

Being Coastal

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There are many ways of being coastal, varying by time and by place. If one takes the time to seek them out, traces of all these ways can be found on the shores of San Francisco Bay. Names like Shellmound Street call to mind the Ohlone way of coastal life based on mobile hunting and gathering that once flourished there; China Camp offers a glimpse of bygone immigrant fishing communities, while the fortifications on Marin's headlands tell the story of the coast's military past. Remaining bits and pieces of an authentic San Francisco working waterfront sit next to the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, whose splendid collection of ships from earlier periods, reminds us of a fabled era of deep sea sailing. Angel Island suggests the ways that coastal islands were used as migration and quarantine centers, while Alcatraz, the location of the first lighthouse on the west coast and later a fort, military prison, and federal penitentiary adds yet further layers to this complex coastal archeology. Yet, no less authentically coastal are new high-end shopping precincts, marinas, and luxury residences like Emeryville's Watergate that now crowd the shores around the Bay. Look carefully and you can find in just this one place evidence of all the phases that coasts around the world have been going through over the past three hundred years.

Coasts are the most rapidly changing of all American landscapes; and the transformations that have taken place since the Second World War are breathtaking in their scope and consequences. Everywhere we see a movement toward the sea. Today 80% of all Californians live within 30 miles of the ocean, but living *on* the coast is not the same as living *with* the coast in the manner that the Ohlone or the immigrant Chinese shrimpers once did. They were amphibious, living off both sea and land, moving between them. For such societies, the coast was not then a line where land and water met, but a broad zone where they mixed. For them the shore was not an edge or barrier, but a place of place of transit and circulation. They were more likely to be part-time fishermen than fulltime seafarers, and they moved alongshore rather than very far offshore.

Coastal societies like these exist today only in a few developing countries. They have largely disappeared in Europe and North America, along with the working waterfronts that are the last vestiges of an amphibious way of life. 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. Everywhere traces of the old coastal life are fading and even our best maritime museums are not very good at preserving its memory. San

San Francisco's Hyde Street Pier displays deepwater ships rather than the much more numerous smallcraft that did a much greater volume of fishing and transportation. It plays to romantic conceptions of the sea as a world apart, ignoring the constant exchanges between land and water that sustained the Bay's numerous coastal communities. Reconstructed sailortowns leave the impression that those who made their living alongshore were single, footloose unmarried men, when, in fact, coastal work involved women as well as men, who returned home each night, living lives that were deeply embedded in family and community. In reality, coastal societies were different from both maritime and inland populations, constituting a buffer between the two but also having their own unique history and geography that deserves our recognition.

Earlier coastal societies knew how to live *with* a shore that gave them their living but also frequently took from them their property and their lives. They knew not to build too close to the sea, but to erect that kind of temporary housing that could be shifted alongshore or inshore when necessity dictated. Those who insist on building on the seaside ignore their experience, assuming that the coast is the edge of land like any other. Today we have a different species of coastal dwellers who no longer know how to live with the sea.

We talk loosely of America as being bicoastal, using stereotyped notions of east and west coasters to differentiate them from the inlanders of “flyover country.” But, in fact, both are actually inlanders who have chosen to bring their interior habits to a new place. Coasts have become the last frontier for interior populations, overwhelming the last remnants of older coastal communities and making the coast itself an extension of land, a mistake which we are repeatedly paying for after major storms and tsunamis. The effort to extend the land to the edge of the sea, as if there is some line in the sand that the forces of nature will not cross, has been catastrophic not only environmentally but socially and politically.

Linked by Water

If we would only look, America has a rich coastal past to learn from. While it is rarely acknowledged in standard historical accounts, what became the United States began as a gaggle of coastal societies, more attached to the sea than to land. The English, French, and Dutch were not initially interested in the interiors. They were themselves littoral, riverine, and island peoples, who were past masters of living with coasts. European fishermen exploited the coastal waters of North America without even taking up permanent settlement. When they eventually decided to plant colonies, northern Europeans did so first on islands – Roanoke, Jamestown, Manhattan, St. Croix -- initially

turning their backs to the land to face the sea which was their lifeline. Initially they were quite successful in establishing lucrative exchanges with Native American coastal peoples. As long as Europeans did not take possession of lands, relations remained quite friendly. As in Europe itself, coastal peoples were very good at establishing peaceful trade among themselves.

