Beachcombers' Alert!™

January – March 2015

75th Anniversary Issue

Thank you for subscribing,
Curt Ebbesmeyer

Plastic in Crest 3D Toothpaste. Warnings on the tube and box labels differ (upper left versus upper right panels, respectively). Only the box warns the buyer the paste contains polyethylene, one of plastic's many forms. Once the user discards the box, the plastic warning's gone. Lower panels show the tube (left) containing microbeads, a few of which are shown on the tip of Curt's right index finger (right). Seems to me, these warnings merit Mr. YUK stickers for kids on both the box and tube.

Dave Ingraham photos

Dental Ocean

Dental undercurrent. This Alert features aspects of dentistry in the ocean: a plastic aligner and denture, micro-plastic in toothpaste infects the ocean, and a dentist returns tsunami debris. Google "plastic microbeads products" for the myriad items contributing plastic grit to the sea and our food supply.

Plastic Factoids: A 4.2-ounce tube of facial cleanser contains 356,000 microbeads; 90 percent of floating ocean debris is made of plastic; 36.5 percent of fish in the English Channel have plastic within their gastrointestinal tracts.

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If you wondered. Four color pages provide the Alert's new look. Efficient use of eight pages versus the previous 10-page Blue Alert allows color photos with the same word count (5,000). Curt will appear at four beachcomber fairs in 2015: Beachcombers' Fun Fair, March 7-8, Ocean Shores, WA; Driftwood Show, April 4-5, Grayland, WA; Pathways Across the Pacific and Beachcombers' Fair, August 19-23, Sitka, AK; and Sea Bean Symposium and Beachcombers' Fair, October 16-17, Cocoa Beach, FL.

Satellite Denture

"On January 12, 2014, I found this denture on Satellite Beach, FL," said **Carol Agnew** at the 19th Sea Bean Symposium and Beachcombers' Fair. "It was a beautiful day, low tide and plenty of shells and sea glass. These teeth were sitting on top of a massive pile of shells and glass. That was the big find of the day." For some years it's been a federal law that dental appliances be engraved with the owner's name. As of this writing, the denture's owner **(J. Wening)** has not been traced. Photos: left, Curt Ebbesmeyer; right, Carol Agnew.

NB: Beach Aligner. At the 2013 Sea Bean Symposium (October 18-19), along with entries in the Bean-a-Thon, a beachcomber gave me an Invisalign, a type of dental appliance used to adjust teeth. Though the aligner carried a serial number, I've not been able to trace its owner. ■

17-Year Old Lego?

During July 2013, **Katherine (aka Kat) Pollock** of Austin, Texas, beachcombed a black Lego octopus (3 inches across) tangled in thick, dried sea grass on the west end of Galveston Island, Texas. It matches the description of the 4,200 octopi spilled in 1997 in a container off Land's End England from the cargo ship Tokio Express.

For Kat and the Texas beachcombing community, it is an exciting find and the only Lego from the famous spill thus far reported in the United States. After being at sea for 17 years, the octopus is in great condition as are many other pieces found along England. The sea grass might have protected it from wear explaining how the octopus could have traveled across the Atlantic Ocean. It's also possible a youngster playing with his Aquazone Lego kit left the black octopus on the Galveston beach. ■

Jet Assisted Takeoff *(aka JATO) device partially buried in Sargassum weed with Clint Buffington for scale. Kate Smiley photo*

Octopus Trap. *Clint Buffington photo.*

Clint's story begins on page 3

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Plastic Toothpaste

Continued from page 1

Humanity, I mused, might be making progress in reducing the amount of plastic in the sea. File it under wishful thinking. **Ed Perry,** author of Sea-Beans from the Tropics: A Collector's Guide to Sea-Beans and Other Tropical Drift on Atlantic Shores, set me straight as we prepared for the 2014 Sea Bean Symposium and Beachcombers' Fair (October 17-18).

Ed brought out his empty tube of Crest 3D White toothpaste, pointing out 'polyethylene' listed as an inactive ingredient on the tube's box but not on the tube. To see the polyethylene, we dissolved a pea-sized drop of toothpaste in water in a small plastic white cup. As we mixed, thousands of blue plastic microbeads adhered to the sides of the cup.

