

## American Coasts, Past and Future

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America's shores have been colonized three times over. First there were the coastal immigrants from Asia arriving from the west. Then came the Europeans by ship. Most recently, there has been the massive colonization from the interior, which has so completely transformed the shore as to threaten its nature and obliterate its history. Now we have in New England what John Cheever called "a second coast...of gift and antique shops..." On the West Coast, there exists what one California writer calls the boutique waterfront that prevents visitors from seeing "the shores for the stores."<sup>i</sup> Chicago Press, 2012, 127. A man-made coast now overlays nature's shore, threatening not only the natural environment, but, as we all saw during Hurricane Sandy, the built environment itself.

We use the terms shore and coast interchangeably, failing to acknowledge that before there were coasts there were only shores. Coasts arrived quite late in human geography, but today they are the world's most mapped features, and stand out more than any other feature.<sup>ii</sup> "Looking at a globe, what strikes the eye most are coastlines. This area where land and water encounter each other is perhaps the most characteristic feature of our planet," writes Kenneth White, taking up Ralph

Waldow Emerson's observation that "the point of greatest interest is the place where land and water meet."<sup>iii</sup>

It is all the more astonishing to realize that the surveying of coasts began only two hundred years ago. Before then the idea of the coastline did not exist and most shores were *terra incognita*, more fantasy than fact. That the factious Island of California could survive on many maps until the eighteenth century should be sufficient proof of that. Coasts are very much artifacts of modernity. They arrived with those other things that define the modern – rationality, utility, and apparent mastery over nature. Coasts belonged to what some want to call the anthropocene, a world subject to human design. It was one of those things that promised order and predictability, not just for the mariner seeking safe harbors but for the landlubber keen on fixing the line between land and water, banishing uncertainty and anxiety that had previously existed at the shore.

Lines are an icon of modernity. We use them to differentiate, to bring "islands of meaning neatly separate from one another" out of the limitless chaotic continuum that is nature.<sup>iv</sup> University of Chicago Press, 1991, 1-3. But, while lines separate, they also connect. Lines are a barrier, but they are also a seam. A coast, normally drawn as a very thin line, brings the sea into direct contact with the land, allowing no margin, no buffer that the more broadly understood shore has offered.

The coast is now in conflict with the shore, a situation that has no precedence in prior history. Tonight, I was to explore the origins of this ecological dilemma and ways that it might be resolved.

### The Shore: Original Home of Mankind

Humans have had a very long, though largely unrecorded, history of living not only *on* but *with* the sea. It began roughly 165,000 years ago, when, due to unfavorable climatic conditions inland, Africans came down to the sea at the southern tip of their continent. There they discovered an *ecotone* where two ecosystems, one of water, the other of land, intersected, offering those who crossed the tideline riches far greater than found inland. In what Carl Sauer later called the first home of humankind, *Homo sapiens* found a place to “eat, settle, increase, and learn.”<sup>v</sup> In time they became what ecologists call an *edge species*, adept at exploiting both sea and land.

When Africans eventually exited the continent they did so by coastal migration, eventually settling the entire globe apart from Antarctica. Moving alongshore rather than inland, humans remained coast huggers until the nineteenth century, when all the continents were finally settled. It was at the shore that they developed those qualities, including tool and symbol making, which gave *Homo sapiens* the distinctive species-being which advantages us over all other hominids.

As Rowan Jacobsen has argued “we are made for – and made by – that thin world where land meets sea.”<sup>vi</sup>

The shore was also the initial home of Europeans, first in the Mediterranean and later on the edge of northwestern Europe, where people who arrived as mobile hunter-gatherers made their way alongshore in pursuit of their prey, eventually settling estuaries and moving inland along rivers. Later, the coastal and island Europeans who crossed the Atlantic proceeded in the much the same way. Apart from the Spanish, who plunged inland in search of mineral riches, they came as fishers, hunters, and traders, living lives not much different from the Native Americans they encountered on this continent’s edges.

