

Our Ocean Backyard
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The Coast that might have been

There is value in looking back from time to time to see not only what our region looked like in the not to distant past, but also to realize how much has changed and how differently it could have turned out had history gone in a different direction.

Fifty-four years ago I arrived here to join the early faculty at UC Santa Cruz. After four undergraduate years surfing at UCSB I was a bit landlocked in graduate school at Oregon State University in Corvallis. Instead of being on the beach, I was often about 150 miles offshore working from a ship in 10,000 feet of cold North Pacific ocean. I was looking forward to being on the California coast again and getting back into the water. I'd heard about Pleasure Point, so not long after arriving in town I threw my old longboard in the car and took off for the east side.

Several things were immediately apparent. The first was that the water was a whole lot colder than Santa Barbara, where no one wore wet suits simply because there weren't many around in the early 1960's. We all just got out of the water about November as the water got cold and then started surfing again in March when the water was tolerable. But I quickly realized in my mild hypothermia at Pleasure Point that surfing here was going to require some insulation. Everyone else in the water had wetsuits, and something else new to me, leashes, which also hadn't been around in my UCSB days. After losing my board a few times and swimming through the ice water to get it back I soon appreciated that the leash must have been invented in Santa Cruz. Necessity or survival was the mother of invention.

The other thing I noticed as soon as I paddled out was the smell and discolored water right off Pleasure Point. I had minored in Civil Engineering in graduate school and had taken a course in Sanitary Engineering, which was really all about sewage treatment; and the odor that day was unmistakably that of sewage. It didn't take long to find out that in addition to being called Pleasure Point, the break was also known by locals as Sewers.

This experience and a concern about the potential problems of nearshore discharge of partially treated sewage got me involved in my initial ocean research in Santa Cruz, which focused on wastewater disposal and ocean currents around Monterey Bay. In the late 1960's, the wastewater from Capitola and the Live Oak area was treated to a primary level and discharged about 200 feet off Pleasure Point in about eight feet of water. At low tides today you can still see the old discharge pipe crossing the beach about 250 feet upcoast of the beach stairway below the blufftop county park.

At that time, the city of Santa Cruz also used only primary treatment (settling and chlorination) and discharged their treated effluent about 2000 feet off West Cliff Drive at the end of Almar Avenue in about 25 feet of water. On a calm day you could see the cloudy discharge emerge at the ocean surface not far off Mitchell's Cove.

Within a few months I learned that there was another local discharge. This was from a slaughterhouse on Shaffer Road just across the railroad tracks from what is now the UCSC Coastal Science Campus and Long Marine Laboratory. All of their blood and wash water was piped to the ocean where it was discharged into a cave about 2000 feet west of Natural Bridges State Beach that the marine lab now pumps their seawater from.

There were new threats to the Santa Cruz coast on the way, however. On April 9, 1970, Pacific Gas & Electric took a six-month option on 6,800 acres of coastal land just north of Davenport owned by Coast Dairies and Lands. Their plan was to build six one million kilowatt nuclear generating plants, which would have made it the world's largest. Their public information program touted nuclear energy as efficient, economical, safe and clean. I was part of a small group that formed to look into the proposed nuclear plant, which we gave the acronym CEDAR to (the Committee to Examine the Dangers of Atomic Reactors). Upon closer examination, nuclear power really wasn't efficient, economical, safe or clean.

At that time the town of Davenport wasn't served by any city services, such as trash pickup. So the residents typically took their trash and dumped it off the coastal bluff below the railroad tracks across Highway 1 from the town and then would just periodically light it on fire.

In 1971 the old family-owned Wilder Ranch was sold to a Canadian investment firm. The Wilder family had their property taxes raised by the county assessor who decided to tax the land on its value as development rather than farmland, which drove them out of business. The investment firm put forward a proposal for seven villages on the ranch that would have housed 35,000 new residents, virtually doubling the population of the city with the associated demands on city water, sewer, schools, police and fire.

The Santa Cruz coast was under a number of threats at the time of the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970. At the same time I was teaching the first Environmental Studies class at UCSC. After a semester of learning about the environmental issues facing the area, the students and I decided to do some environmental reporting the next semester and put together a report covering all of these issues and what was at stake for the Santa Cruz County coast. In May of 1970 we finished the project and printed up several hundred copies of the booklet, *Santa Cruz and the Environment*.

The students had all gone home for the summer, so I took these down to the two bookshops in town at the time for them to sell at fifty cents each. While I was naively expecting there to be some expression of appreciation for the student's efforts at describing the environmental issues we all faced, the reaction was quite different. For several weeks the Sentinel carried front page stories of the backlash from city and county leaders who were angered by our exposing issues that threatened them as public officials. As a young and untenured assistant professor this was all very unsettling for me personally, getting roasted on the front pages of the paper night after night, with headlines like: Fight Brews Over Report On Pollution; UCSC Pollution Report Takes Some Official Raps; SC Council Criticizes UCSC Report; UCSC Environmental Report Blasted.

Over the next several years, however, each of these proposed projects was turned down, the problems were resolved, outfalls were eliminated and wastewater treatment was improved and

discharged safely further offshore. Those idealistic 19-year-old students who researched and wrote about these environmental issues back in 1970 are now in adults in their early 70s. In April 2008, I was invited along with Dan Haifley to write a biweekly Sentinel column on Our Ocean Backyard.