Even when Virginia and Massachusetts colonists pushed inland in the early seventeenth century, the settlements remained quite dependent on the coast, linked more by water than land, still tied more closely to other shores around the Atlantic rim than to their own interiors. The first American cities were all sea or riverports. 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 Puritan agrarian interior. As Samuel Eliot Morison put it: "God performed no miracle on the New England soil. He gave the sea."

For two centuries, destiny's arrow pointed seaward. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the economic and political strength of the United States was coastal in character. It became a continental power not because of its overland prowess, but because of its maritime capacities. Like its eastern counterpart, the west coast was

explored and settled not by land but by water. When Thomas Jefferson instructed Captain Merriweather Lewis in 1803, he told him to find "most direct and practical water communication across the continent for the purpose of commerce..." saying nothing about settlement. And it was the search for safe harbors rather than arable lands that justified the possession of Oregon and California. The west coast 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 the sea, not the land, that gave the United States its identity and shape in the early nineteenth century.

The United States was bicoastal from the beginning. Boston merchants felt closer to their west coast trading partners than they did to those who broke sod on the Great Plains.

The coastal cultures of the Pacific as well as the Atlantic were easily transferred to the west coast. Chinese fishermen felt at home on the shores of San Francisco Bay, while Boston merchants made Monterey and later Honolulu into little Bostons. Coastal societies have always been diasporic and cosmopolitan in nature. Belonging exclusively to neither land nor sea, they are more open and permeable than the interiors. Coastal people are defined more by the routes they travel than by their roots to 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 treat their coasts as points of vulnerability rather than opportunity.

It was

then that they began to arm the shores, establish fixed points of immigration and transform 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," giving far more symbolic importance to its coastal than its land boundaries. Having now become the hard edge of the land, coasts took on a very different meaning. Coastal communities lost their quasi-autonomous quality, becoming peripheral for the first time.

In the period roughly 1850-1970, America turned away from the sea, transforming its coasts and coastal islands into extensions of the land. 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 overseas than to the coasts contiguous to themselves. 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 profit.

The urban industrial masses found at the shore a last frontier, a new kind of wide open space to colonize during weekends and vacations. The shore's promoters presented it as an empty space, the last refuge of wild nature. 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. In the early twentieth century hotels and boarding houses encroached on the coast, but only the very wealthy sought private residence there. But the automobile age ultimately brought 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.

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. In an era when services

account for three quarters of all the economic activity in the United States, coasts became attractive to the new tourist and leisure industries. 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 developers. Once it did, cities on the sea would be transformed beyond recognition. Today the sailortowns 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, of visual experience. They live on the coast, but have no experience with the ocean, except when storms and tsunamis bring it crashing into their otherwise wholly landed existence.

Coast of Dreams

There is one other way of being coastal. For millions who do not live anywhere near the shores and may never have even visited them, coasts occupy a prominent place in their mindscapes. 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 become possessive of coasts for personal reasons as well, associating them with precious childhood memories, youthful vitality, and comfortable old age.

To understand why people crowd the coasts the way they do, it is necessary to know how they live *by* them mentally. In recent years Americans have come to identify with coasts as with no other geographical feature. They are considered a kind of national commons where everyone has a right to that which lies below the tide line. 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.

The surge to the shore also reflects a massive shift in leisure patterns, which has made the coast as 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 puzzled over this phenomenon in the opening pages of Moby Dick, when he noted at the water's edge of Manhattan "thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries....How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they here?"

To answer Melville's question, one must consider the place of the sea in American culture, a largely neglected subject but one that begs for our attention. The editors of this journal made a step in the right direction when in 1990 they added the ocean to its title, thus casting their lot with those who believe that coasts cannot be understood apart from the sea. They were also right in noting in 2006 that "we can't see the present or prepare for the future without a perspective that includes the past." (22, nr. 3, p. 2) The coasts as we know them today are the product of many forces, some emanating from the interior, others generated offshore. But they are also the product of the coasts' complicated, multilayered histories. While the numbers who know how to live *with* coasts are now small, their past and current experience with littorals is invaluable if we are to understand how people can relate to this unique environment. Those who live *on* coasts also need to know their own histories, if only to prevent the repetition of the disasters that occur when people resident there ignore the need to respect the nature of the shore itself. But those who live *by* coasts must also examine the origins of the

images they hold so dear, for their mindscapes play a very significant role in determining the national and transnational policies that now shape the future of coasts around the world.