When I returned home to Seattle, to further visualize the grit, I began filtering a tube of 3D Crest through a white coffee filter. It was slow going. Each morning in my bathroom, I looked for progress. No matter how much I dilute the paste with water, it's taking weeks to filter just a small amount.

Though I've filtered only ten percent, the residue of blue grit's hideous. Realizing these tiny particles pass through sewage treatment plants and cannot be filtered from the sea, I surmise these particles wind up in the guts of sea creatures. Humanity, it seems to me, has passed a point of no return. I cannot see how technology can undo such harm.

Micro-plastics (aka microbeads) are less than a millimeter in size. They've been detected in more than 200 different consumer products. Little wonder researchers find microbeads in lakes, rivers, and the ocean. Researchers found 450,000 per square kilometer on the surface of Lake Erie. Along a 320-kilometer section of the river from Lake St. Francis and Quebec City, researchers measured over 1,000 microbeads per liter of sediment, a magnitude rivaling that in the world's most contaminated ocean sediments. These numbers imply microbeads have entered the oceanic food chain.

"My sister said Crest 3D White has now been banned up north (New York) and that yes, it was wedging into the gums of users and causing dental problems," Ed concluded. "I cannot see why the American Dental Association would EVER approve of this product. I feel like writing Crest and asking for my purchase money back for the last five years and telling them why I am not using the product anymore." ■

JATO, Octopus Traps

Continued from page 2

Flotsam drifts to the northern Antilles in the southwest corner of the North Atlantic from all about the great ocean. Here's an account from **Clint Buffington.**

"Among the most interesting pieces of flotsam I've found here is a rocket. When I first walked up to it, I thought it was a beached torpedo! Technically, it's a 'Jet Assisted Takeoff' device (aka JATO). It's about 8-10 feet long by a foot in diameter. Unfortunately, the only writing I found on it was 'JATO SPRING FAD' which hasn't been enough to trace its origin. Though these JATOs were once used to help aircraft taking off on short runways, like those on aircraft carriers, they aren't used much nowadays since aircraft themselves have become more powerful. My guess is that the JATO's been floating around the North Atlantic for quite a while."

"A funny thing happened on the beach. As I was walking with my girlfriend **Kate Smiley** (who found her first Message in a Bottle!), I picked up an octopus trap to show her what they look like. 'Oh!' she said, 'That's what an octopus trap looks like? That explains a lot.' To which I, surprised that she would have any awareness of or interest in octopus traps, said, 'What do you mean? How do you know about octopus traps?!'"

"Kate, a resident in surgery, explained. 'There's a disease called Takotsubo Cardiomyopathy which is more commonly known as broken-heart syndrome. Takotsubo is the Japanese word for octopus trap, so the disease essentially translates to 'octopus trap heart disease.' "

"Kate said this condition causes weakening and lengthening of the heart, so its shape comes to resemble the shape of an octopus trap. It's known as broken-heart syndrome because it's usually brought on by intense emotional stress, like the loss of a loved one."

"Isn't that crazy?!" Clint concluded. "There's a lot to philosophize over here. Consider the fact that we've reached the point where we name diseases of deep emotional pain after plastic objects." ■

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Tsunami Debris News

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Though the tsunami produced by the Great East Earthquake struck northern Japan nearly four years ago (March 11, 2011), currents continue distributing flotsam to the shores ringing the North Pacific Ocean. Thus far, radiation from the Fukushima nuclear disaster has been conclusively measured in North American coastal waters, dozens of Japanese fishing vessels have washed up in North America, vessels have collided with large flotsam in the Great Garbage Patch, invasive species have been identified on Oregon beaches, the Pacific Ocean food chain has absorbed much of the Styrofoam which comprised most of the tsunami debris, and beachcombers continue reaching out across the Pacific to reunite flotsam with devastated families.

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Returning Tsunami Debris

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Alert readers may recall racing yachts which struck utility poles washed to sea in the tsunami, and soccer and basketballs reunited with Japanese victims. The following accounts amplify the threats large flotsam pose to mariners, and reveal the difficulties in tracing the often enigmatic markings found on tsunami debris.

