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# Our Coast: The Effects of Urbanization and Coastal Development on California Surf Culture

Alex Pines

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## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

### INTRODUCTION

Growing up in Southern California, the ocean has always been a very important part of my life. For me, swimming and surfing in the ocean is almost like having a conversation with nature. Unlike snowboarding or skateboarding, where one rides on stationary ground, the ocean is an unpredictable, moving force. One must understand where and how to move with the wave as it pushes forward. Surfing is a lifestyle and a culture and there was never a point in my life where I thought that could all disappear. However, with the overwhelming increase in urbanization, population growth and coastal development, we are witnessing an ever-increasing rate of water pollution and disappearing surf spots.

Urbanization has increased dramatically in California and development has taken over nearly 90% of the coast. Extreme weather changes are beginning to degrade the current landscape and force families out of their homes.

California is experiencing a detrimental state of expanding urbanization. In just over two generations, more than ninety percent of California's coastline has been lost to development. Coastal conditions are constantly getting worse as erosion takes out historical surf breaks, degrades

current structural conditions, and reduces public beach access.

On January 15, 2010, a state of emergency was declared in San Francisco. Due to extensive erosion, 900 feet of coastline fell into the sea, jeopardizing a 14-foot tube carrying raw sewage underneath parts of the Great Highway south of Sloat Boulevard. The city's response was to build a temporary wall of giant boulders along the bluff, which can have greater long term effects.

Erosion is a major side-effect of coastal development, as the tidal currents are thrown off the natural course. The effects are greatly intensified during El Nino periods when ocean temperatures rise with water levels. Sea-walls have become a temporary solution, but have had greater repercussions, as the waves bounce off the rocks and carry more sand down-coast, eroding neighboring beaches. California is known for their world-class waves, but what happens when they all start to disappear?

While I was shooting between December and January 2010-2011, the entire state of California was hit with a record-breaking storm. Flooding and intensified erosion forced hundreds of families out of their homes and put their homes in danger of falling into the ocean.

OUR COAST aims to emphasize a deeper cultural understanding of the depreciating effects that urbanization and expensive development projects are having on the ocean and people who view the ocean as a way of life.

## APPROACH

I approached OUR COAST as a personal inquiry of such human destruction and how it is affecting California residents and surfers. I travelled to California several times in the making of this project, both during the summer and in the winter months. During the winter El Nino months, waves on the western coast are bigger than they typically are during the summer, and the winter prior to my documentation, waves were so big that they destroyed several highway passages and continued to degrade the coastline where many houses are built. With these homeowners at risk, and surfers at risk of the highway falling into their lineup, I knew I had a responsibility to document the transformation before it was too late.

## METHODS

In producing OUR COAST, I had to consider who would be the most effective subjects in telling the story. I contacted major environmental and ocean preservation organizations, including the Surfrider Foundation,

Heal the Bay, Save the Waves Coalition, and the Surfers Heritage Foundation. Each organization played a helpful role in either participating in interviews or referring me to locals and surf industry professionals who have witnessed California's change firsthand. I decided to interview Coastal Preservation Manager, Mark Rauscher at Surfrider, Gary Griggs, Director of the Marine Institute at University of California, Santa Cruz, David Pu' u, professional surf photographer and long-time environmental activist, San Diego natives Charlie Noonan and Kris Eklund, and San Clemente local Jean Pierre Van Swae. Each played a vital part in giving a well-rounded portrayal of living and working in California and seeing their livelihoods transform before their eyes.

#### CREATIVE DECISIONS

In shooting and filming OUR COAST, I captured several time-lapses of the coast, the water and the developments along the coast. I wanted them to be colorful and to portray the true beauty of the coast. In a sense, it was a way for me to preserve the beauty and to show the audience what is at stake. I had no concrete schedule of times in the day when I would shoot, as the tides and sets were unpredictable and inconsistent, but I was always at the beach at sunrise and again at sunset. It was very important to shoot in prime light, and to capture the ethereal nature of surfing and

the ocean. To further the impact, I hired a helicopter pilot who took me up over the coast to capture aerial imagery.

