

Tsunami—British Columbia (1964)



A tsunami in 1964 washed away cars, trees, buildings and houses in Port Alberni, British Columbia.

On March 27, 1964, the largest earthquake ever recorded in North America occurred in Alaska. It measured 9.2 on the Richter scale. The shift along the fault beneath the ocean floor that runs along the North American coastline created a series of giant waves, known as tsunamis. The largest wave travelled from Alaska through the Pacific Ocean, flooding the coastlines of Canada and the western United States. The wave was over 11 feet high when it reached Hawaii's shores, but was only a few inches high by the time it reached Japan on the other side of the ocean.

While whole communities along the coast of Alaska were wiped out, communities along the west coast of Vancouver Island also received significant damage. Buildings were lost, trees were uprooted, and fish were killed. Port Alberni may have been the Canadian community that was hardest hit. Just before midnight, a 7-foot wave reached the shoreline, causing flooding. An hour and a half later, a 14-foot wall of water crashed into the city at an estimated speed of 400 km/h. Cars, trees, even houses were washed away. Four more large waves followed through the night. There were no casualties in Port Alberni, despite the fact that the tsunami struck during the night. In part, the first, smaller wave gave people a warning and they were able to retreat to safety. Fifty-eight homes were destroyed, and about 350 more were damaged. In all, damages to the British Columbia coast amounted to \$5 million (\$25 million in today's dollars).

Port Alberni was swamped with larger waves than elsewhere in British Columbia because of its location at the head of a narrow inlet that funnelled the tsunami and created higher waves.

The tsunami killed 119 people in the United States and Alaska, and caused more than \$300 million dollars in damage in Alaska alone. Tsunamis are a rare occurrence in Canada, though there is one reported every 15–20 years, albeit not on the scale of the 1964 wave.

Additional reading

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. "1964: B.C.'s Tsunami Disaster." CBC Digital Archives. <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/1964-bcs-tsunami-disaster>.
 Natural Resources Canada. "Tsunamis." Atlas of Canada, 6th edition. <http://geogratis.gc.ca/api/en/nrcan-rncan/ess-sst/de203e61-8893-11e0-afae-6cf049291510.html>.

Obee, Bruce. "Tsunami!: When the Ocean Roars." *Canadian Geographic*, February/March, 1989. www.canadiangeographic.ca/tsunami/tsunami_cg1989.asp.