ColumbiaCounty Spotlight

Friday, July 13, 2018

LITTLE BOAT ON A BIG ADVENTURE

Nicole Thill-Pacheco
Friday, July 13, 2018

Sailboat made by Otto Petersen Elementary School students bound for Japan makes it to Alaskan Coast

When students from Oregon and Japan began working on a joint project called MiniBoats, the idea was to learn about ocean currents and how the unmanned boats would fare on the open sea.

Groups of students from Oregon and Japan each launched five fiberglass sailboats from each coast to begin a 4,500 mile trek across the Pacific Ocean.

Seven months after the boats were launched, there seems to be more lessons learned from shipwrecks, unresponsive GPS trackers, and the kindness and enthusiasm of strangers who are excited about the intention of the project, than anything else.

The project, which was sponsored and organized by the Columbia River Maritime Museum, with help from an organization called Educational Pathways, was initially designed to help students learn about ocean currents while connecting them cross-culturally to students around the world. Nate Sandel, the education director for the museum, offered the program at five different Oregon schools, including Otto Petersen Elementary School.

"When I first stared this project, the last thing I ever wanted was for one of these boats to crash but it's actually super exciting," Sandel said. "[The boat] is meeting new people, kind of making ports of call. It excites everyone else and it makes it real."

At the start of the 2017-18 school year, students in Laycee Kinsman's sixth grade class at OPE began crafting two five-foot-long fiberglass sailboats — one to be launched from the Oregon Coast, the other from Hachinohe, Japan.

In December, the U.S. boat — named the Red White and Blue Crew — started off its journey strong when it remained at sea for 82 days before it made landfall 16 miles outside of Sitka, Alaska in late February. After it was recovered, the boat made its way to Blatchley Middle School where students there also became involved in the project. Local media outlets there reported on the project and student involvement. Sandel traveled to the school to help the students design and attach a new sail to the boat before it was relaunched in April.

"It's amazing how the whole community comes together when it crashes," Sandel said.

Less than a month later, however, the boat landed at Augustine Island in the Cook Inlet along the Alaskan coast, where it then pinged its location for nearly a month. Susan Saupe, the Director of Science and Research at the Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council, received an email one afternoon from Sandel and a series of other scientific and boating community contacts he reached out to in hopes of recovering the ship. That's when she learned about MiniBoats program and offered to help.

After a month of stormy and severe weather in the Cook Inlet in May prevented Saupe and her work crews from accessing the island to do their own field study work for the RCAC, her crews organized a helicopter fly over in June. Coincidentally, Augustine Island is home to a fuel cache for their helicopter so stopping briefly to look for the boat was no trouble, Saupe explained.

When they went to look for the boat, she wasn't sure they would find it.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SUSAN SAUPE - Crews attempt to drain some of the water that was trapped inside the boat before removing it from Augustine Island on the Alaskan Coast. The boat is still in Alaska, awaiting transport back to Oregon where repairs can be made before it is launched again.

"You get beaches where debris piles can kind of collect — they can be huge logs all piled up — that's what I pictured. I thought we'd have a hard time. The day before I looked at its last logged location. We thought we'll start flying along and see," Saupe explained. "We started flying along

and came across some of those debris piles, but it was right there all by itself in amongst some boulders."

After seeing the location of the OPE boat and how it appeared trapped amongst sharp, angular boulders, Saupe believes it was simply trapped and unable to continue on its journey.

"I think it came in on a wave and then got in behind some big angular boulders." Saupe explained. "I think when it landed it was probably completely intact but when we found it the mast and the flag was broken off and floating around nearby and I think that's where a lot of the damage happened."

Lessons to be learned

By tracking the movements of the boat through GPS coordinates and seeing how the boat has traversed so far, Saupe explained that students might also learn more about objects that drift at sea and objects that have some type of directional assistance mechanism, like a sail.

"There's a difference between a true drifter and something that has a sail on," Saupe explained. "Winds can overcome those ocean currents in some situations. It pushed it straight across the gulf and then pushed up into Cook Inlet. But maybe if it didn't have the sail it might've been different."

That may not be the only lesson learned either. Some of the GPS trackers in the boats launched from Japan have become completely unresponsive after a huge storm struck the area in January, Sandel explained.

Other boats, which have been recovered, have shown signs of salt buildup on the plexiglass cover which the GPS tracker is enclosed in. Next time around, Sandel plans to coat the plexiglass with Rain-X to help deter that.

"When we get to see the boat after its been at sea for 80 days we can see salt is building up and that's why we can't get the GPS tracking," Sandel explained. "We get to learn things when they do come ashore."

Future of the Red White and Blue Crew

After Saupe loaded the damaged, waterlogged Otto Petersen boat into tightly-fit helicopter, where the boat barely fit, it's now sitting in Saupe's backyard about 80 miles from where it washed ashore awaiting the next step.

Sandel has been working with local sources, organizations and companies to determine the best way to transport the boat back to Oregon where it can be studied and repaired. Ultimately, Sandel hopes to then relaunch the boat from Homer, Alaska.

"That's sort of the goal, get it here, get some pictures and learn some things about how it broke. And then fix it and get it up to the kids back in Homer," Sandel explained.

Currently, the Nishikaze, a boat made by students at Richmond Elementary School, which was launched off the southwest coast of Baja California, has traveled thousands of miles and crossed the international date line. Its next challenge will be facing the Marshal Islands, Sandel explained.

With some luck, Sandel hopes the strong, northern Alaskan currents will be enough to guide the Red White and Blue Crew boat all the way to Japan once it's back in the water.