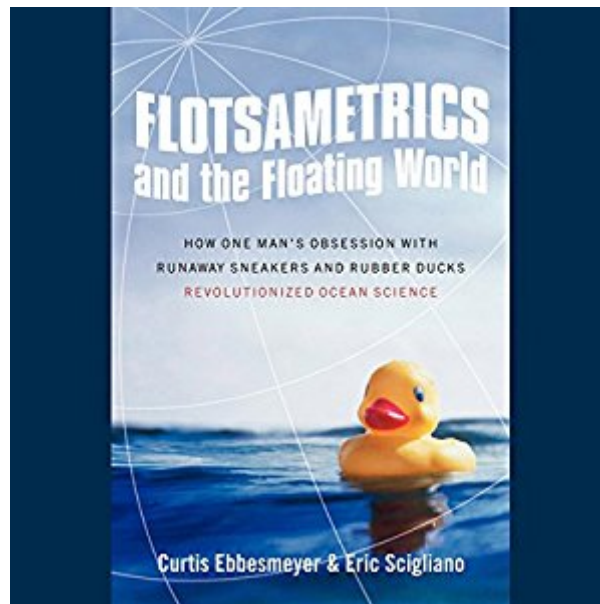


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# Flotsametrics And The Floating World: How One Man's Obsession Revolutionized Ocean Science



## Synopsis

“Curtis Ebbesmeyer’s goal is noble and fresh: to show how the flow of ocean debris around the world reveals the music of the world’s oceans.” —New York Times Book Review  
“Through the fascinating stories of flotsam, one of the Earth’s greatest secrets is revealed. In *Flotsametrics and the Floating World*, maverick scientist Curtis Ebbesmeyer details how his obsession with floating garbage—from rubber ducks to discarded Nike sneakers—helped to revolutionize ocean science. Scientist and environmentalist David Suzuki, host of CBC TV’s “The Nature of Things,” calls *Flotsametrics and the Floating World* “Science and storytelling at its very best.” “A very enjoyable, if at times dark, book” (Nature), it is must reading for anyone interested in Oceanography, Environmental Science, and the way our world works. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book contains many charming anecdotes about how floating objects, from garbage to sneakers to dead bodies, are carried around by the surface currents of the ocean. I particularly liked the extended discussion of how careful observation of flotsam may have persuaded Columbus that the ocean wasn't too wide to cross to India. The book also gives some nice descriptions of what it's like to conduct science at sea. However, as a physical oceanographer, I was disappointed and finally infuriated by the book's neglect of the discoveries of literally hundreds of scientists who have

studied ocean circulation in the last century. The book argues for new names of the major ocean gyres but says little about how the gyres work. Other fascinating topics in physical oceanography poorly explained by the book are the relationship between the wind and ocean currents, the existence and cause of strong currents on the western side of gyres, and the way the Earth's rotation creates a simple relation between water velocity and pressure. An intrinsic feature of ocean dynamics is that surface water tends to converge (draw together in the center) in the subtropical gyres and diverge (float apart) in the subpolar gyres. This is very important for understanding why garbage patches would accumulate in the subtropical gyres and make landfall adjacent to the subpolar gyres. Based on the book's discussions of physical oceanography, I suspect the book could have said more about garbage and other flotsam as well. The large gaps in explanation would be less irritating if the book didn't sometimes give the impression that Dr. Ebbesmeyer was practically the only person studying ocean circulation. Readers of the book will learn about the bottles thrown into the ocean by preachers to evangelize strangers, but not about the thousands of remotely-tracked drifters placed in the ocean by scientists to trace the currents. Much of the book gives biographical information which is sometimes interesting and relevant but sometimes drifts into unconnected personal reminiscence. The book would have been much better if some of the biographical parts were replaced by better descriptions of the scientific context of Dr. Ebbesmeyer's quest for the rubber ducky.

