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Moby-Duck or, the synthetic wilderness of childhood

By [Donovan Hohn](#)

We know exactly where the spill occurred: 44.7°N, 178.1°E. We know the day, January 10, 1992, but not the hour. Neither do we know the name of the ship nor of its captain nor of the shipping magnate who owned it. We do know the harbors from which it sailed (Hong Kong) and to which it was headed (Tacoma, Washington). We know that despite its grandeur, when rocked by forty-foot waves, the colossal vessel, a floating warehouse weighing 50,000 tons or more and powered by a diesel engine the size of a barn, would have rolled and pitched and yawed about like a toy in a Jacuzzi.

We know that twelve of the colorful containers stacked above deck snapped loose from their moorings and tumbled overboard. We can safely assume that the subsequent splash was terrific. We know that each container measured forty feet long and eight feet wide and may have weighed as much as 58,000 pounds, depending on the cargo, and that at least one of them—perhaps when it slid into another container, perhaps when it struck the ship's stays, perhaps as it descended to high-pressure depths—burst open. We know that when it left port, this ill-fated container had contained 7,200 little packages; that, as the water gushed in and the steel box sank, all or most of these packages came floating to the surface; that every package comprised a plastic shell and a cardboard back; that every shell housed four hollow plastic animals—a red beaver, a blue turtle, a green frog, and a yellow duck—each about three inches long; and that printed on the cardboard in multicolored lettering were the following words: FLOATEES. THE FIRST YEARS. FROM 6 MONTHS. EXPERT DEVELOPED ♥ PARENT PREFERRED. 100% DISHWASHER SAFE.

From a low-flying plane on a clear day, the packages would have looked like confetti, a great drift of colorful squares, exploding in slow motion across the waves. Within twenty-four hours, the water would have dissolved the glue. The action of the waves would have separated the plastic from the cardboard. There, in the middle of the North Pacific, in seas almost four miles deep, more than six hundred miles south of the western extreme of the United States, 28,800 plastic animals produced in Chinese factories for the bathtubs of America—7,200 red beavers, 7,200 green frogs, 7,200 blue turtles, and 7,200 yellow ducks—hatched from their plastic shells and drifted free.

Eleven years later, more than 7,000 nautical miles to the east, an anthropologist named Bethe Hagens spotted something small and bright perched atop the seaweed at the southwest end of Gooch's Beach near the entrance to Kennebunk Harbor in Maine. She stopped and crouched. Its body was approximately the size and shape of a bar of soap, its head the size of a Ping-Pong ball. A brand name, THE FIRST YEARS, was embossed upon its belly. The plastic was "white, incredibly weathered, and very worn," Hagens would later recall. The thing looked as though it had crossed the ocean. It was fun to imagine, a lone duck, drifting across the Atlantic, like something out of a fairy tale or a children's book—fun but also preposterous. Sensibly, she had left the toy where they found it and walked on.

The classified ads in the July 14, 1993, edition of the Sitka *Daily Sentinel* do not make for exciting reading, though they do convey something of what summertime in Alaska's maritime provinces is like. That week, the Tenakee Tavern "in Tenakee" was accepting applications "for cheerful bartenders." The Baranof Berry Patch was buying berries—"huckleberries, blueberries, strawberries, raspberries." The National Marine Fisheries Service gave notice that the winners of the 1992 Sablefish Tag Recovery Drawing, an annual event held to encourage the reporting of tagged sablefish, would be selected at 1:00 p.m. on July 19 at the Auke Bay Laboratory. Then, under the ambiguous heading of "Announcements," between "Business Services" and "Boats for Sale," an unusual listing appeared.

ANYONE WHO has found plastic toy animals on beaches in Southeast please call the Sentinel at 747-3219.

The author of the ad was Eben Punderson, a high school teacher who moonlighted as a journalist. On Thanksgiving Day, 1992, a party of beachcombers strolling along Chichagof Island had discovered several dozen hollow plastic animals amid the usual wrack of bottlecaps, fishing tackle, and driftwood deposited at the tide line by a recent storm.