## EVOLUTION OF PROJECT

OUR COAST began as a personal project and only included stills of the ocean and the occasional surfer. While the images satisfied my initial goal, as I studied more into multimedia and video production, I came to the conclusion that the story would be more efficiently told accompanied with audio. Every time I went home to visit family and friends, I shot more and began to familiarize myself with hidden surf spots and issues concerning the coast. In the Fall of 2010, I received a grant to return to California and travel the entire coast to compare neighboring coastal communities. The grant allowed me to go drive up to San Francisco and Santa Cruz, where the waves are much bigger than in Southern California. While erosion is evident along the entire coast, it was apparent that the bigger the waves, the greater the energy and force scraping away at the cliffs and back-beach. OUR COAST has evolved into an in-depth look and portrayal of the California coast from the local' s point of view.

## INTENDED AUDIENCE

The intended audience for OUR COAST spans the east coast to the west coast. It plays an integral part in educating the public on the east coast of the transformation and risks faced by California residents and surfers. Living on the east coast for the past four years, I have come to realize that the things I take for ‘normal,’ such as the ocean, are often times an unknown entity for residents here. I want this piece to show those individuals and families what coastal communities face when poor or rash environmental planning comes into play. While pollution is a concern for the entire world, I want this piece to portray the effects of ocean pollution and how it can affect communities hundreds of miles away. I also want OUR COAST to speak to California residents as well. While those directly affected by climate change, rising sea levels, pollution and loss of homes due to erosion will be familiar with the topic, I aim to speak to those who take the ocean for granted. I want this to be a wake up call to take better care of our environment and to treasure what we have left of it.

## INFLUENCES

In the making of this project, I have been influenced by many people, through both direct working and learning environments, as well as distant blogs, magazines and websites. I have been reading Surfer and Surfing magazines since I was about seven years old, and have been

inspired by many of their stories. There are often original editorial stories about hidden surf spots in hidden lands. They send photographers and surfers to find new surf spots and to educate the surfing communities of untouched pristine surf spots around the globe and that played a very influential role in motivating me to tell a story very few people outside California concern themselves with. Bruce Strong has influenced my way of thinking about stories and how to effectively tell them to an unfamiliar audience. If I hadn't studied multimedia and editing with him, I likely would not have a story at all similar to what it is today.

Morgan Maassen, a young photographer from Santa Barbara and Quality Peoples, a blog by designer Ed Fladung, have been some of the biggest influences in my style of surf photography. Color plays a very big part in establishing their work, and I have come to believe it is one of the most important aspects in portraying the ocean, the sunsets and the surfers.

I have also been greatly influenced by the ocean, itself. When I am around or in the ocean, I feel and think differently than if I were anywhere else in the world, and I try to capture that in my imagery. When editing, I recall what I was feeling when I was shooting and take every measure to make that come to life in post.

EDITING



Editing OUR COAST was an evolutionary process. Initially, I knew what I wanted to say in the piece as a whole, but each time I went back to editing, I saw new things. I combined stills, video, motion graphics and audio to give an overall feel of being frozen in a moment, while also giving the viewer a chance to experience the motion and sounds of the water. OUR COAST is made entirely in Final Cut Pro and After Effects and utilizes key aspects of motion graphics, visual sequencing and multimedia storytelling. The editing style is meant to take the viewer on a moving journey along the coast told through the perspective of ocean experts and active surfers.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORK

OUR COAST is a personal achievement in documenting a place I have grown up with and grown to cherish. I have had several good friends lose their homes and fallen ill due to the powerful and sometimes destructive nature of the ocean. It is my goal to build awareness of the dangers of not cherishing our land and our environment and the consequences that can come about from those dangers. This is a documentation of the beauty, the soul and the power of the ocean.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There have been countless individuals who have helped me along this journey. First, I would like to thank my professors and advisors Tom Kennedy and Bruce Strong for the constant advice and encouragement to never stop shooting, and for showing me what it takes to produce quality stories.