American history is usually told as a story of westward movement, from sea to shining sea, when, in fact, until the mid-nineteenth century it was more maritime than territorial. It will be remembered that Columbus set sail not with intention of finding a new world, but an old one. His goal was passage to India, and he, and all those who followed, were frustrated to find a landmass blocking their way. Until the nineteenth century, explorers kept the hope alive that the shores they encountered were those of islands they might sail around rather than the impenetrable coasts of a great continent. The vision of an archipelagic America did not die easily, for until the eighteenth century the whole world was conceived of as

islands. The notion of continents had emerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but was not naturalized until the nineteenth century when Americans came to see themselves as continental.<sup>vii</sup> The Europeans who explored North America were island and shore peoples who viewed the world in archipelagic terms. Here they encountered peoples with the same metageography. Natives of Virginia informed Captain John Smith that the world was “flat and round like a trencher, and themselves at the midst.”<sup>viii</sup> The English, French, and Dutch empires were all seaborne and archipelagic. The English had been island hopping, first to Ireland and then across the Atlantic since the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>ix</sup> Until the mid-seventeenth century, the biggest prize continued to lie offshore, in fish-rich waters rather than on land as such.

North America was initially known to Europeans entirely from the sea. The interior remained *terra incognita*.<sup>x</sup> While the discovery of shores was assumed to carry with it a claim to the hinterland, early explorers were less interested in possession of land than passage around it.<sup>xi</sup> In a map of 1651, Virginia is shown to be insular, with Sir Drake’s New Albion (California) just beyond its western edge, giving easy access to the “The Sea of China and the Indies.”<sup>xii</sup> In one of the first sermons preached in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Robert Cushman gloried in the fact that it too appeared to be an island with access to the Far East on its western shore.<sup>xiii</sup> At first, that which lay inland held little interest. As Wilcomb

Washburn pointed out, "...Europeans often looked over, or overlooked, the real land to which they came, in anticipation of the Pacific land that remained an ideal in their minds." One of the first things that Francis Billington did when he disembarked from the Mayflower was to climb a tall tree with a westward view, reporting "a great sea, as he thought." It turned out to be only a pond, which even today is called the Billington Sea.<sup>xiv</sup>

### Bicoastal America

Initially, what was to become the United States belonged more to the sea than to land. As late as 1837, Alexis de Tocqueville was convinced that its destiny was marine rather than continental. Apart from the Spanish, Europeans turned their backs on the continent. Water, and the fish and furs it provided, was their greatest resource. It also connected them not only to their homelands but to one another. The shore and its islands was North America's first frontier. It was a zone rather than a line, an *ecotone* constituted of both land and water with its own distinctive economy and culture.<sup>xv</sup>

Initially explored and charted from the sea, shores were, as Rachel Carson would later describe them, "an elusive and indefinable boundary."<sup>xvi</sup> They were waterlands, inhabited by water peoples, both Native and European, and connected to the interior by rivers. In an era when water provided the quickest and most

efficient travel, shore and riverine frontiers were the most coveted and contested geographies. Contrary to the standard histories organized around settlement and westward movement, the first North American Europeans came with no territorial imperative, no manifest destiny. They were by origins insular and riverine peoples, the least feudal Europeans. Like the fish and animals they came in search of, they never stayed in one place very long. The English, wrote Thoreau, were like sailors “who land for but a day.” The French and Dutch were equally peripatetic, always on the move alongshore, rather than cross country, “down east” rather than “out west.”<sup>xvii</sup>

Neither the east nor the west coasts were initially conceived of as the edge of land but as a unique space, a frontier, constantly moving both landward and seaward.<sup>xviii</sup> Initially, shores remained placeless places, temporary camps for fishermen and traders, whose dwellings were makeshift and portable, allowing periodic retreat when winter came or storms threatened. Like native shore dwellers, Europeans initially used the shores lightly.<sup>xix</sup> By the mid-seventeenth century, shores were beginning to be settled by a hybrid population of farmer-fishers, but these were still as much oriented to sea as to land. For such amphibious peoples, the coast was not a line, not an edge or a barrier but a place of transit and circulation.

What was to become this country began as a gaggle of coastal enclaves, tied together by the sea. When Virginia and Massachusetts colonists finally pushed inland in the early seventeenth century, their settlements were linked more by water than land, still tied more closely to other shores around the Atlantic rim than to their own hinterlands. The first American cities were all sea or river ports. Virginia survived only when it discovered a viable export crop, tobacco, and a labor supply, African slaves, that tied it ever more firmly to the sea. Puritan farmers, lacking an export crop, invested heavily in the fisheries as a crucial source of income to pay for their imports from England. To do so, they imported a body of West Country fishermen, who constituted a coastal society quite distinct culturally as well as economically from the agrarian Puritans. As Samuel Eliot Morison put it: “God performed no miracle on the New England soil. He gave the sea.”<sup>xx</sup>

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the economic and political strength of the United States was bicoastal rather than interior in character. It became a continental power not because of its overland prowess, but because of its maritime capacities. Like its eastern counterpart, the western shore was explored and settled by water. And it was the search for safe harbors rather than arable lands that justified the possession of Oregon and California. The western shore was first



prized as giving access to the Pacific and for a very long time it would remain more important as a way station than a place to be.