For some reason, people tend to flock to the water. Especially when vacation calls. There is something magical about sitting on a beach, watching the waves. Or in having a cold beverage while gazing at the vastness of the ocean. This migration to the water seems to be part of human nature - a throw back to some ancient time. As we are in the midst of summer, a book concerning the oceans, and things that float on it, seems like a great idea. Part science, part autobiography, part cautionary tale, *Flotsametrics and the Floating World: How One Man's Obsession with Runaway Sneakers and Rubber Ducks Revolutionized Ocean Science*, by Curt Ebbesmeyer and Eric Scigliano, makes for the perfectly literal beach book. Contents: Preface: A New World, Chasing Water; Oil and Icebergs; Messages in Bottles; Eureka, a Sneaker!; Coffins, Castaways, and Cadavers; The Admiral of the Floating World; Borne on a Black Current; The Great Conveyor; Ashes to Ashes, Life from the Sea; Junk Beach and Garbage Patch; The Synthetic Sea; The Music of the Gyres; Appendix A: Urban Legends of the Sea; Appendix B: A Million Drifting Messages; Appendix C: The Oceanic Gyres; Appendix D: Ocean Memory; Appendix E: Harmonics of the Gyres; Acknowledgements; Illustration Credits; Glossary; Further Reading; Index Dr. Curt

Ebbesmeyer wasn't always an oceanographer; his undergraduate degree is in Mechanical Engineering and after college, he landed a job with Mobil Oil. Soon, he decided he wanted a graduate degree and gravitated toward two possibilities; nuclear engineering and oceanography. His wife was interested in library sciences. Deciding on a college that was strong in all three took him to the University of Washington. It was there that Dr. Ebbesmeyer decided on oceanography. Flotsametrics is the story of Ebbesmeyer's rise to the top of oceanography by, of all things, studying and reporting on the flotsam and jetsam in the ocean. While he made a name for himself studying Puget Sound and the effects of wastewater discharged in it, he rose to prominence by researching and reporting on the beaching of thousands of toy ducks on the western coast of North America. Using a software program, OSCURS, developed by a friend, he was able to accurately predict where and when flotsam would wash up on the shore. With this knowledge, he was able to better study the gyres, continental-scale closed loops of water around which flotsam drifts, in the oceans of the world. He also coined the term "garbage patch," which are areas within a gyre where drifting objects collect. These areas create giant garbage dumps. one of which is called Junk Beach and is located on Hawaii's Big Island. Interestingly, Ebbesmeyer reveals the rhythmic nature of the world's oceans, adding an underlying beauty to the water. Finally, he weighs in with his thoughts on global warming and effect that it will have on the gyres as well as the pervasiveness of plastics in the oceans. Like the tides, this book rises and falls. The science of the gyres, flotsam, garbage patches, and the cautionary words allow this book to sail. When Ebbesmeyer recounts his life, it has a dragging effect on the reader. I am sure that he has a wealth of interesting and lively anecdotes, however the ones that he chose for this book are overshadowed by the flotsam. While it makes for a few uninteresting pages, when he returns the seas, the pace really picks up. We are treated to maps, diagrams, and family pictures that add to the stories that he relates. Written in a manner that is accessible to everyone, his passion for the oceans is shared with the reader, who cannot close the book without having a better understanding of them. He is not heavy handed with global warming, but rather brings a different perspective; the plastics that pollute our oceans may be affecting the weather, and, without a doubt, the creatures that inhabit it and fly over it. While the chapter on the garbage patch was unnerving, he shows how these gathering places showed early voyagers where to make camp, provided Christopher Columbus with the knowledge that there is something out there, over the horizon, and brought iron and wood to remote areas of the world. If you live in Washington state or on or near an ocean, this is a very worthwhile book. For the rest of us, it no less interesting, as the oceans affect all of us. And if you have ever thrown a message in a bottle into the water, Ebbesmeyer will show you where it may have made landfall.

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