I would like to thank my peers for always pushing me to be better and for the constant feedback, no matter the time of day or night. Matt Ziegler – thank you for working with me on so many multimedia projects and for always helping me with sports and neighborly crises. David Miller, I cannot thank you enough for all of the designs and animations you have made for me over the years. I am truly inspired by your work, and it has set a tone on OUR COAST better than I could have done myself. Bridget Werner, thank you for helping me organize my life and my projects when sleep was out of the picture.

Michael Morse – thank you for opening up my world of video knowledge. Your emails and links have helped me countless times during production.

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Thank you to my parents, who let me live at home for free and provided me home cooked meals through out the production of this project.

Thank you to everyone who let me crash on their couches along the coast – Alex Popper, Rachel Horowitz, Jon Laird, Spencer Diamond, Kris Eklund, Charlie Noonan, and The Wilson Family. Without all of you, I would have been living out of a car.

A very big thank you to the Renee Crown Honors Department for awarding me a grant and the opportunity to fulfill this very personal project.

Rob Dekker, thank you for providing some very useful music samples and suggestions.

Lastly, and most importantly, thank you to everyone involved in the making of this project!

## SOURCES/SUBJECTS

Gary Griggs  
Director, Marine Institute at University of California Santa Cruz  
Coastal Processes and Geologic Hazards  
ggriggs@es.ucsc.edu

Charlie Noonan  
San Diego native  
(818) 268-5776

David Pu' u  
(805) 794-0123

Mark Rauscher  
Coastal Preservation Manager  
Surfrider Foundation  
markrauscher@surfrider.org  
(949) 492-8170

Surfing Heritage Foundation  
(949) 388 0313

Jean Pierre Van Swae  
San Clemente Surfboard Shaper  
flsurfboards@att.net

Rick Wilson  
Coastal Management Coordinator  
Surfrider Foundation  
Rickwilson@surfrider.org  
(949) 492-8170

## SUMMARY

“There’s no question that California’s population has doubled in the 43 years since I’ve been here,” said Gary Griggs, Director of the Marine Institute at UC Santa Cruz. “It’s gone from 19 million to almost 39 million people. And most of those people, 75% of them are living in coastal counties.” Urbanization has increased dramatically in California and development has taken over nearly 90% of the coast. Extreme weather changes are beginning to degrade the current landscape and force families out of their homes.

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long term effects.

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“If sea level rises by one foot or two feet or three feet by 2100, were going to see a lot of California’ s beaches disappear. No matter how much sand we might throw on them to keep them there, it’ s going to be a different coastline than we see today.” –Griggs

We are beginning to see the impact of such a huge population squeezed into a limited amount of space, and surfers are the first to experience the consequences. With increased land use, we are seeing an accompanying increase in pollution, and surfers are the first to find out. Runoff from river mouths, farms and improper sewage outlets stream directly into the

ocean and back into the air. Surfers are increasingly complaining of stomach flu, sinus infections and more recently, MRSA. At some point, surfers are forced to ask themselves when to call it quits to save their health.

Surfers are also experiencing the increased development and pollution as their beloved surf spots are disappearing. Dana Point, for example, used to be one of the greatest spots in Orange County and all the local surfers dubbed it Killer Dana. In 1967, the land was transformed into a harbor, and the construction and pollutants from boat traffic eliminated the break altogether. Bird Rock has also changed dramatically from pollution several years back. What was once a grassy reef has turned into a rock reef. The replacement of a near by sewage pump killed all the vegetation on the reef, which has transformed the wave completely. Surfers are now cutting their feet as they try to walk out on the rocky reef to the line-up, as well as getting increasingly sick in the area.

Aside from experts and avid surfers, many California residents are unaware of the impact they are having on the ocean, and thus on their fellow humans. OUR COAST educates and portrays the most urgent issues surrounding the coast and spotlights the people who are most affected by it.

