

UCLA

Electronic Green Journal

Title

An Ocean Beach Diary?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4br545xp>

Journal

Electronic Green Journal, 1(19)

Author

Miller, Ryder W.

Publication Date

2003

DOI

10.5070/G311910532

Copyright Information

Copyright 2003 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

An Ocean Beach Diary?

Ryder W. Miller

San Francisco, California, USA

.....

Ocean Beach (part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area) in San Francisco, California, provides readily available access to the seashore for residents of, and visitors to the city. The seashore is the home to shorebirds, but also an important place for recreation. Rather than environmentalists avoiding the beach as part of a larger effort to lessen the impact of visitor use of the beach, the author suggests that environmentalists can be observers/witnesses to monitor the recreational use of the natural resource. Over the years there have been numerous environmental concerns that have impacted Ocean Beach, including wastewater runoff, erosion, and wildlife disturbance. Concerned citizens can take action by becoming involved with the San Francisco Department of the Environment's Ocean Beach Task Force that works on a number related of issues. An interpretive/naturalist presence at the beach or a popular book about the local natural history could effect visitor behavior there, and therefore mitigate against harmful use of Ocean Beach.

Description

In San Francisco, California, Ocean Beach lines the western edge of the city, all the way from the famous Cliff House restaurant in the northwest to Fort Funston in the southwest. There are no boardwalks with stores or numerous restaurants along its length. The city, including a few restaurants, is on the other side of the Great Highway that lines the coast in San Francisco. The Pacific Ocean waters are cold, and the surfers wear wetsuits. The waves at Ocean Beach are not very large. The National Park Service, through the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA), has oversight and management responsibilities for the area. Ocean Beach is exemplary as a public beach because of the easily available access it provides San Franciscans to the seashore. There are numerous bus and streetcar lines that end close to the shoreline. One can hike for miles along its length. On hot days there is a sense of community while crowds gather to watch the sunset at the end of the day.

Need for the Resource

The ocean provides a dependable and affordable source of recreation for many. It provides cool weather during the summer; it allows one to think of

other places, and different ways. Ocean Beach resides at the end of the Western World. Lenček and Bosker (1999) relay the historical importance the ocean played for the literary Romantics and later generations. They tout the beach as a "Paradise on Earth." At Ocean Beach, one can commune with the ocean, the sky, and the night. One can listen to the waves and observe bird life. It is also one of the few places where San Franciscans without cars can visit the ocean. On weekends, Ocean Beach is a popular place for bonfire parties. For some, Ocean Beach has become an essential part of their recreational needs.

The proximity of the ocean has also had an impact on the mind frame of the city. In San Francisco's early days, during the mid 1800s, many traveled to San Francisco by ship. San Francisco Bay was port for trade and the interior region that was the site of the Gold Rush. Locals have been so enamored of the sea and the rich local marine resource, that it was possible to create marine reserves in the nearby waters like the Gulf of the Farallones Marine Reserve (which include the Farallon Islands) to the west, the Cordell Bank Marine Reserve to the northwest, and the Monterey Bay Marine Sanctuary to the southwest. There is also a National Park Service Maritime Museum in San Francisco, and communities of ocean singers and surfers. For many locals, the ocean has been an integral part of their lives. Looking out towards the horizon, one is reminded of the bigger world with its foreign ports.

Personal Experience as Observations

For years I have ventured to Ocean Beach to commune with the ocean, the sky, the night, and to observe shorebirds. One can hike unimpeded for many miles along its length. I present myself as the model for concerned citizen as observer, in contrast to the concerned non-visitor. For those who need the inspiration and sustenance gained from nature experiences, a model of behavior reflecting the values of concerned use can find the redeemable qualities for those who would argue that certain places should be left entirely alone. But the decision to make a place off-limits can be a mistake as damage may still occur since the unconcerned are left to do whatever they want unobserved. Unfortunately, those who are not concerned, those who would use such places as Ocean Beach for harmful recreational purposes, will still use such places out of sight of the concerned. I can offer 10 years experience as an observer of what has transpired at Ocean Beach over the years. I have also written numerous articles for local community newspapers about the impact that visitors have had on the local wildlife.

Hiking on Ocean Beach in the presence of the ocean, the sky, the night, and birds have been some of the best experiences of my life. While I visited the

ocean I tried to understand what it could teach me. It reminded me that certain borders, like the shoreline, exist between irreconcilable worlds. It reminded me that life could be different, because it is different elsewhere. The ocean teaches the lesson of the power of persistence. The shoreline and nearby locals are the meeting places between different cultures. The shoreline offers itself as readily available illustration of these lessons.

Environmental Issues at Ocean Beach

San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, Jr. established an interagency Ocean Beach Task Force to resolve issues at Ocean Beach. The taskforce is under the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Department of the Environment and there are board members from some local chapters of environmental groups like the Audubon Society and Surfrider Foundation. There also are members from local businesses and other concerned parties. Jared Blumenfeld, Director of the Dept of the Environment (DOE), introduced the Ocean Beach Vision Statement, which reads as follows:

The vision for Ocean Beach is to enhance and preserve this valuable urban/natural resource by making recommendations for an accountable, pro-active, multi-agency, holistic and coordinated management philosophy that prioritizes Ocean Beach's environmental sustainability and health balanced with the reasonable needs of public access and enjoyment.