Tsunami Wreckage Sinks Yacht

While sailing from Hawaii to the US mainland through the Great Garbage Patch the crew of the Trimaran Transit of Venus sighted an overturned hull. The crew guessed it to be a fishing vessel the tsunami washed to sea. At 1:15 am, September 25, 2014, the multihull slammed into another large flotsam halting their vessel dead in the water. Daylight revealed the collision had torn away ten feet of the trimaran's starboard ama (outrigger). After attempting repairs, the crew declared an emergency. Luckily, the 738-foot bulk carrier Golden Heiwa crossing from China to Panama passed within 15 miles enabling a speedy rescue of the stricken crew. The abandoned Transit of Venus became yet another of the derelicts orbiting the Garbage Patch.

Foam insulation often lines sailing vessels enabling their wreckage to float for long times. Beachcombers, watch for parts of the Transit of Venus. Source: Latitude 38 Sailing Magazine, November 2014.

Reuniting Debris and Victims

"I am a Dentist practicing in Anchorage," writes **Kevin Easley.** "I was born and raised in Anchorage, Alaska, and, as a child, spent many summers with my family in Prince William Sound. My love for beachcombing began there."

"With the passage of time, I became a bit of an adventurer. Most of my travels have taken me close to a coast because I love to roam beaches and find treasures. Two years ago, a buddy and I rode our fat-tire bikes along Southeast Alaska on the Lost Coast between Yakataga and Cape Suckling. During seven days, I saw an amazing amount of debris."

"I picked up a few things, but a singular item ended up in the film Lost and Found by Frank Films of Toronto, Canada. It was a Styrofoam bicycle helmet liner with Mako Honda's name and phone number written inside. Though tattered, for some reason I packed it home. I never imagined where that liner would take me."

"I wound up traveling to Japan and returning the helmet liner to the Honda family. On that journey, I witnessed rebuilding efforts in recovering from the incredible damage wrought by the Tsunami. I became acutely aware how important these lost items were to the tsunami victims. I forged enduring relationships with the Honda family whose son Mako lost the liner."

"That summer, my girlfriend found a volleyball we also returned in the film. We discovered it on the outside of Montague Island during a rare calm day when we could safely land our raft and pick through the debris. Turned out, the volleyball belonged to a girl's middle school volleyball team."

"These beachcombing finds and my trip to Japan fueled my interest to repatriate more items. Many people lost everything in the Tsunami. Some yet struggle while living in temporary housing. One seemingly simple flotsam returned can be deeply moving, even spiritual, to some. Experiencing that during my trip last year has transformed me."

"I have made the repatriation of tsunami debris a mission. This spring and summer I spent much time searching the Lost Coast, Prince William Sound and Kayak Island. I found more items, collected found objects from other folks, and searched Japan to find owners."

Zen of the Return

"Of all of the marked buoys I plucked from Alaska's beaches, this buoy seemed my favorite. It was found on Kayak Island during a portion of one of those trips with my kids that I have tucked away amongst my fondest memories. I don't know if it was the style of writing, the meaning it represented, or the way it'd been found. Way back in a corner of my mind, I had always hoped to find its owner; I secretly hoped for a lengthy and difficult search. I wanted to hang with it for as long as I could.

"The Kanji characters painted on the buoy mean virtuous or good. Its Chinese pronunciation (On-Yomi) is Zen and its Japanese pronunciation (Kun-Yomi) is Yoi, or Yoshi. When combined with other Kanji, this particular character could be one of at least two hundred combinations possible to make up a Japanese surname. It may have originated, for example, from the Zenzou or the Yoshinobu families."

"In preparation for my trip this year, I positioned this buoy's photo before eighty others I had collected. It would be the first buoy that any Japanese wakame, or oyster, or scallop farmer, would see as they peered into my iPad, searching for something they might recognize. I wanted it to show how impressive a lot of these markings still looked after drifting more than 5,000 miles across the Pacific. I also wanted it's meaning to sink in subliminally. As my Japanese is horrible, I thought this picture could convey my intentions."

"As we searched and searched for the first three days, no one recognized what I came to call the Zen Buoy's origins. I almost began clicking quickly by it when I started showing the photo collection, because the slim odds of my mission succeeding were starting to sink in. One wakame farmer did recognize a related photo, however, and gave me hope. As he directed me to a location a few miles away, I just barely caught an oyster farmer dockside before he put out to sea."

