

## **The Conflict between Coast and Shore**

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America's shores have been colonized three times over. First there were the people from Asia, who arrived by migrating along our western shores. Then came the Europeans, who arrived 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. We now 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." A man-made coast now overlays nature's shore, and threatens not only to destroy the environment but, as we have seen during Hurricane Sandy, to undermine itself.

We use the terms shore and coast interchangeably, failing to acknowledge that before there were coasts there were only shores. The shore was not a fixed linear boundary, but a porous place of transit and circulation. Early sea charts marked ports and landing places, but did not delineate what lay between. Like native shore dwellers, Europeans initially used the shores lightly. Initially, shores provided temporary camps for fishermen and traders, whose dwellings were makeshift and portable, allowing periodic retreat when winter came or storms threatened.. By the mid-seventeenth century, shores were just beginning to be settled by a hybrid population of farmer-fishers, but were still as much oriented to sea as to land. The notion of coastline was

not common until the end of the eighteenth century.

What was to become the United States began as a gaggle of enclaves, tied together and to Europe by the sea. It was initially a maritime nation, oriented more to sea than land. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that Americans turned their backs on the sea and populated the heartland. The shores emptied out, leaving them open to be recolonized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by inland folk seeking not employment but leisure. Hotels and boarding houses encroached on the shore, initially attracting only the very wealthy. Eventually the automobile age would bring the sea within reach of a much wider urban and suburban population. At first, the surge to the coasts was mainly seasonal, but today more and more people are making it a permanent residence, especially in retirement. The coastline, previously a cartographer's abstraction, now takes on a material reality which often obliterated all traces of the preexisting shore.

In the past, people lived *with* the shore, knowing its ways. Today, most who live there have little experience with the sea except when storms and tsunamis bring it crashing into their otherwise wholly landed existence. Yet, coasts are a defining feature of national identity for Americans, to be defended against all enemies, natural as well as human. 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, its Coast of Dreams.

But the modern construction of coasts as hard, fixed edges of the nation are now in conflict with the natural ecology of shores, which Rachel Carson famously described as "elusive and indefinable boundaries." Few of our shores are any longer pristine. Natural

beaches have been replaced by artificial ones and protective wetlands are long gone. Native species of fish, birds, and animals are largely endangered, but so too is *homo littoralis*. Few 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. In our effort to protect coasts, to seawall them, we have wrecked havoc on shores.

Archaeologists tell us that the first home of *Homo Sapiens* was the shore. It has been said that “we were made for – and made by – that thin world where land meets sea.” But right now we are at a critical point in our evolution as a species. Having substituted man-made coasts for natural shores, we have cut ourselves off from much of our history. We cannot afford to be walled off from the sea, for in doing so we alienate ourselves not only from nature, but from our own humanity.

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