

# Tsunami Whirlpools - observed in 2004 and remembered in First Nations art and myth

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## Abstract

During the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami whirlpools were photographed by SPOT satellites and reported by observers in at least a half-dozen locales. Whirlpools have been reported in a number of other tsunamis, and are a memorable feature of the human experience of a tsunami. On the west coast of Canada, Haida mythology from the Queen Charlotte Islands mentions a whirling wave of foam in several stories that appear to describe tsunamis. A petroglyph from southeast Alaska shows a spiral suggestive of a tsunami whirlpool inside the body of a sea-monster who, stories say, inundates canoes, makes the salt-water boil, swallows fishermen, pushes fish into a cave, and creates a canoe passage by flopping across a spit. Hundreds of kilometers to the south, Salish carvings from the inland side of southern Vancouver Island show whirlpool-like symbols in conjunction with Thunderbird and Whale; supernatural characters used to explain the origins of earthquakes and tsunamis by tribes on the outer coast of Vancouver Island.



**Figure 1.** Brueh Island 2004 Tsunami whirlpools. SPOT Satellite image and labeling from <http://www.terraimageusa.com/Images/Tsunami/Image2.jpg>



**Figure 2.** Photo from Dorris, 1975.  
Sea-monster petroglyph, with spiral.



**Figure 3.** AMNH. Salish spindle whorl, Georgia Strait, Vortex symbols and human face framed by breaker-like Thunderbird beaks. Thunderbird often appears in stories with tsunami-like flooding from the sea.