"As I ran along the dock towards the boat, photo in hand, something caught the corner of my eye. There were buoys everywhere, of different sizes and shapes, displaying various characters. By that time, I'd memorized all of the photos I carried; something seemed familiar. I didn't have the time to investigate, though, so I put the thought aside, and continued my bee-line to the farmer in his boat."

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Returning Tsunami Debris

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"As I approached the boat and received permission to board, on deck I saw Zen Buoy's cousin. I was so excited my detective work had paid off! I showed the photo of the faded Kanji character to the owner, but said his buoy's marking was similar, but not the same as the buoy in the photo. It was not his."

"A tad deflated, I asked if I could show him my other photos and he gladly obliged. He immediately stopped at the first one. "Oh, yes!", he said, "That must be his," and pointed over my shoulder at a man and his wife placing wakame seeds for the season. I couldn't believe it. There, not twenty feet away was Zen Buoy's brother."

"Deflation became elation when I approached the nearby wakame farmer! Upon showing him my photo, he said that this was his buoy and that it was his hand that painted his grandfather's surname upon it. It was used to mark an oyster set, and was lost, along with all of his other buoys, in the tsunami. It took him a while for the gravity of it all to sink in, but once it did, he and his wife rejoiced and were very happy. In the soft and humble Japanese way, they requested the buoy be returned to them, as a symbol of hope and remembrance of their lives before the disaster."

"At that moment, I realized my days with Zen Buoy were coming to an end, but I also realized I would not have traded the circumstances of that day with any other. I'm not a religious guy, but I couldn't help but sense that there was more to my lucky happenstance. It did not seem mere coincidence that Zen Buoy found its way home. As I walked away from the happy old couple, I truly felt that the exciting, but bittersweet return of Zen Buoy was not only an occurrence that was meant to be, but also served a symbol of more 'Good or Virtuous' things to come."

Need help with translation or returning tsunami flotsam? Please visit tsunamireturn.com. Kevin's website displays beachcombed items and respective locations, as well as touching stories of returned tsunami flotsam. ■

See photos on page 7

Flotsam beneath the Dunes; *Thoughts on beach archaeology*

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While attending the 19th Sea Bean Symposium in Cocoa Beach, Florida, **Jane Darke** sent me a fascinating email chain with **Joanna Atherton** and **Claire Wallerstein** concerning flotsam stored in the dunes and cobbles. Here's a distillation of their reports. For clarity, along the chain I've added bold lettering to the narrator.

"I just listened to the BBC radio piece concerning Lego on the beaches here," emailed **Jane** [October 24, 2014] from Cornwall near the Atlantic Ocean entrance to the English Channel. "I thought you might be interested in my observation that the Lego has most likely not been at sea since the container spill [1997]; it has been sitting in sand dunes and under stones and rocks on beaches. The debris we find on beaches changes with the years so old debris is recognizable if you have been gathering as long as I have."

"For the last 15 years or so there have not been any really big Westerlies and so not many big seas off the coast here. Some people have built beach restaurants further down the foreshore, closer to the water's edge, because the sea has not swept in so far. The dunes all along the north coast of Cornwall have built higher and higher. On Porthcothan Beach, where I live, they have almost tripled in height over the last 20 years. This winter many of the new buildings built close to the sea were damaged or washed away but the dunes provided a valuable sea defence for many communities like mine on the edge of the Atlantic."

"The last really big seas were in the winters leading up to 2005 when we filmed The Wrecking Season. Then we found a huge number of seeds from the Americas. At the time **Charles Nelson** [the famed botanist] said that he thought that some of them had come out of the dunes. He had been gathering from beaches for longer than Nick and I. We were relatively new to the game then."

"Most beaches in Cornwall are not cleaned during the autumn, winter, and early spring. So winter debris has always been buried as the dunes build. This last winter the big seas sliced the front off the dunes and scoured out beaches. Porthcothan Beach level is still nine feet lower than at the end of 2013. The sand was held in suspension by the waves and taken out — dropped half a mile out in some cases — the plastic debris was released and being lighter it floated in."

"Most of the beachcombers here have not been doing it for very long so they are not familiar with old stuff from older spills. I worked as the beach cleaner on this beach for 16 years and have been searching the beaches here for 20 years now so I recognize things."