After ten months at sea, the ducks had whitened and the beavers had yellowed, but the frogs were still as green as ever, and the turtles were still blue.

In subsequent weeks beachcombers on other islands found more of the toys, and new ones kept washing ashore. Laurie Lee of South Baranof Island filled an unused skiff with the horde she'd scavenged. Signe Wilson filled a hot tub. Betsy Knudson had so many to spare she started giving them to her dog. It appeared that even the sea otters of Sitka Sound were collecting them: one toy had been plucked from an otter's nest. On a single beachcombing excursion with friends, Mary Stensvold, a botanist with the U.S. Forest Service who normally spends her days hunting rare varieties of liverwort, gathered forty of the animals. Word of the invasion spread. Dozens of correspondents answered the *Sentinel's* ad. Toys had been found as far north as Kayak Island, as far south as Coronation Island, a range of tide line extending for hundreds of miles. Where had they come from?

Thousands more were yet to be accounted for. Where had they gone? Into the Arctic? Around the globe? Were they still out there, traveling the currents of the North Pacific? Or did they lie buried under wrack and sand along Alaska's wild, sparsely populated shores? Or, succumbing to the elements—freezing temperatures, the endless battering of the waves, prolonged exposure to the sun—had they cracked, filled with water, gone under? All 28,800 toys had emerged from that sinking container into the same acre of water. Each member of the four species was all but identical to the others—each duck was just as light as the other ducks, each frog as thick as the other frogs, each beaver as aerodynamic as the next. And yet one turtle had ended up in Signe Wilson hot tub, another in the jaws of Betsy Knudson's Labrador, another in the nest of a sea otter, while a fourth had floated almost all the way to Russia, and a fifth traveled south of Puget Sound. Why? What tangle of causes and effects could explain—or predict—such different fates?

There were other reasons why the story of the toys kept going, reasons that had nothing to do with oceanography and everything to do with the human imagination, which can be as powerful and as inscrutable as the sea. In making sense of chaotic data, in following a slightly tangled thread of narrative to its source, Eben Punderson had set the plastic animals adrift all over again—not upon the waters of the North Pacific but upon currents of information. The Associated Press picked up the story. Newspapers across the country ran it. The Floatees eventually made brief appearances in *The Guardian* and *The New York Times Magazine*, and a considerably longer appearance in *The Smithsonian*. Like migrating salmon, they returned almost seasonally to the pages of *Scholastic News*, a magazine for kids, which has reported on the story seven times. They were spotted in the shallows of *People* and MSNBC, and in the tide pools of *All Things Considered*. They swirled around the maelstrom of the Internet and bobbed up in such exotic waters as an oceanography textbook for college undergraduates and a newsletter for the collectors of duck-themed stamps.

These travels wrought strange changes. Dishwasher safe the toys may have been, but newspaper safe they were not. By the time they drifted into my own imagination, the plastic animals that had fallen into the Pacific in 1992 were scarcely recognizable. For one thing, the plastic had turned into rubber. For another, the beavers, frogs, and turtles had all turned into ducks. It had begun the day Eben Punderson published an unusual ad in the pages of the Sitka *Daily Sentinel*—the metamorphosis of happenstance into narrative and narrative into myth.

Story Analysis

1. Where were the ducks being shipped from _____, where were they heading? _____.

2. Why did the ducks end up in the water? _____

3. Sitka Alaska is on the shores of which ocean? _____

4. Kennebunk Maine is on which ocean? _____

5. How could these duck travel so far? _____

6. If the company that made the packages of ducks (& other bath toys) planned to sell them for \$10 at stores in America, how much money did they lose when their cargo was lost at sea? SHOW YOUR CALCULATIONS

7. How might a shipping company keep their cargo containers from sliding off the deck of their ships even in the roughest of seas? _____

