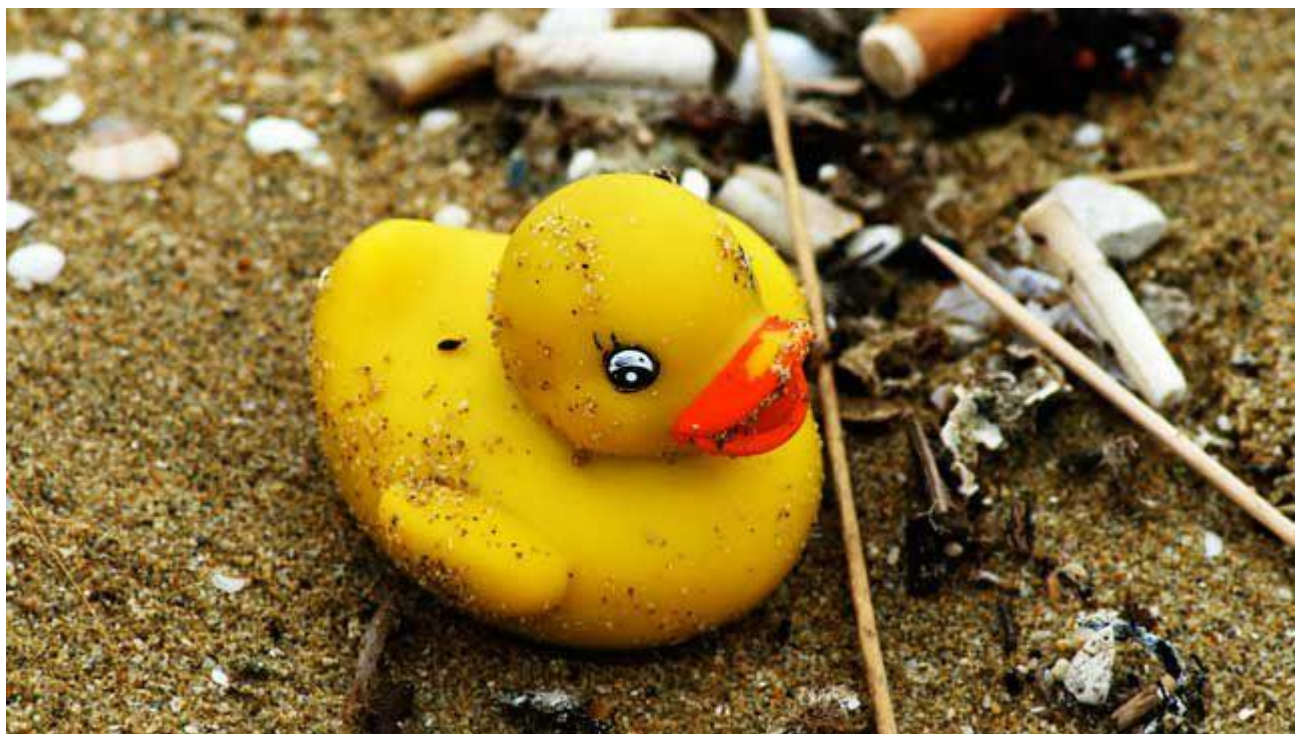


Rubber Ducks Assembly

Last week was Geography week, in which we opened the Edward Evans Building – the new home of Geography at MTS. I would like to celebrate the study of Geography and the wonder of the natural world this morning, with a true story. It began 27 years ago, in 1992. There was a storm in the Pacific Ocean, which caught a large cargo ship bound from China for America.

The waves must have been huge; they crashed down upon the deck, striking the exposed steel shipping containers and spilling all of their cargo into the ocean below. The ship itself must have been soundly made, because it survived to limp into the nearest port. It left its cargo behind, in a vast flotilla, floating on the water, all nodding their heads together: 29,000 yellow plastic rubber ducks.



These charismatic rubber ducks have since become famous, and have even been christened with a name, the "Friendly Floatees," by devoted followers who have tracked their sea journey over the years since 1992. The ducks drifted for months in the Pacific Ocean, slowly turning in the North Pacific Gyre - a circle of ocean currents whose circumference is measured in many hundreds of miles. The area is known as the Great Pacific Ocean Garbage Patch. It is a massive island of floating debris, mostly plastic. Though nowadays we speak of the recent programme Blue Planet as raising consciousness about the problem of plastic waste in the oceans, the rubber ducks were raising awareness about the problem decades ago. 2,000 of them are still there, circulating in the North Pacific Gyre — a three year round trip of currents that stretches between Japan, southeast Alaska, Kodiak and the Aleutian Islands.