The multi-agency task force works to achieve this vision and to resolve problems that occur at Ocean Beach. One can find out more about the task force on the Internet at:

http://www.ci.sf.ca.us/sfenvironment/aboutus/openspaces/ocean_beach.htm. Some of the environmental issues that they have worked on include wastewater runoff, protection of wildlife communities, erosion control, and recreational use.

Pollution

In a pipe observable at Fort Funston, treated wastewater from San Francisco is pumped four miles out, into the deep ocean. After a heavy rain the ocean waters are also polluted due to urban runoff. Storm water runoff, which can be mixed with sewage during a heavy rain, is released at two locations (at lookout structures) on Ocean Beach and one at Fort Funston. The local San Francisco Surfrider Foundation, a community of surfers, in the past regularly tested the water for harmful bacteria and posted the results on the Internet. The ocean water testing is now taken care of by staff members of the nearby Oceanside Waste Water Treatment Plant. Arleen Navarret, Supervising

Biologist for the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (PUC), which runs the Oceanside Waste Water Plant, refers concerned parties to the city's Recreational Water Quality Hotline: 1-877-SFBEACH. They also have a water quality website at: <http://www.beaches.sfwater.org>. The interactive website, and hotline enable surfers to determine if the waters are safe for surfing. The PUC tests the nearby waters surrounding San Francisco every week, and they increase their efforts after a rainfall. They have posted signs with warnings to beware of the local waters after a heavy rain. There are also necessary beach cleanups, when volunteers clean up the waste left by visitors and the bonfire crowds on Friday and Saturday nights. Not included in this analysis is the effect of urination on the seashore environment.

Wildlife Protection

Bird life can be found at Ocean Beach including the endangered western snowy plover, bank swallow, sanderling, numerous species of sea gull, dowitcher, curlew, willet, and others. A variety of life can also be found at Seal Rock at the north end of Ocean Beach. Occasionally, one can also observe sea lions in the surf as well. Also dead crabs, sea lions, seabirds, and the occasional whale can be found washed ashore on Ocean Beach. At the Gulf of the Farallones Marine Sanctuary a *beach watch* program operates. The members of this program monitor the local beach, document the wildlife one can find along the shore, and report stranded marine mammals to the local Marine Mammal Center.

Off-Leash Dogs

Dog walking has been an issue on Ocean Beach because dogs will chase the shorebirds. Sometimes this can result in mortality, but often it just requires the shorebirds to expend energy, which they are trying save to perform their migrations. Ocean Beach is a stop and resting place along avian migration routes. Dog walkers have taken legal action against the GGNRA to keep areas of nearby Fort Funston (a GGNRA open space along the shoreline) available to dog walkers. Gateway National Recreation Area, the sister urban National Park Service park has faced similar issues with the disgruntled public when access has been restricted to protect wildlife (in particular, the piping plover).

The GGNRA at Ocean Beach has implemented a leash law that restricts dogs from running freely in areas where the bird life is most prevalent. Visitors are allowed to let their dogs run free in the northern and southern areas of Ocean Beach but not in the central areas of the city shoreline where one is more likely to find the threatened western snowy plovers, sanderlings, dowitchers, curlews, willets, and sea gulls. I have observed that many obey

the leash law in practice or in spirit. Even when dog walkers allow their dogs to walk off-leash, most dogs are not chasing birds along the shoreline. When off-leash, most dogs are usually under verbal control. But there are some visitors who allow their dogs to run freely, even when they chase birds.

Erosion Control

Erosion control has also been identified as a critical environmental issue with some fearing the demise of nearby shoreline roads if the problem is not solved. The cliff-side roads south of Ocean Beach may become impassable if corrective actions are not taken. Some areas of the parking lot on the south side of the city beach have fallen into disrepair due to erosion. Large rocks have been placed along some of the eroded areas but this has not been a satisfactory solution because the cliffs and parking lots continue to retreat inland. Currently the city of San Francisco is working with the Army Corp of Engineers to find a solution. One can find out more about erosion reduction efforts on the San Francisco Surfrider Foundation website at: <http://www.sfsurfrider.org/beachscape.html>.

Public Safety

The waters at Ocean Beach are cold and the undertow is strong. The GGNRA has taken efforts to warn visitors about the potential dangers. Signs have been posted and during the day lifeguards patrol the beach in a vehicle and helicopters oversee the shoreline. There are also surfers who have had experiences with the local conditions and can provide assistance if necessary.

Solutions

What seems to be missing at Ocean Beach is the presence of park rangers/interpreters or public naturalists. An interpretive presence was not included as a recommendation in the resolution by the San Francisco Commission on the Environment to San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, Jr. (Resolution no. 001-02-COE - January 15, 2002), but such a presence could help solve some of the problems identified.