"AND I have seen the same thing happen when staying on the East coast of the UK where the cliff edges are eroding all the time. There I found 40-year old potato chip packets that had been held in suspension in shingle banks. These were films of plastic that would not survive the decaying properties of direct sunlight — with the printing still intact, with the price 6d written on them, the old pre-decimal currency. It's interesting that leather sits around for years because the shingle is so free draining that it doesn't rot."

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Flotsam beneath the Dunes

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"In March [2014] on this beach I found those white plastic nozzles that were everywhere 15 years ago — do you remember? — the ground up parts of Ford cars that came ashore when 'The Mulheim' ran aground off Land's End in 2002 and were buried for 12 years under slate stones on beaches 30 miles up the coast from where they went into the sea, the colored tops from Smarties (a tube of sweets no longer made in the UK), plastic containers from suntan oil and washing up bottles with 20/30 year old packaging, many, many cotton bud sticks of which we have been seeing less and less in the last ten years. AND Lego pieces."

"It's interesting. There were a lot of people getting very excited from Surfers Against Sewage and other organizations here about the amount of debris washing up after the winter storms this year. When they saw the old debris they thought it had been washing around in the ocean for years but plastic which floats for a long time does not retain its color or the printed word and becomes sculpted by weather or abrasion from rocks etc."

"Heavier debris does get stuck amongst loose kelp on the sea bed close to shore. When we get a big kelp dump, usually after storms in May, when the kelp is young and has been growing fast so is easily ripped off the rocks in a big sea, there are particular things among it: metal - usually aluminum cans, occasionally copper from the keels of old ships, socks full of sand, lumps of lignum vitae from blocks used in the age of sail - which doesn't float, and coal from steam ships."

"Most of what was picked up on beaches early this year had been ashore for years — stored in the dunes and under stones — and its release gave us a second opportunity to pick it up."

"In fact, I was amazed at how little new debris washed ashore last winter. Apart from the contents of a French fishing boat which ran aground half a mile from here, the beach was covered with fish boxes and fish and everything else a fishing boat holds! This may be because there are fewer boats in the Atlantic, less fishing, hardly any freighters, and fewer but larger cruise ships. So less packaged waste and fishing gear. A friend on the South Coast of Cornwall says they have been getting a lot more debris over the last few winters. So perhaps there has been a change? Is this because the Gulf Stream is flowing further south? More reasons to record what we find."

"I am wondering if most debris has always been distributed by natural disasters. I have been expecting debris from New York and New Jersey after Hurricane Sandy in 2012 but have not seen much other than the usual fisheries tags from the USA. Where did it go? The South Coast? Is it still travelling Columbus Gyre? Or did it end up in a sand dune on a beach in Ireland, Scotland or Norway?"

"I find your observations especially fascinating," commented **Joanna** of Bedfordshire. "I think it accentuates the importance of those people who live at the frontier of the Atlantic Current, as it is you who walk the shore on a daily basis that will spot those subtle changes which are not always obvious when looking at statistical data. It is the empirical finds and observations which offer so much more."

Joanna continued: "My boyfriend is an academic who specializes in researching ponds and lakes and has a scientific approach (collecting cores, analysing pollen samples in the lab to construct environments of the past), yet he will always consider records kept by locals (be it a nature diary, local newsletter, personal account, etc.), that is held in equal esteem if not higher than the scientific results, as it will always provide the personal insight, which you have demonstrated."

Joanna continues: "I think it takes a lifetime of observations to spot differences / anomalies. As Jane mentions, there have not been any significant Westerlies on the stretch of coast, and it takes a lifetime to recognize the slight differences in environment to understand the variations in context to interpret the strandline. As an artist, all of your comments are insightful and I thank you for sharing them as they inform my work, especially given the narrative strands that can be considered. If these items have been lying in the sands, they could be read as a snapshot or unconscious deposit of an earlier moment in time."

"Around our area of Cornwall (south east coast) we don't have any dune systems at all," **Claire** wrote. "As **Tracey Williams** says, though, much of this stuff may have been trapped under rocks that get shifted in strong seas. I think it would be absolutely wonderful to mark the 10th anniversary [2015] of The Wrecking Season in some way. That film has been so inspirational for so many of us, and it seems very fitting now that marine litter seems to be moving up the political and media agenda."

