

For centuries the coasts of Japan have been ravaged by deadly tsunamis. Local communities responded by erecting tsunami stones, not memorials to the dead but reminders of the highest points of inundation. In recent years, these stones have been displaced and forgotten. When the great tsunami of March 11, 2011, struck local people had no way of knowing how far to flee. Almost sixteen thousand people died, and the number of missing remains at 2652.

New Jersey might do worse than to erect Sandy stones to remind it of just how far the ocean can reach, but no doubt these would be objected to for the same reasons that Santa Barbara rejected painting a green line on its streets that would have marked projections of sea rise levels. Critics objected that the line would lower property values and scare away tourists. There was once a time when the traces of disaster, shipwrecks and ruined wharves, were allowed to linger on beaches as reminders of the dangers of the sea. Today, sands are quickly cleansed, for beaches are the places we turn to forget the world, our chosen places for forgetting. We live in an age of coastal amnesia.

It is not just the memory of particular events that has been erased, but the entire history of the shore itself. The shore has become the place where nothing is ever supposed to happen, a refuge that offers retreat from the frenzied pace of our everyday lives. The people who might be expected to have longer memories – fishers and sailors – are now only a tiny minority of those who live on the coasts. They have been priced out of shorefront property by newcomers who have little experience

of the sea. What little of the coastal past remains is to be found in maritime museums and antique shops. Just as the “eternal sea” is supposed to be something that never changes, so we view the coast as timeless, existing apart from history. America has forgotten that it was once the most coastal of all nations, discovered and then settled by sea, and so

economically

dependent on it that in 1837 Alexis de Tocqueville predicted for it a glorious maritime future.

Today, more of us live on coasts than ever before. Just over fifty percent of Americans live in what is designated the coastal zone, which makes up only fifteen percent of America’s territory. But the coasts we have returned to are not those that Tocqueville or Melville would recognize. Working waterfronts are gone, fishing has collapsed and shipping moved elsewhere. America’s great seaports have lost not only their wharfs but their sailortowns. Those who now occupy the high-priced condos in New York’s Battery City are there to recreate and consume. Their contact with the sea is visual and they have not the slightest idea how to live *with* it.

Coasts have changed more than any other part of the American landscape. They have been engineered to suit the interests of resort owners and land developers, and, in the process, have become increasingly vulnerable. They have become the hard edge of the land rather than the buffer that Rachel Carson rightly called a “marginal world,” where land and water coexist: “today a little more land may belong to the sea, tomorrow a little less.” Ironically, the seawalling, setting the shore in stone, has made it more rather than less vulnerable. With seventy to eighty percent of our wetlands gone, shores are subject to unprecedented erosion and pollution. Another of nature’s protections, the dunes, are rejected by homeowners who complain that they deprive them of a sea view. Our shores no longer support fish, birds, and marine

mammals; and to the list of endangered species must be added human beings, especially *homo littoralis*.

Shores have always been our most dynamic as well as most biodiverse geography. Time and again, in earlier periods of climate change, they were the last resort of interior populations. Now that they are so endangered we have no place to turn. This time, let us not forget our coastal history. It will do no good just to mark the highwater line or place a plaque where a house once stood. Instead, let us learn to see Sandy as part of the long, highly instructive environmental and human history of coasts and coastal peoples. For it is only through the past that we will fully understand our present predicaments and future possibilities. In this epochal event we witnessed the inseparability of human and natural history. It is time to step back, both literally and figuratively, to learn from earlier generations who knew to live lightly and flexibly *with* and not just *on* the shore, retreating when necessary. This is not the time to treat the shore as a fixed thing that can be rebuilt and restored as if set in stone. A sustainable coast is a changing coast, and we must learn to change with it.

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