine made a →



discovery that has helped to better understand the tusk. They found that it has a very complex system with millions of nerves and sensors running through it. This allows the narwhal to detect things in its environment. Scientists believe the whale can use it to detect how much salt is in the water so it knows where it's safe to swim. Ocean animals require a certain amount of salt in the water for them to survive. Scientists also believe that the tusk can be used as a hunting tool. It can sense tiny particles in the water, which may be able to help the narwhal recognize what kinds of fish are swimming nearby.

Not everything is understood about the narwhal yet, but dentists and other marine scientists continue to study its tusk in hopes that it will help us learn how to strengthen our own teeth.

Answer the questions on page 3 to test your understanding of this text. —→



RESPONSE QUESTIONS

- In what part of the world do most narwhals live?
- Why is the narwhal's tusk unlike any other animal's tusk?
- What is another name for the narwhal?
- What was an important discovery that scientists recently made about the narwhal's tusk?
- Name some of the ways that the tusk is helpful to the whale.
- Can you think of any unanswered questions about the narwhal?