Although 2000 rubber ducks remain there, through some freak of wind or tide, most of the ducks broke free and began to drift away on an ocean current. Those ducks, many thousands of them, began to ride a long, Pacific-crossing current, which took them towards Seattle, the very port for which they were originally bound.

That journey across the Pacific is one of the largest uninterrupted stretches of water on the planet. It is hard to give a sense of the vastness of the Pacific Ocean. The distance across the Pacific, from coast to coast, from Shanghai to Los Angeles is about 8,000 miles. Our ducks had slightly less far to go - their journey was roughly 5000 miles... if they had taken the shortest route.

Then came a great falling out. The ocean current they were riding split. Most of the ducks were swept north, in a great arc, which took them directly towards Seattle and then further north to Alaska. Others were drawn south, to the warm waters of Hawaii. I like to imagine the breakaway group of yellow plastic ducks coming closer and closer to that paradise island, skirting the pleasure cruisers and rounding the sharp coral reefs, before surfing in, in their thousands, alongside the wave riders of Waikiki or Honolulu.

The larger contingent of rubber ducks had, as I said, turned north. As they swept up the coastline of Alaska they were three years into their epic journey. In 1992 they had turned their beaks to the East; now it was 1995. The Alaskan coast they now passed is a wild and lonely place. There are whales and the only sounds on the shore are the yawps of the sea lions.

How confused the local wildlife must have been to see the vast congregation of tiny bobbing yellow ducks, battered by their long journey but still bravely riding the waves. The ocean current which had carried our rubber ducks so far, the North Pacific current, denied them landfall there. A far crueller fate awaited them.

The ducks were swept further and further north, past the Aleutian Islands, upwards into the frozen waste beyond the Bering Strait, which separates America from Russia. It was through this tiny gap that the flotilla of plastic ducks steered, heading directly towards the North Pole. What happened to them in that terrible place is unknown. Certainly, many will have been entombed in the ice. Others will have been trapped in narrow bays and folds in the ice sheets.

