

**‘ALL SIGNS THAT IT HAD BEEN DRIFTING FOR ALMOST EXACTLY 10 YEARS WHEN IT LANDED AT LONG BEACH. VERY LIKELY, IT ORBITED NORTH PACIFIC GYRES MULTIPLE TIMES.’**

John Chapman, Hatfield Marine Science Center



# GHOST

# BOATS

COURTESY OF ROB WALTEMATE  
A boat heavily encrusted with marine life washed ashore in Long Beach in March 2021. It was determined to be a ghostly reminder of the Japanese tsunami that struck almost exactly 10 years earlier. It was one of two very similar 10-meter utility vessels that came ashore within a month of one another after a decade at sea.

## Drift odyssey still concluding a decade after great tsunami

Now and then, the Pacific gyres deliver living passengers

By CURTIS EBBESMEYER  
*Beachcombers' Alert*

On March 11, 2011, the nation of Japan was shaken by a 9.1 magnitude earthquake. Centered 231 miles northeast of Tokyo, the quake — the largest ever recorded in Japan — caused a tsunami with 30-foot waves that devastated the Sendai region and damaged several nuclear reactors in the area. Ten years later, a 31-foot fiberglass boat washed ashore near the town of Long Beach. The boat “was suspected of having been washed away from Japanese shores during the tsunami and had been adrift since that time,” emailed Russ Lewis after a beach cleanup along Leadbetter Point.

“There was some Japanese lettering in two locations,” Lewis continued. “John Chapman, a marine scientist, came up from the Hatfield Marine Science Center in Newport, Oregon, to sample the attached marine species that generally consisted of pelagic gooseneck barnacles, a small number of pink barnacles, and pelagic oysters. The boat was demolished and then hauled to a local landfill.”



In 2013, Leanna Reuss of AmeriCorps, Travis Haring and Bruce Kauffman of Willapa Bay Shellfish Lab examined a small boat swept to sea by the Japanese tsunami.

Said Chapman, “It is clearly a Japanese Tsunami Marine Debris (JTMD) boat. There were dead oysters on it and we also found dead plus live *Megabalanus rosa*, a strictly Asian barnacle. There was no scrape or wear that would indicate it was beached and then washed back into the ocean after the initial event. There also were no signs that it had an outboard on it when it was swept

away and all the drain ports were open, so it came off the land. It wasn’t tied to a float or dock. Finally, there were no identifying plates or marks. I bet it was abandoned in a Japanese boatyard. All signs that it had been drifting for almost exactly 10 years when it landed at Long Beach. Very likely, it orbited North Pacific Gyres multiple times.”

James T. (Jim) Carlton, director emeritus of the Williams College-Mystic Seaport Maritime Studies Program and founding editor of Biological Invasions, emailed to say, “We have registered about 170 derelict vessels that we believe are likely linked to the March 2011 tsunami — these have been found at sea or have landed in North America (Alaska to California) and in the Hawaiian Islands (out to Midway).”

### 6,000 years ago...

In 2009, in our book “Flotsametrics and the Floating World,” coauthor Eric Scigliano and I wrote of derelict vessels which drifted from Japan across the North Pacific Ocean. Forty years earlier (1965), Betty Meggers, eminent anthropologist at the Smithsonian Institution, published an inspiring account in *Scientific American* of Japanese derelicts which 6,000 years ago drifted from Japan

See Drift, Page B4



OBSERVER FILE PHOTO  
A small boat that washed ashore in Long Beach in March 2013 displayed a registration number from the area of Japan struck by the tsunami. This one was added to the collection at the Columbia River Maritime Museum.

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