Thus, it was by sea, not land, that our western shores were populated. Chinese fishermen felt at home on the shores of San Francisco Bay, while Boston merchants made Monterey and later Honolulu into little Bostons. Shore societies have always been diasporic and cosmopolitan in nature. Belonging exclusively neither to land nor sea, they are more open and permeable than the interiors. Shore people are defined more by the routes they traveled than by their roots in a particular place, one of the reasons that for centuries they have been seen as somewhat alien by inlanders.

### Hardening Land's Edge

It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that Americans turned their backs to the sea and began to think of shores as coasts, as points of vulnerability rather than opportunity. It was then that they began to arm the shores, establishing fixed points of immigration and transforming both the east and west coasts from relatively open borderlands into strictly policed borders. By the end of the nineteenth century the United States had defined itself as a continental nation that stretched “from sea to shining sea,” seizing islands but never giving them equal status with its continental acquisitions. Having now become the hard edge of the

land, coasts took on a very different meaning. Coastal communities lost their quasi-autonomous quality, becoming fully continental for the first time. American history and geography became landlocked. By the end of the nineteenth century, Plymouth Rock, which had been removed from the shore in the early eighteenth century and practically forgotten, was reinstalled as an icon of national origins. Now that time's arrow moved east to west, the east coast became associated with the past and the west coast with the future, graced by what Jonathan Raban has called the "end-of-the-world State of California."<sup>xxi</sup>

In the period roughly 1850-1970, America turned away from the sea, transforming its shores into coasts. This was due in part to the industrial revolution, which gave precedence to production over trade as the basis for the nation's wealth and privileged the great heartland cities. Linked to the interior by road and rail, seaports became more connected to both the deep interior and places around the world, but no longer maintained alongshore connections. Fishing cut its ties with the land and moved ever farther offshore. The coasting trade declined, smaller ports decayed, and coastal and island populations precipitously declined, leaving the shores to be recolonized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by inland folk seeking not employment but leisure, pleasure rather than sustenance.

In the late nineteenth century, hotels and boarding houses encroached on the

coast, filling in the gaps left by decaying fishing towns. At first, these attracted only the very wealthy. Eventually the automobile age would bring the shore within reach of a much wider urban and suburban population. At first the surge to the sea was mainly seasonal, but today more and more people are making it a permanent residence, especially in retirement. The urban industrial masses found at the shore a last frontier, a new kind of open space to colonize during weekends and vacations. Henry David Thoreau had declared the sea to be wilderness and the coast as the last unsullied frontier. The old coastal communities suffered a fate not unlike Native Americans. They were doubly displaced, losing their place on the shore but also becoming in the minds of the newcomers the last vestiges of a lost way of life. Many a fishing village and working waterfront first became a tourist attraction and later a maritime heritage site.

World War II had brought unprecedented militarization of America's coasts, but in the age of intercontinental bombers and missiles they ceased to be the country's first line of defense, opening up the shore to civilian uses. The real transformation came in the 1970s with the restructuring of the economy, shifting of industrial production overseas, largely to Asia, and changing America's function from that of the world's dominant producer to the globe's greatest consumer nation. With the advent of the container ship and the supertanker, world trade

boomed and the sea took on an importance it had not had since the nineteenth century. But commerce no longer flowed through the old seaports like New York and San Francisco, but through a whole new set of mechanized terminals located elsewhere like Bayonne and Oakland. The shift to air travel accelerated the decline of the old waterfronts, whose piers quickly rotted and seafaring populations virtually disappeared. Yet, it would not be until the 1980s that the possibilities of this empty space dawned on urban developers. Once it did, cities on the sea would be transformed beyond recognition. Today the sailor towns are gone. Few who live in the new waterfront high-rises have any material connection to water. It is for them entirely a space of leisure, a visual experience. They live *on* the sea, but have no experience *with* it, except when storms and tsunamis bring it crashing into their otherwise wholly landed existence.

