

# Debris from Japan tsunami washes up on B.C. shores

*Tofino mayor finds sock, toothbrush; items arriving sooner than expected*

**Denise Ryan, Vancouver Sun, 12-29-11**

Beachcombers in Tofino have noticed a significant uptick in debris of Japanese origin on their shores, a sign that items swept out to sea by the tsunami in Japan may have found their way to B.C. earlier than expected.

"In or around Dec. 5th the first item or two of some consequence was found," said Tofino mayor Perry Schmunk. "Some lumber came ashore that had Japanese export stamps on it."

On Christmas Day, Schmunk and his family were walking the beaches of Schooner Bay in Pacific Rim National Park Reserve when they made what he calls an "eerie" find, each marked with Japanese writing: a toothbrush and a baby's sock.

Schmunk said he felt intuitively that these personal items might be tied to the tragedy that occurred in March 2011, when a magnitude 9 earthquake triggered a tsunami leaving an estimated 20,000 people dead.

"If what we're finding is tied to the tragedy that occurred last March, it's not just litter."

Schmunk has carefully pre-served the toothbrush and sock, and hopes to set up a website to document each item, no matter how small, that may be personally significant or bring comfort to a loved one in Japan.

Jean-Paul Froment of Tofi-no's Live To Surf shop has also been cataloguing found items possibly tied to the tsunami - lumber, water bottles, a can of glue - on his website, Liveto-Surf.com.

While it's normal to find occasional items of Japanese origin on the windswept shores of Vancouver Island, Schmunk said what they have found since early December has been "significantly more" than normal.

"There has been speculation as to whether it is or isn't tsunami debris; this is a wake-up call for us to be prepared for the volume and some potentially serious issues," he said.

If the Japanese debris arriving on the West Coast is tied to the tsunami, it's no surprise to oceanographer Curt Ebbesmeyer, who predicted in November that some of the 20-million-tonne debris field may land on our shores sooner than expected.

Ebbesmeyer ran a simulation with a buoy and found that the first of the debris could be arriving right about now, although the majority of it isn't expected until 2014.

Howard Freeland, a scientist with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, predicted tsunami debris would begin to arrive around two years after the tragedy.

He is hesitant to confirm these latest finds as the beginning of a tsunami-related deluge.

"Flotsam from Japan has always washed up on the coast here. ... If plastic bottles washed ashore how would we know it is tsunami debris?"

Julianne McCaffrey, spokes-woman for Emergency Management B.C., said there have been many different guesses among the scientific community as to exactly when, and where, the tsunami debris will land.

Most scientists have predicted the debris, which weighs in at millions of tonnes and is roughly equivalent in size to the state of California, will land on the Pacific Northwest coast within two years of the tragedy.

Timing and volume will depend on ocean currents, sinking and winds.

McCaffrey said a provincial tsunami debris coordinating committee will begin meeting in January to determine how to deal with the potentially massive amount of debris.

"We've reached out to the Japanese consulate, Public Safety Canada, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and Environment Canada," said McCaffrey.

In most cases the federal government has jurisdiction over water and shoreline, and if debris washes up over the high tide line, local authorities would take responsibility, he said.

If hazardous materials or human remains are found, that would fall to provincial authorities to deal with.

As for items of personal, symbolic and cultural value, or that may belong to victims or survivors of the tragedy, McCaffrey said authorities will be looking to the Japanese consulate for guidance. Mayor Schmunk believes that whatever comes ashore in the coming months, whether it's a water bottle of Japanese origin, a piece of wood or a child's sock, should be handled with care and catalogued.

What looks like detritus could be more than a haunting reminder of all that was lost; even the smallest personal item, a gift to be returned.

"People could reconnect through some of these things," said Schmunk.