Japanese tsunami debris joins towns separated by an ocean

By Kimberly Wear, The Times-Standard

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We do not want to be forgotten. This is our hope.

Those were the words of Rikuzentakata Mayor Futoshi Toba in a message posted on the Internet to "our friends overseas" after the March 11, 2011, tsunami swept away most of the once prosperous Japanese city.

Thousands of miles away in Crescent City, Calif., 35 boats were crushed and most of the harbor's docks were swept away by the series of surges generated by the magnitude-9.0 earthquake that struck an ocean away. The town, which has its own history of wave-driven devastation, was spared.

Two years later, Rikuzentakata and Crescent City may share another connection. A small, barnacle-encrusted boat washed up just south of the northern California city earlier this week.

Once officially verified, the 21-foot panga boat from Rikuzentakata will become the first documented piece of tsunami debris to reach California's shores — joining 26 others found in Hawaii, Washington, Oregon, Alaska and British Columbia.

The words "Takata High School" — handwritten in Japanese characters on the boat's side — were among the first clues to its long journey across the Pacific Ocean.

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4/14/13

We needed this desperately,' Miller said. "It's wonderful.'

Today, Rikuzentakata remains a city frozen in time.

Miller said none of the city's officials ever thought recovery would take so long.

'We live with the scenes of the disaster every day, and the city is absolutely resolute to rebuild,' she said.

Photo: The barnacle-encrusted boat that washed up near Crescent City this week has been positively identified by a teacher as belonging to a school in Rikuzentakata, Japan, that was destroyed by the March 2011 tsunami. The find has brought great joy to the community, according to a city spokeswoman. (Redwood Coast Tsunami Group)