"It's ten years since my husband Nick died next year and ten years since we filmed The Wrecking Season," **Jane concluded.** "I have been looking at beaches here and in other parts of the world during that time. Nick was the communicator and was always amazed, almost to the point of disbelief, by natural processes. I find that I am most interested in interpreting a beach these days — in reading what I see and find. I found the first crustacean tags and most of the tropical drift seeds and we searched together — not many realize that. I made the mistake of leaving myself out of the film. He was so much better at talking. As Nick wrote for the end of The Wrecking Season — 'the sea is telling us something'. Nick wasn't sure what it was the sea was saying but the answers are there." ■

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Jane Darke's House

Porthcothan Beach overlooks the North Coast of Cornwall fifty miles from Land's End, England. **Left.** Jane's house circa 2010 with Marram Grass in the foreground perched just above the dunes. The dunes gradually built up over 80 years, moving down Porthcothan Beach and trapping layers of old strandlines. **Right.** Face of the dunes below Jane's house (with small smoke stack) taken on November 27, 2014. The Marram Grass is dropping in great clumps off the edge and slumping to the beach below. Cornwall has a great difference between the rise and fall of tides. In March 2014, 27-foot waves on a 23-foot tide rise cut the dune face on most beaches taking the sand far out to sea and up the coast. Now, each tide cuts away at the dune base, as does the river which has changed its course to follow the new gradient. Old debris is washing out all the time: cork floats, a ceramic bed warmer, old tar from the 1967 Torrey Canyon oil spill, a 50-year old toothbrush, and candy wrappers from the 1980s. ■

Jane's story begins on page 5

Returning Tsunami Debris

Kevin Returns Mako's Bicycle Helmet Liner

Lost: **Mako Honda,** Ofunato, Japan. Found: Kevin Easley, Cape Suckling, Alaska. Mako's family gathers round the helmet liner (Mako, not shown, luckily survived; Mako's mother **Takako Kumagai** and grandmother **Satoko Honda** in the background and foreground, respectively).

NHK photo

Kevin's story begins on page 3

Rin's Soccer Ball (left)

Lost: **Rin Goto.** Minamisanriku, Japan. Found: **Bob Torrey.** Ship Island, Alaska. Before the disaster, Rin lived in Minamisanriku, Japan, where he lost everything. "You didn't just find and return a ball," Kevin wrote to Bob, "You found and returned hope, encouragement, security, and the will to press on to a little guy who had been crushed."

KIDS NOW photo.

Zen Buoy (right)

Lost: Minamisanriku, Japan. Found: **Mikki Stazel,** Kevin Easley, Kayak Island, Alaska.

Photo: Kevin Easley collection.

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"May the tides be good to you."
— Paul J. Ebbesmeyer

Top Beachcomber

"Are you looking for reports on toy tops washing ashore?" writes **Christine Cowan.** [Toy tops provide favorite pastimes for kids in Central and South America. After being discarded, they wash out to sea and float about the Atlantic.] "If you need a contact in Galveston, Texas, my son **Owen Cowan** is at the beach almost every week. He's twelve years old and homeschooled."

"His favorite beach is the long, narrow strip along the Galveston Seawall. Sometimes, he walks for miles with his Grandma. He also likes the beach at the north end of the Galveston Channel just outside of Seawolf Park [on Pelican Island], a treasure trove of trash, especially bottles from Asia. The clear bottles are Jamaican. Over the past few years, he also has found lots of light green plastic Clarasol bottles labeled 'made in Mexico.'"

"Owen focuses on bottles from around the world, but particularly noticed these tops. He found one a few years ago, then one in mid-August, then two more in late-August. They are dense plastic, red or blue, with a metal tip, about 1.5 inches in diameter. There is writing embossed on one top's top, but it is mostly worn away. The first three letters seem to be 'CAL.'"

"This year, there has been an exceptionally large amount of seaweed, and along with it, a lot of bottles from the Caribbean. In the past couple of months, he's taken an interest in the sea beans [see www.seabean.com]. Since this summer, he has been finding a lot of bottles from Jamaica, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, French Antilles, St. Kitts and St. Lucia. Also, more than usual number from Mexico. We don't know whether this is a result of the shipping industry or ocean currents." [Curt doesn't know either.] ■

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