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Mystery Japanese boat fascinates local residents

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This boat from Japan washed up on Avalon Canyon last week and gave local residents a cause to wonder. Where did it come from? Did it reach our shores after being lost at sea after the 2011 Japanese tsunami?

"I uncovered the small yellow tag/decal with Japanese writing on it," said Pacifican Jeff Christner. "Prior to this, only the Yamaha Motor Co. tag was visible. I literally scraped away some of the mussels to reveal the small yellow tag."

That tag translated to "place tanks here," which led some to conclude the boat had been used for diving.

GGNRA officials examined the boat last week to see if the marine life that encrusted it would pose a threat to our local ecosystem.

"It was heavily encrusted with barnacles and other marine species," said Alexandra Picavet, spokesperson for GGNRA. "We have not been able to conclusively connect it with the March 11, 2011 tsunami, but it looks like it has been in the water for a long time. We are working with NOAA to remove the barnacles and then the boat will be removed, as well. Our first goal is to not spread the invasive species. Once thing we have noticed is the longer the boat has been in the water, the fewer invasive species are on it. Right now we are seeing things that are common to these waters already," she said.

California has not seen many Japanese boats that have been traced to the tsunami.

"This is only the second or third boat to wash up on California shores. The last one was in Humboldt in June," Picavet said. "California has not seen much debris from the Japanese tsunami compared with Washington, Oregon, Hawaii and Alaska."

NOAA affiliate, Dianna Parker, said her agency takes the lead in an investigation such as this to determine the source of the vessel and to determine if it poses any threat to human life or marine life.

She responded to some questions from email.

"NOAA is the lead federal agency for addressing marine debris from the tsunami in Japan. We continue to work closely with our federal and state partners to respond to tsunami marine debris and share information. NOAA is leading an ongoing shoreline monitoring effort to gather more data. The reporting email (DisasterDebris@noaa.gov (<mailto:DisasterDebris@noaa.gov>)) is still active and we collect the information provided and coordinate it among our state and federal partners. We plan to continue these efforts, as well as those to address marine debris from around the nation."

Any idea who owned the boat?

"Marine debris is an ongoing problem with everyday impacts, especially around the Pacific, and natural disasters can make the problem worse. That's part of why it's very difficult to tell where debris comes from without unique identifying information. If a piece of debris is suspected to be from the tsunami, NOAA works with the Japanese government to identify these items if possible. We have contacted the Japanese consulate to help identify this particular boat.



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What's the boat's purpose?

"We likely won't know what the boat was used for unless we confirm that it was lost during the tsunami and the owner is located. We have been successful in the past -- for example, the first boat that washed up in California was returned to a high school in Japan. Just two weeks ago, we helped return a sign found in Hawaii to the village it came from."

Does the boat pose any threat?

"This vessel does not pose a threat to human health. There are no radiation concerns. The NOAA Marine Debris Program has general guidelines on what to do if you encounter debris from the tsunami, including potentially hazardous items such as oil drums. Those instructions can be found at: <http://marinedebris.noaa.gov/tsunamidebris/faqs.html> (<http://marinedebris.noaa.gov/tsunamidebris/faqs.html>)."

Last Friday, the boat was broken up into pieces for eventual removal, said Pacifican Helen Nicely, who had been visiting the boat often while she was on the beach.

"The fiberglass skiff possibly from Japan, which may or may not be from the 2011 tsunami disaster, has been scraped clean of animal life (to be destroyed separately) and broken up by GGNRA personnel. In pieces, it was dragged along the beach at low tide this morning, and left at the south end of the beach then removed before high tide Friday," she said.

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