In 10 years of visiting regularly, I have almost never seen a park ranger/interpreter or tour guide at Ocean Beach. There are only lifeguards present, usually only during the day. There could be naturalists who keep an eye out for the western snowy plover and the other birdlife that is sometimes harassed by the visitors and off-leash dogs. In *Wildlife and Recreationists*, Knight and Gutzwiller (1995) point out that disturbance can be detrimental to the wildlife that shares our open spaces. Disturbance can

result in the expenditure of energy needed by wildlife to recuperate and prepare for migration. It can also interfere with the nesting behavior of birds.

But the environmentalists cannot take the beach away from the public. Access to nature is vital to many people's well being. The ocean has been part of the lives of many locals. A middle ground is necessary and education or interpretation can foster a happy mediation between the needs of wildlife and the urban public. Such efforts could be either voluntary or professional.

Some concerned agencies which could assist in such an effort include the California Academy of Science's Steinhart Aquarium, which has volunteers that give tours of the museum; the Ocean Beach Task Force, which could also organize volunteers; the San Francisco State Oceanography Department, which has students that could do internships or self-organized study; the Gulf of the Farallones Marine Sanctuary Association, which has a volunteer pool; the Aquarium of the Bay, which has a staff of naturalists; and the GGNRA, which has a community of volunteers and the responsibility for the management of the property. Together or separately these organizations could provide the manpower to provide Ocean Beach with a community of public naturalists. The presence of roving naturalists on Ocean Beach can foster greater appreciation and protection of the area. Naturalists at Ocean Beach could remind us of the impact that we are having on the marine food chain by eating fish unsustainably. They could also monitor the fisherman who fish along the shore and warn them about the dangers of eating fish caught in polluted waters.

But the naturalists would need to respect people's boundaries. Ocean Beach is sometimes treated like an urban park, rather than a national park, and therefore the naturalists would need to respect people's need to recreate. Impingement on visitors' freedom has resulted in some of the public arguing for taking Ocean Beach back from the National Park Service and making it a city property again. On weekend nights people have bonfires and drink alcohol, and a naturalist would become unpopular and ineffective if he/she did not respect the partygoers' interest in being unrestricted. The chosen seashore guides should be naturalists and not law enforcement officials.

It would also be helpful for these naturalists to have some knowledge of meteorology and astronomy. The horizon frames the sky to the west, which is not the same everyday. There is also seasonal variation in the constellations that one can observe.

Another option could be the publication of a book that focuses on the natural history of Ocean Beach in San Francisco. Similar books have been written

about other beaches, for example: *The Outermost House* by Henry Beston and *The Great Beach* by John Hay. Ocean Beach can engender the appreciation and curiosity of an ecologist, oceanographer, meteorologist, or astronomer. Tentative titles for a work that explores the natural history of the local environs could be *A Naturalist's Guide to Ocean Beach* or *An Ocean Beach Diary*. If funds were available or a publisher interested, someone could write this book. Such a work could be a model for similar works about other local beaches. It could document the seasonal cycles that one can observe at the shoreline. Such a work could help instill concern. Such a work could explain the wonder.

The presence of naturalists on Ocean Beach or a publication of a book about the local natural environs could help concerned parties achieve the goals of environmental education. Greater place attachment or individual connection to an area (and therefore probably also the seashore) could result in improved environmentally responsible behavior (Vaske & Kobrin, 2001), and therefore more concern for Ocean Beach, its residents, and its neighbors.

Below are resources that could provide a model.

Bibliography and Resources

Beston, Henry. (1928). *The outermost house: A year of life on the great beach of Cape Cod*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Co.

Clark, Tim W.; Willard, Andrew R.; & Cromley, Christina M. (2000). *Foundations of natural resources policy and management*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Hay, John. *The Great Beach*. (1963). Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

The Journal of Environmental Education.

Kelbaugh, Douglas. *Repairing the American metropolis*. (2002). Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

Knight, Richard L.; & Gutzwiller, Kevin J.. (1995). *Wildlife and recreationists: Coexistence through management and research*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

Lenček, Lena; & Bosker, Gideon. (1998). *The Beach: The history of paradise on earth*. New York: Viking.

Lewis, William J. (1981). *Interpreting for park visitors*. Philadelphia: Eastern

Acorn Press.

Lindbergh, Anne Morrow. (1955). *Gift from the sea*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Miller, Arthur P., Jr.; & Miller, Marjorie L. (1992). *Park ranger guide to seashores*. Harrisburg PA: Stackpole Books.

Pauly, Daniel; & Maclean, Jay L. (2002). *In a perfect ocean: The state of fisheries and ecosystems in the North Atlantic Ocean*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

Vaske, Jerry J.; & Kobrin, Katherine C. (2001). Place attachment and environmentally responsible behavior. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 32(4), 16-21.

.....
Ryder W. Miller <dolphin1965@hotmail.com> is a freelance environmental and science reporter who has been published in *Sierra Magazine*, *California Coast & Ocean*, *California Wild*, and *Hydrosphere*