

The little boat that could -- a story of survival

Lori Dengler, Eureka Times-Standard, 4-12-13

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Two weeks ago, I wrote about tsunami debris for tsunami preparedness week. A boat, a dock and a piece of a temple had recently shown up on Oregon and Washington beaches but, at that time, no debris had been seen in California that could be definitely linked to the 2011 tsunami. That changed on Sunday. Around 9:30 p.m. I got a text: "We just had a Japanese fishing boat 20 ft or so wash up on south beach..." It was from Cindy Henderson, the Emergency Services Coordinator for Del Norte County. She knew it was Japanese from an inspection sticker that could barely be seen beneath the coating of marine organisms.

"You've got to see this," was Cindy's comment the next morning. That was all the enticement we needed. Troy Nicolini (National Weather Service), Sherry Constancio (California Department of Water Resources) and I headed north. Our purpose was to look for information that could help decipher the boat's story, and perhaps link it to the Japan tsunami. Just finding debris with Japanese characters is not conclusive for a tsunami origin. Unfortunately, there are many sources of debris and some of it has Japanese characters -- flotsam and jetsam from Japanese fishing fleets or West Coast aquaculture operations. To tie this boat to the March 2011 tsunami, it needed to be traced back to the owner to see if it had been swept away by the tsunami.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is the lead U.S. agency for both marine debris and tsunami debris. NOAA is officially designated to keep track of, and help to reunite tsunami debris with owners. But NOAA doesn't have local staff that can quickly check out every possible tsunami debris sighting. We were assisting with the leg work, and kept close contact with NOAA marine debris program staff.

The boat was unique -- I had never seen anything like it before. The interior of the 21-foot panga-style boat (an open fishing boat common in Asia and the developing world) was covered in spaghetti-like goose-necked barnacles. These barnacles are common in coastal areas throughout the Pacific -- floating in ocean currents until something solid like a piece of wood, a buoy or a boat passes by to adhere to. The boat had spent most of its voyage floating upside down as the hull was barnacle-free. Imagine an overturned "Life of Pi"-sized boat with its odd load of barnacles dangling from 15 to 20 inch long necks peacefully floating across the ocean.

While the barnacles were quite a sight, they couldn't link the boat to the tsunami. They did indicate the boat had been adrift for a long time, as they were enormous. The clues to the boat's origin were beneath the marine mantle. Inspection stickers linked it to Iwate, one of the three prefectures hardest hit by the tsunami. But it was the hand painted characters on the side that proved the gold mine. We quickly found several volunteers to translate -- and they read Takata High School. A quick search for Takata High School in Iwate Prefecture lead to Rikuzentakata, a city I had visited in May 2011 on a post-tsunami field investigation.

NOAA contacted the Japanese Consulate in San Francisco and is following the official protocol in identifying the boat. However, the world of social media moves far more quickly. I have a number of Japanese colleagues and have followed Rikuzentakata's Facebook page for some time. It didn't take long for Rikuzentakata officials to see the photos I had posted on the Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group's Facebook page and find a teacher from the school who identified the boat.

That seems like the end of the story and a neat solution to a little mystery. But for me the link starts a second and much more powerful chapter. Now the boat has a context, ripped violently from a quiet dock where the high school kept its boats, along with many inhabitants of the city. It is far more than a curiosity -- it is a

physical reminder of those awful minutes and hours when the tsunami struck and a lesson about the power of a tsunami. It goes far beyond “cool” and sends shivers up my spine. It came from a place where I have visited.

We have much in common with Rikuzentakata -- a beautiful coastal setting, reliance on coastal resources and a similar fault system. We have had Japan-style earthquakes and tsunamis in the past and will have them in the future. The only way to survive a great tsunami is to be away from the area where it hits. The earthquake shaking is the warning and knowing how to get to high ground is the solution. North Coast Communities, one by one have developed plans and evacuation routes. Saturday, it's the community of Manila's turn. At 10 a.m., the Manila tsunami siren will signal a mock earthquake (in a real great earthquake, the shaking will be the only warning) and I hope everyone who lives, works, or plays in Manila will take the route that will lead most quickly to safety. This is the most important lesson of our surprising Japanese visitor.