

Why I filled a 50,000-litre aquarium with plastic debris

When Douglas Coupland saw debris from the Japanese earthquake washing up in Canada, he became fascinated by the centrality of plastic in our lives – and began to pick it up

Douglas Coupland
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Douglas Coupland collects a polystyrene object washed up on Haida Gwaii in Canada in 2017. Photograph: Ocean Wise

In 1999, I was in a Tokyo department store walking down a household cleaning products aisle and had what you might call an ecstatic moment when the pastel-tinted plastic bottles on both sides of the aisle temporarily froze my reptile cortex: pink, yellow, baby blue, turquoise — so many cute-looking bottles filled with so many toxic substances, all labeled with bold katakana lettering.

I bought 125 bottles and took them back to my hotel room where I emptied them down the toilet. Yes, I can hear you judging me as an ecological criminal, but then let me ask you this: if I'd added some dead skin flakes or some shit to these chemicals, would that then have made it OK to deliver them into the Tokyo harbour?

Around 1999 is also when I began to visit Haida Gwaii (formerly the Queen Charlotte Islands) off the coast of British Columbia. Largely untouched by the ice ages, these difficult- and expensive-to-reach islands are, to me, the most enchanted place on the planet and afford a chance to experience nature in a meditative manner that borders on the religious. The raw sense of life and of living creatures can be overwhelming.

Cut to the summer of 2013 when I was beachcombing on Rose Spit on the northernmost tip of Haida Gwaii's north island. I stood there gazing at the waves and was feeling at one with the cosmos and pretty darned good about the world, when I looked down at my feet and there found a plastic bottle of the sort I once brought from Japan wash directly up to me. It was a chilling moment that made me feel as though I was on the receiving end of a medieval curse. The bottle was, of course, part of the first wave of debris from the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami to begin washing up on North America's west coast. Soon the wave became an avalanche, and quickly all I could see was the alien plastic marine debris that inundated my most sacred place on the planet.



'The internet was surprisingly useless in providing images of the Pacific Trash vortex'... Douglas Coupland in his installation Vortex, on display at the Vancouver Aquarium. Photograph: Ocean Wise

It collapsed any sense of geographical remoteness the islands once held for me, and it made me stop to think about this thing called the Pacific Trash Vortex — or the Great Pacific Garbage Patch — or the Pacific Trash Gyres. What is it? Or what are they? A Texas-sized clump of a billion shampoo bottles somewhere along the equator? A floating garbage dump the size of California? The internet was surprisingly useless in providing images of what the Pacific Trash vortex might look

like, so I decided that my job was to create an image of the trash gyres so that people could get a visual of something that most of us have thought about and been discussing these past years.

Thus, here in 2018 we come to Vortex, on display at the Vancouver Aquarium for the next year. It features several tons of (non-radioactive) Haida Gwaii plastic debris sloshing around within a 50,000-litre pool. In the centre of this synthetic gyre bobs a Japanese day-fishing boat lost in the tsunami, but whose owner I went to meet last October in Ishinomaki, Japan. On this boat rests a small cosmology of entities that address the past, present, and future of humanity's relationship to plastic.

The more we look, the more we find plastic in our food and in our water. It's now becoming harder to distinguish where our bodies end and where the synthetic world begins. I got to thinking of growing up in the 1960s, back when people still littered. Young people have trouble believing this but people just tossed stuff out the car window or on to the streets with no thought about it, and then, almost overnight in the early 1970s people stopped littering. Poof! No more litter. The lesson I take from this is that I've seen people change once, so I know they can change again. We seem to be going through some sort of collective darkness right now, but the Queen is discussing plastic drinking straws and the Pope is discussing synthetic agrotoxins. I stand firm that there is hope and change in the air.

- Coupland, Douglas, "Why I filled a 50,000-litre aquarium with plastic debris," *The Guardian*, Friday, May 18, 2018