### Coasts of Dreams and Nightmares

For millions who live far from coasts, shores nevertheless occupy a prominent place in their minds capes. Coasts are now a defining feature of national identity for all Americans, treated as inalienable heritage and precious natural resources to be defended against all enemies, natural as well as human. After Hurricane Camille in 1969 American flags were seen flying everywhere on the Mississippi coast; people responded to the Alaska oil spill as if had happened in

their own backyards. Whole inland regions now identify with coasts, which increasingly provide them with a collective identity. Maine touts its Lobster Coast, New Jersey has its Shore, and California is defined by its beaches, with what Kevin Starr calls its Coast of Dreams. People have also become possessive of coasts for personal reasons, associating them with precious childhood memories, youthful vitality, and comfortable old age.

To understand why people now crowd the coasts the way they do, it is necessary to know that we not only live *on* coasts but *by* them mentally and emotionally. They are now closely associated with both our desires and our fears. In recent years Americans have come to identify with coasts as with no other geographical feature. They have become fiercely possessive of lighthouses, which have replaced church spires as regional symbols in New England and elsewhere. Lighthouses, which once protected seafarers now demand protection themselves, everywhere threatened by coastal erosion. But when sensible planners suggest they be moved back from the sea, locals denounce this as retreat. Seaside property owners also demand that inland taxpayers protect them from the sea, arguing that they are the trustees of a kind of national commons, even when they refuse access to beaches to their fellow citizens.

Coastal access is everywhere a major issue as the value of shorefront

property rises to astronomical levels and those who build on the shore claim it as private property. Fishermen struggle to maintain their shore rights against developers, but so do surfers and divers. For the most part, the struggle over access is driven by reasons other than employment of the traditional kind. Coasts are now a place of consumption rather than production, making it the site of a range of activities – swimming, pleasure sailing, and surfing – that scarcely existed two centuries earlier. But we also need to consider the existential functions of the coast for those who come to the beach to do nothing except to stare out to sea, to be moved by its grandeur and thrilled by its power. Herman Melville was puzzled to observe in mid-nineteenth century Manhattan how many of those who no longer had any contact with the sea, came down to the waterfront on the weekends. He found there “thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries....How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they here?”

Melville would be astonished at how many more Americans now come down to the sea, not to do, but simply look.<sup>xxii</sup> To answer Melville’s question, one must consider the place of the sea in American culture, how it features as a final frontier, a replacement for the green fields that have been lost to urban and suburban development. Coasts are America’s favorite horizon, a place to project

their dreams, but also to locate their worst nightmares. Close encounters with the coast had always been the mariner's worst fear, but now the terrors come from the sea itself – hurricanes, shark attacks, and now tsunamis – fears which. *Jaws* affected not just beach goers, but people throughout the American heartland. Our seafaring nation has become a seafearing one.

### Learning to Live with the Sea

Few of our shores are any longer pristine. Natural beaches are rapidly replaced by artificial ones and protective wetlands are long gone. Native species of fish, birds, and animals are hugely endangered, but so too is *homo littoralis*. Few any longer make their living from the sea and the working waterfront is a rarity. Of the 5,300 miles of Maine's coastline only about 20 can be described as functioning as a nexus between land and sea. Coves and headlands that were once home to active fishing and clamming communities are now lined with the residences of summer people. When fishing industrialized it concentrated itself in a few large ports. The ancient connection between farming and fishing was severed, and the latest coastal colonists no longer know how to live *with* the sea.

Earlier generations knew not to build too close to the sea, and, when they did, to erect that kind of temporary housing that could be shifted alongshore or inshore when necessity dictated. The newcomers seek to armor the shore, to

seawall it. But this violates the very nature of that *ecotonal* zone where land and water intermixed. We attempt to pin it down, fix in place, only to discover that is the world's most recalcitrant geography. "Today a little more may belong to the sea, tomorrow a little less," wrote Rachel Carson, "Always the edge of the sea remains an elusive and indefinable boundary."<sup>xxiii</sup> The Japanese, who have concreted an estimated sixty five percent of their coasts, were not protected from the recent tsunami by their giant seawalls, which actually prevented coastal residents from seeing what was coming. Furthermore, modern harbor construction multiplied the force of the sea surge that wetlands and other natural features would have moderated. The fact that *tsunami* means "harbor wave" in Japanese suggests the way that by altering the coast humans have had a hand in their own destruction..

