

Endless quest for ancient sea monster

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By A.K. Whitney, Staff writer

Marine biologist Clyde Roper has never seen a living giant squid. But it's not for want of trying.

Known as the Smithsonian's "Cephalopod man," Roper has taken countless submersible rides, to depths of almost half a mile, in search of the creature said to grow as long as a school bus, weigh about 1,000 pounds, and have eyes the size of hubcaps.

"This is not just some overgrown calamari," said Roper, who is giving a speech on his favorite elusive creature at a Giant Squid Party Friday at the Aquarium of the Pacific as part of Smithsonian Week in Long Beach. The Squid Party also features a squid puppet show and a performance by Gregg Young and the Second Street Gang.

But Roper doesn't need to feel bad about not finding the giant creature. No one has ever seen a live giant squid, though people have seen their dead remains, in nets and washed up on beaches.

And it is that very elusiveness that has ensured that people would wonder about the giant squid for millennia.

Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote about the giant squid, which he called teuthos. And giant squids are probably the inspiration for many sea monster tales told by drunken sailors once they were

back on land.

In the 19th century, Jules Verne had a giant squid try to crush Capt. Nemo's submarine in ``20,000 Leagues Under the Sea." And in the late 20th century, Peter Benchley's ``Beast" -- a vengeful 100-foot squid -- made diners afraid of their plates of calamari.

But the drunken sailors, Benchley and Verne have actually given the giant squid a bad rap, Roper said.

``Those stories of battles are very fanciful," said Roper, adding that giant squid are not vicious creatures. ``I wish (giant squid) were a little more curious."

In his zeal to find the legendary cephalopod, Roper has even been known to enlist the help of its archenemy, the sperm whale.

``The sperm whale had a camera mounted on its head," said Roper of a memorable excursion, when he and fellow scientists got several sperm whales involved in their search for the giant squid. ``We called it the `critter cam.' "

The idea behind enlisting whales, Roper said, is that, since squid are its favorite snacks, a whale would know where to look.

(Scientists, Roper said, have gotten some of their knowledge of giant squids from examining the content of a sperm whale's stomach. They have also been able to estimate a giant squid's length from tentacle sucker marks left on whales' bodies. Now that's a hickey to remember.)

In other words, it's sort of like using a pig to find truffles, except the sperm whale is not on a leash, and it would be mighty hard to persuade it to not eat the squid once it has found one.

But how on earth does one get a whale to cooperate with such a

project?

“Very carefully,” quipped Roper, but then provided a clearer explanation.

First, scientists go to where sperm whales like to hang out. Then, two scientists, in a small inflatable raft, sneak up on some unsuspecting creature, which usually measures more than five times the length of their raft. The “critter cam” is on a platform about 2 feet long and attaches to the mighty marine mammal's cranium with a suction cup. The purpose behind the suction cup? It feels to the whale like a squid tentacle's sucker, Roper said, and is therefore not too bothersome.

The whale then dives, and the scientists wait. And wait. Finally, the critter cam dislodges itself from the whale's head and bobs to the surface. When this happens, the scientists seize upon it and hope for the best.

But how do they know the camera will come back at all?

It might not, but sperm whales tend to return to the spot where they first dove, so it's a fairly safe bet.

Unfortunately for Roper, the camera-equipped behemoths failed to find a super-sized meal during the expedition.

But he refuses to give up hope, a hope that has spurred his 35-year career at the Smithsonian.

Actually, Roper has his older brother to thank for his current obsession.

A native of New Hampshire, Roper loved the water and animals and spent his teens working on a lobster boat. But when it came time to start college -- at Transylvania University in Lexington,

Kentucky -he decided to major in philosophy. His brother, who, according to Roper, had known since birth that he wanted to be a dentist, was the one who gently pointed out to his little brother that there was a field known as marine biology.

Roper changed his major to biology, and in 1966, got his doctorate from the Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences.

The same year, he got hired at the Smithsonian, and has been there since.