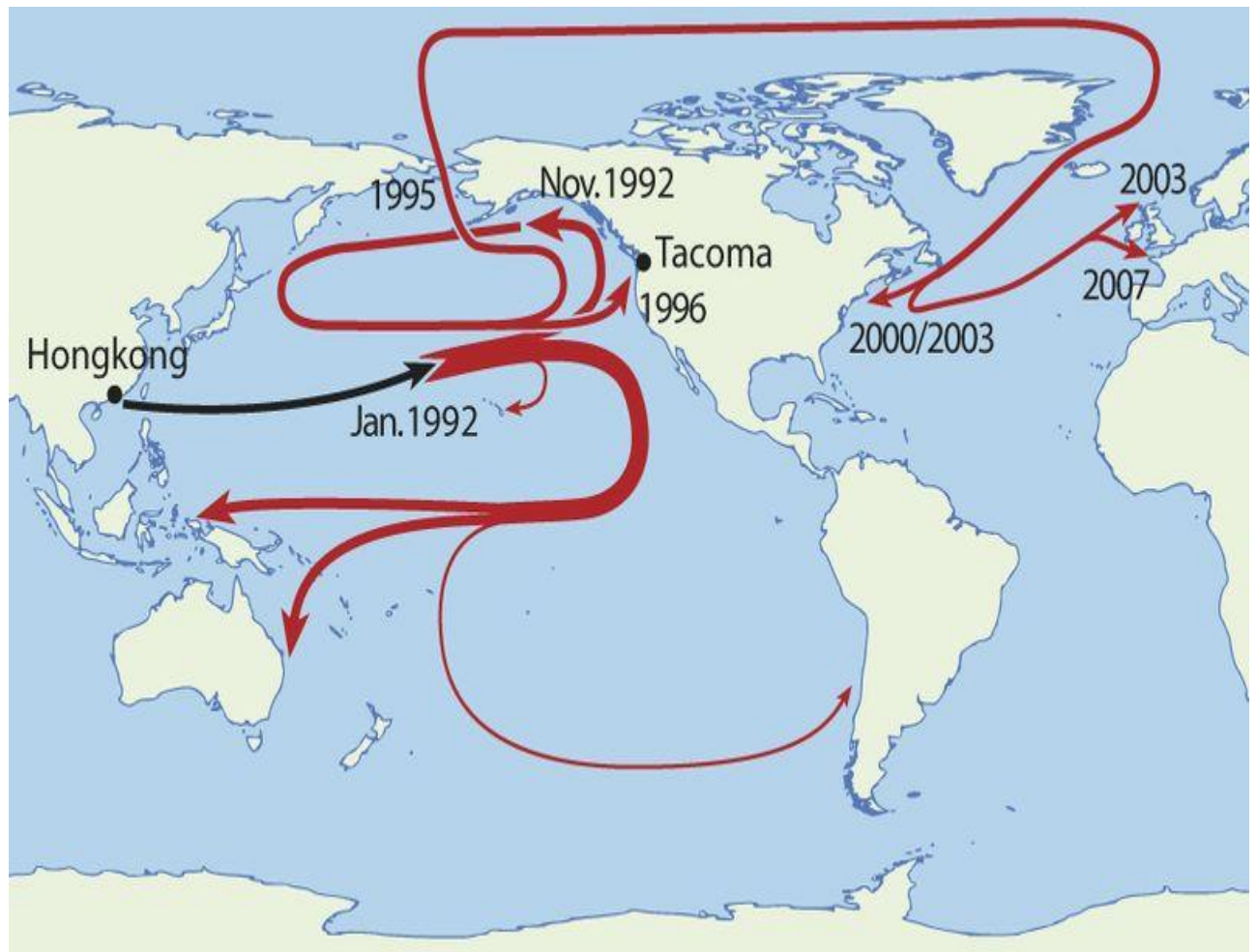
Who knows how many of the original 29,000 made it through, but... incredibly... in 2001... six years after they passed through the Bering Strait, yellow plastic ducks began to appear in the North Atlantic off Iceland. They had circumnavigated the North Pole and were heading south again, seeking out the warmer waters they had left so many years before. So far, they had been travelling for eleven years.

The hardy survivors, still numbered in their thousands, then passed Great Britain, still heading south. The ducks' sea voyage had yet further to go. They headed back across the Atlantic towards the East coast of America. The current finally brought a horde of the ducks ashore in 2003 in Nova Scotia in Canada. A final contingent then was swept back across the Atlantic, to make landfall in Cornwall in 2007. They were battered from their huge sea voyage. Their bright yellow colour was bleached white by sun, salt and ice. No doubt some surprised child on a Cornish beach picked up a

faded plastic duck on the beach and wondered at it – little realising that the thing which he or she held had journeyed for years and years, through the harshest terrain on the planet and covered a distance of 20,000 miles without landfall, so that it could be held in their hand.

But for some of the ducks the journey has still not yet ended. Since that day in 1992 when they were unceremoniously abandoned at sea, yellow ducks have bobbed halfway around the world. There are few shores of the world which have not been visited by one of the Friendly Floatees. Many are still out there.

This map details the journeys of the ducks so far:



From this true story, may I suggest the ducks have some lessons for us. They tell us how beautiful and strange the world is: consider the contrast between the warm beaches of Hawaii and the savage ice flows of the Bering Straits. They tell us how large the world really is – we imagine we have shrunk it with information technology and rapid travel, but the journey of the ducks puts the world back into its proper scale, where something can float for twenty-seven years and never touch land.

They tell us that although the world is vast, it is washed by waters which have travelled throughout its regions. That although things might appear to be distant and strange, everything is connected. The waters that flow past one country have circled the globe countless times, and will circle it again countless more. There are deep currents that link us all, both literally and metaphorically.

They are a spur to action on our part. The ducks were the one of the earliest messengers of the problem of plastic waste in our oceans – ironically, by being part of that problem.

Finally, perhaps we can find an encouraging symbolism in the endurance of the plastic ducks. In them, I also find encouragement to keep on going. Our lives often feel like voyages through rough seas and perhaps we can find something for ourselves in that epic journey, made by the plastic ducks, which for some of whom came to an end on the scattered beaches of the world, but for others may never end, as they circumnavigate the world endlessly.

The rubber ducks – and the study of Geography – have much to teach us.