All around the world wetlands have been destroyed with disastrous consequences. Recent events on the Gulf coast show just how dangerous it is when waterworlds are subordinated to territorial interests. Right now it would not be an exaggeration to say that coasts designed to meet landlubbers needs are the greatest single threat to shores. What we witnessed at the time of Sandy was not a natural disaster, but a human one.

If our coasts are to have a sustainable future, we need to provide them with a



intelligible past, one that acknowledges the fact that the shore was the first home of humankind. It is as much a part of our heritage as any of the ancient landlocked monuments to which we devote so much attention. Wet archaeology has recently given us access to a part of our past of which we have been quite ignorant. We need to know much more about how humans have lived *with* the sea if we are to cope with this latest episode of climate change. We have become dangerously alienated from nature, but, even more troubling is our alienation from our own human nature, as this evolved at the point where land meets sea .

Around the world, coasts are not only crumbling physically, but the very idea of the coastline is being called into question.<sup>xxiv</sup> What was once seen as the world's most natural boundary is revealed to be among the most unnatural, a danger to itself. As Zygmunt Bauman has observed, the master metaphor of the twenty first century is not fixity but fluidity. In this era of liquid modernity, that which was supposed to bring order into the world has proved to be a source of disorder. For a long time we could not see the shore for the coast, but now, in the nick of time, it is coming into its own again. Scientists are just beginning to understand the dynamics of the land/sea interface, and humanists are now endeavoring to see both coasts and shores as historical actors in their own right. Tonight I hope I have convinced you just how vital this interdisciplinary enterprise

is if we are to cope with the ecological crisis we are currently faced with.

Avery Point, March 2013

## Endnotes:

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- i See John R. Gillis, The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History, Chicago; University of
- ii Mark Monmonier, Coastlines: How Mapmakers Frame the World and Chart Environmental Change, Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 2008, chapter i.
- iii Kenneth White, On the Atlantic Edge, Highland Scotland: Sandstone Press, 1988, 25.
- iv Eviatar Zerubavel, The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life, Chicago:
- v Carl Sauer, “Seashore – Primitive Home of Man,” Land and Life: A Selection of the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963,
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- vi Rowan Jacobsen, The Living Shore: Rediscovering a Lost World, New York: Bloomsbury, 2009, 128; also his Shadow on the Gulf: A Journey Through Our
- vii Martin Lewis and Karin Wigen, The Myth of the Continents: A Critique of
- viii John R. Gillis, Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), chapter I; J.B. Harley, “New England Cartography and the Native Americans,” American Beginnings: Exploration, Culture, and Cartography in the Land of Norumbega ed. Emerson W. Baker, et al. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1994, 288; G. Malcom Lewis, “Native North Americans’ Cosmological Ideas and Cartographical Awareness: Their Representation and Influence on Early European Exploration and Geographical Knowledge,” North American Explorations, i, ed. John L. Allen. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997, 81-2.
- ix Jonathan Scott, When the Waves Rules Britannia: Geography and Political Identities, 1500-1800 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- x J.H. Parry. Discovery of South America. London: Paul Elek, 1979, 39.
- xi Jeremy Brotton, “Terrestrial Globalism: Mapping the Globe in Early Modern Europe,”
- xii Wilcomb E. Washburn, “The Intellectual Assumptions and Consequences of Geographical Exploration in the Pacific,” The Pacific Basin, ed. H. Friis. New York:
- xiii Douglas H. McManis, European Impressions of the New England Coast, 1497-1620. University of Chicago Department of Geography Research Paper 139, Chicago,
- xiv Washburn, 327.
- xv Ladis K.D. Kristof, “The Nature of Frontiers and Boundaries,” Annals of the Association

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- xvi Rachel Carson, Edge of the Sea, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988, 1.
- xvii Philip Steinberg, “Insularity, Sovereignty, and Statehood: The Representation of Islands on Portolan Charts and the Construction of the Territorial State,” Geografiska  
Kristof, 269.
- xviii
- xix John R. Stilgoe, Common Landscapes of America, 1580-1845. New Haven: Yale, 1982, 17; Orrin Pilkey, A Celebration of the World’s Barrier Islands. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 270-71.
- xx Samuel Eliot Morison,  
Jonathan Raban, Coasting: A Private Voyage, New York: Penguin, 1988, 300.
- xxi
- xxii John R. Stilgoe, Alongshore, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.
- xxiii Carson, 1.
- xxiv On the difficulty of defining and measuring coasts, see Monmonier.