

## Archive of Spotlight Feature Articles

# After Floating Around in the Atlantic for 26 Years, NOAA Drift Card Comes Ashore on Irish Beach

By Jana Goldman



The location of the NOAA drift card found on a beach in western Ireland is marked by the NOAA symbol.

Jean-Paul Duffy noticed a light-yellow card among the flotsam and the jetsam.

"I have found a drift card on Carne Beach in Belmullet, Co. Mayo, Ireland. It was found on Sunday 4th May about 7 p.m.," Duffy wrote in an e-mail to a NOAA public affairs officer five days later.

He described the card as "quite old, there is no Web URL address and the Boulder Colorado zip code is 80302 whereas my web searches turn up the NOAA at 80305. In any case perhaps this info is of some use to somebody who may have worked on this program."

On the front of the card was the emblem of the Department of Commerce, with the following information: No. C0103, OCSEA Program Office, NOAA/ERL (Rx4) Boulder, Co. 80302 U.S.A. Thank you for your help. You may keep this card as a souvenir. Upon receipt of your reply we will send you a certificate of appreciation describing our research."

A small yellow plastic card released off the East Coast of the United States was found on a west Ireland beach last summer after spending 26 years floating in the North Atlantic Ocean.

The card, numbered C0103, is believed to have been released by NOAA in October 1977 during an asphalt barge incident off the coast of Avon, Conn. Such cards are set adrift to learn about ocean currents, but can also be used to track the path of ships' contents that may have been released during accidents or other incidents.

While walking along a Belmullet peninsula beach on Ireland's west coast ("next stop Newfoundland"),

Information on the back of the card - written in English, Spanish, and French - was: "Drift card. Please report the number of this card with date and location to:"

During a meeting of NOAA laboratory and program directors a positive response was elicited when the name of the program was mentioned.

Eddie N. Bernard, director of the Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory in Seattle, Wash., said that OCEAP, the Outer Continental Shelf Environmental Assessment Program, was the forerunner of PMEL's Fisheries-Oceanography Coordinated Investigations (FOCI) and it was possible that the card could have been deployed in the Gulf of Alaska.

But investigation by the keeper of the drift card records, Curtis Ebbesmeyer, who describes himself as a "consultant oceanographer retired from the pursuit of money onto the trail to see where my curiosity leads," indicates the likelihood of the card's release off of the coast of Avon, Conn. in 1977, although there is a possibility that it was launched in the Gulf Stream around that same time that year.

Ebbesmeyer said that there are few reasons why an exact launch site is difficult to ascertain: Connecticut lies along Long Island Sound and there was only one report of a drift card found along there - usually there are many from local areas; also, nearly all the reports of drift cards released in the Gulf Stream come from countries around the North Atlantic, such as England, Ireland, France, Spain, Greenland, and Labrador.

However, Ebbesmeyer said, while the exact launch location is open to "further scrutiny," Duffy's card does hold the record for the longest drift of a card. The last reported NOAA drift card from the East Coast was in 1996. He receives a report about once a year from a drift card finder.

Ebbesmeyer said that plastic drift cards are no longer used, but some agencies launch glass bottles.

He also noted in a message to Duffy that the length of time the card was in the water was important to him as he is working on a theory that the "ocean stores drifters out at mid-ocean for long time intervals, including 50 years in the North Pacific, 30 years in the North Atlantic, and 20 years in the Arctic Ocean."

Such information, he said, is important to understand how the ocean stores pollution.

Duffy received the promised certificate and a copy of Ebbesmeyer's newsletter, the *Beachcombers Alert*.

In a note thanking Ebbesmeyer for the newsletter, Duffy noted, "I never realized there was such interest in flotsam and jetsam...but now my visits to the beach will never be the same again, head down instead of head up, always looking for the bottle with the message in it."

Other beachcombers who find something interesting may wish to contact Ebbesmeyer at: 6306 21st Ave. NE, Seattle, Washington 98115 or email him at: [curtisebbesmeyer@msn.com](mailto:curtisebbesmeyer@msn.com)

Bottles with messages in them are often thought of only as communications from persons stranded on desert islands. However, bottles and drift cards have scientific uses as a way to track ocean currents or study how pollutants or other material travel through the world's oceans.

During a storm in 1992, hundreds of yellow rubber ducks and other bathtub toys were released from a ship on its way from China to Seattle. As they turned up on the East Coast of the United States, the toys provided information about ocean currents, when beachcombers reported where they were found.

NOAA's National Ocean Service is using drift cards in a two-year study of the movement of surface currents off the Hawaiian Islands. Data gathered will be used to learn where floating pollutants might go.

Australia's science agency, the Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial Research Organisation, released drift bottles between 1938 and 1940 to trace ocean currents and have since used drift cards to gather similar data.

Contemporary drift cards are usually biodegradable, using non-toxic materials to help protect oceans and coasts.

For more information about drift cards see:

NOAA's National Ocean Service [Drift Card Questions and Answers](#) and Australia's Marine Laboratories Information Network on [Drift Card and Drift Bottle information](#).

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