Wood from the ocean

The animals, fish and plants of the ocean are a rich source of food, clothing and tools for millions of people all over the world. Would you ever consider the ocean as a source for wood? Well, for the Unangan people of the Aleutian Islands, it is.

The Aleutian Islands lie in the northern Pacific between Alaska and Russia, a place where it is too cold for trees to grow. The Unangan people who live there, however, use wood to build framing for their winter homes, called ulax. Their suppliers are the forests of northwestern North America and the currents of the Pacific Ocean.

Ocean water is constantly moving, flowing from one place to another. The way it flows is determined by wind, water temperature and salt content, the topography of the ocean floor, and the Earth's rotation. Surface currents are largely caused by Earth's prevailing winds which, in the northern hemisphere, blow from the northeast. Over the northern Atlantic and northern Pacific oceans, these winds help to push currents in a generally clockwise fashion. Sometimes, however, smaller currents can rotate in a different direction.

In the northern Pacific a huge circular current, or gyre, occupies the open ocean. It flows between North America (in the east) and Asia (in the west), between 15 degrees north and 45 degrees north . When the water approaches North American (around the

Canada-US border), some of it gets deflected south towards California, and some of it gets deflected north, towards Alaska. This water becomes the Alaska current.

The Alaska current is a counter clockwise gyre that is trapped between the coast of North America and the North Pacific Current. It flows up the heavily forested northwest coast of British Colombia. Any trees, branches and logs in the water get caught up in its flow go along for the ride. When it reaches the southern coast of Alaska, the current turns west heading along the coast and out to sea past the Aleutian Islands. Smaller currents caused when water flow is interrupted by the islands deflect parts of the Alaska current and whatever it is carrying. It is these water flows which finally bring BC wood into island coves and bays, where it lands on the beach and is collected by the Unangan people.

Sources:
Unangan history
http://www.nps.gov/aleu/UnanganHistoryAndCulture.htm
Ocean Planet
http://seawifs.gsfc.nasa.gov/OCEAN_PLANET/HTML/oceanography_currents_1.html
Whirlpools in Your Bathtub

http://www.oceansonline.com/ocean_currents.htm

All about us

1 D W L Y H provides culturally relevant learning opportunities in science, math, engineering and technology to Aboriginal students and their teachers across Canada.

[illegible]

You can reach us at:

[illegible]
Faculty of Applied Science &
Queen's
Kingston Ontario K7L 3N6

[illegible]