

## Wave Watch



It is a long drive from Seattle to the beaches of Olympic National Park, so even with a mid-afternoon start, it was past 8 pm when we arrived on the beach to find a place to pitch our tents. Our group of two families—four adults and four children under 12—had been looking forward to this four-day backpack along the wild Olympic coast. It would be a time for hiking along sandy beach or shoreline of cobbles and boulders, and clambering up rope ladders to hike over headlands when the beach was inaccessible. There would be time for building sandcastles, exploring tidepools and enjoying campfires.

Once we were on the beach, we hiked for twenty minutes or so, looking for possible campsites – something far enough from the water’s edge to be above the high tide line, with shelter from the wind if possible. The tide chart informed us that high tide would be around 4 am. As the sky darkened, we looked for signs of how far up the beach the last high tide had reached. We took our best guess and chose a spot that was reasonably flat, near the edge of the trees.

Everyone was tired from last-minute preparations and the long drive, so we set up quickly and soon settled into our sleeping bags inside the three tents—one each for the adult couples and a bigger one for the kids. Soon we were all lulled to sleep by the rhythm of the waves rolling in and breaking on the sand.

It was nearly 3 am when I awoke to the sound of waves crashing nearby. I lay in my sleeping bag, just listening for a while. Just how close were those waves? When was the high tide due? From inside the tent, it sounded like they were breaking less than ten feet away. My curiosity got the best of me. I eased myself out of my sleeping bag, collected my clothes, jacket and boots, and slipped out of the tent.

The moon was not quite full over the water to the west, and the waves were breaking about 20 feet from our tent. The kids' tent was a few feet closer to the waterline. I found a log perch and began a series of mental calculations, concerned but not in a panic. How much higher would the water come? Would we need to move the tents to keep them dry? Should I awaken the other adults or wait awhile? How likely was it that the kids' tent would get wet?

I recalled that the ebb and flow of tides followed a bell curve. In the middle of the tidal cycle, the movement was greatest. In the hours just before and after the high and low, it was less. So how near the real high tide were we? Was the high tide actually at 4 am, later, or earlier? And the critical question: how much higher would the tide rise?

Except for the crash of the waves, the beach was serene and beautiful. The mid-summer night was cool but not cold, and I was warm in my fleece, hat and boots. As I sat on my log, the rhythm of the water invited a kind of magical detachment. I could just sit for a while, watch and wait. If the waves threatened the tents, I could act. If not, I could simply enjoy this summer night.

In my solitude, the pulse of the waves entered my being. The power of the water, this very origin of life, filled me with wonder. My thoughts expanded and contracted with the rhythm. I entered a state of attentive meditation that simultaneously heightened my senses and soothed me.

The water rose higher as time passed, but I was not called upon to awaken my companions. By 4:30 am I decided that the immediate danger was past. I crawled back into the tent and drifted into deep sleep, held within the sound of the water.