

SUSTAINABILITY

Tsunami Debris Will Reach West Coast

First items expected in a year, other pieces to take 2 to 3 years

(AP) -- John Anderson has discovered just about everything during the 30 years he's combed Washington state's beaches — glass fishing floats, hockey gloves, bottled messages, even hundreds of mismatched pairs of Nike sneakers that washed up barnacled but otherwise unworn.

The biggest haul may come in one to three years when, scientists say, wind and ocean currents eventually will push some of the massive debris from Japan's tsunami and earthquake onto the shores of the U.S. West Coast.

"I'm fascinated to see what actually makes it over here, compared to what might sink or biodegrade out there," said Anderson, 57, a plumber and avid beachcomber who lives in the coastal town of Forks, Wash.

The floating debris will likely be carried by currents off of Japan toward Washington, Oregon and California before turning toward Hawaii and back again toward Asia, circulating in what is known as the North Pacific gyre, said Curt Ebbesmeyer, a Seattle oceanographer who has spent decades tracking flotsam.

Ebbesmeyer, who has traced Nike sneakers, plastic bath toys and hockey gloves accidentally spilled from Asia cargo ships, is now tracking the massive debris field moving across the Pacific Ocean from Japan. He relies heavily on a network of thousands of beachcombers such as Anderson to report the location and details of their finds.

"If you put a major city through a trash grinder and sprinkle it on the water, that's what you're dealing with," he said.

As to whether any of the debris might be radioactive from the devastation at Japanese nuclear power plants, James Hevezi, chair of the American College of Radiology Commission on Medical Physics, said there could be.

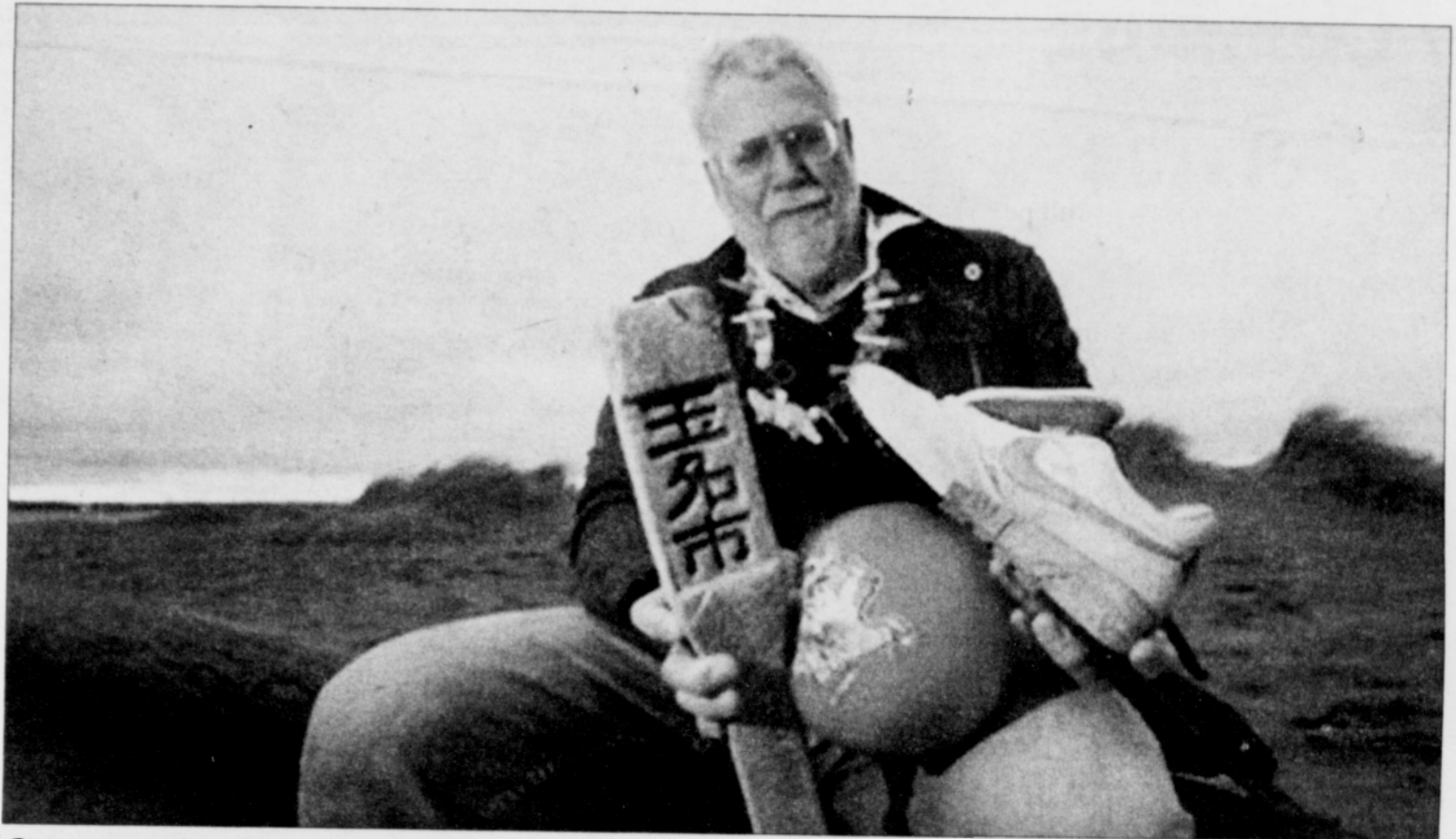
"But it would be very low risk," Hevezi said. "The amount that would be on the stuff by the time it reached the West Coast would be minimal."

Only a small portion of that debris will wash ashore, and how fast it gets there and where it lands depends on buoyancy, material and other factors. Fishing vessels or items that poke out of the water and are more likely influenced by wind may show up in a year, while items like lumber pieces, survey stakes

and household items may take two to three years, he said.

If the items aren't blown ashore by winds or get caught up in another oceanic gyre, they'll continue to drift in the North Pacific loop and complete the circle in about six years, Ebbesmeyer said.

"The material that is actually blown in will be a fraction" of the tsunami debris, said Curt Peterson, a coastal oceanographer and professor of in the geology department at Portland State University. "Some will break up in transit. A lot of it will miss our coast. Some will split up and head up to Gulf of Alaska and (British Columbia)."



Oceanographer Curt Ebbesmeyer displays debris—a survey marker, child's toy and Nike shoe—he's picked up from ocean beaches near Seattle.

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