Our Ocean Backyard

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Lost at Sea

While crossing the North Pacific under less-than-ideal conditions in November 2020, two different large container ships from China headed for Long Beach, lost a total of 1,900 very large steel boxes. Gone overboard with all of their contents. Could have been computers, smart phones, microwave ovens, bicycles, skis, clothes, shoes, or any of a number of other products. And with roughly 226 million shipping containers moving around the oceans every year, there are going to be a few of these lost. In fact, a lot more than a few.

Where do these giant steel Legos end up and what about all the stuff inside? Depending upon how tight these boxes are sealed, they may float for a few hours or weeks. Robert Redford’s 2013 movie, *All is Lost*, is a film about a man alone in a sailboat running into one of these floating containers in the middle of the ocean.

Ultimately, these all of these containers end up on the seafloor, somewhere. But before they finally sink, many disgorge their contents into the sea. Some things float, athletic shoes and plastic bath toys, for example, but most stuff sinks, which reminds me of a wonderful poem, well I think it’s wonderful, by beat poet Gary Snyder, from his days as a merchant seaman crossing the Pacific in the 1960s.

“*Scrap brass, dropped off the fantail, falling six miles*”, which is the description of the long trip to the seafloor for some metal dumped off the stern of the ship he was on while sailing over the deepest spot in the Pacific Ocean, the Mariana Trench.

The inventory of contents from lost container is a bizarre snapshot of our consumption habits today, items often found on beaches where much this collection of floating debris becomes flotsam for beach combers: baby oil, Yeti coolers, urinal mats, flat-screen TVs, fireworks, IKEA furniture, French perfume, yoga mats, motorbikes, hockey gloves, printer cartridges (yeah, lots of printer cartridges), lithium batteries, toilet seats, Christmas decorations, barrels of arsenic, bottled water, cannisters that explode to inflate automobile air bags, an entire container of rice cakes, thousands of cans of chow mein, half a million cans of beer, cigarette lighters, fire extinguishers, liquid ethanol, packets of figs, sacks of chia seeds, knee pads, duvets, the complete household possessions of families moving overseas, flyswatters printed with logos of college and professional sports steams, decorative grasses on their way to New Zealand florists, My Little Pony toys, Garfield telephones, surgical masks, bar stools, pet accessories, and gazebos. Who would have thought?

And a bit of a surprise, some of this floating debris has ended up becoming useful to the science of ocean current investigations. Much like glass bottles with notes used to track currents a century ago, Nike athletic shoes and plastic bath toys have become useful and free instruments for tracking ocean currents. One of the first observations of the travel adventures of lost cargo was in May 1990 when a container ship - the *Hansa Carrier* - destined for Seattle from Seoul, Korea, ran into a storm midway across the Pacific. It lost 21-forty-foot-long steel containers that were stacked high and believed to have been firmly lashed on the deck. Five of those held some high-end Nike sports shoes intended for basketball courts and playgrounds across the U.S. Four of these broke open and spilled a reported 61,280 shoes into the Pacific ocean. This began an odd research adventure for University of Washington oceanographer Curtis Ebbesmeyer who started collecting reports on where these shoes ended up.

By Thanksgiving, hundreds of the drifting shoes had made their way to the beaches of northern Washington, and in the following spring others had moved further north to the Queen Charlotte Islands along the Canadian coast and also south to the Oregon coast.­ So Curtis got involved and developed a website where he now tracks reports and findings of beach debris around the shorelines of the world. <http://www.beachcombersalert.org/>

Two years later, in January 1992, another container ship on almost the same track, departed from Hong Kong heading for Tacoma, Washington. Another storm in the north Pacific and more shipping containers went overboard. About 29,000 Chinese-made plastic bath toys ended up in the sea when the steel boxes opened. These included yellow duckies, green frogs, brown turtles and red beavers, each with a number identifying a production batch so they could actually be traced. Curtis started tracking the ending place for these brightly colored toys and when they arrived at a particular location.

Over a hundred of these little plastic rascals were found on a­ beach in southeast Alaska the next winter. Ocean currents move surprisingly slow, however, and it was in the fall of 1995 that some of these bath toys were caught up in the Subpolar Gyre which flows counterclockwise across the Gulf of Alaska. They drifted past the Aleutian Islands to the Kamchatka peninsula then back across the Pacific to Washington, a 7,500-mile adventure. And it is believed that while some of the animals may have circled around several times, others missed the gyre altogether and headed south. A beaver and frog were later recovered from the Hawaiian Island of Lanai.

Another group of ducks, turtles, frogs and beavers somehow managed to float through the Bering Strait and into the Arctic Ocean. Some of this armada of 29,000 ducks, frogs, beavers and turtles are believed to have made it entirely across the Arctic, which is iced-over for much of the year. They then emerged in the north Atlantic when their large ice cube melted, and sure enough, in 2003, a yellow duck showed up in Maine and a green frog was found later in Scotland that were believed to have been from this initial batch of bath toys.