

A Lonely Coast: The Birth of Industrial Terrain in Long Beach

by

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This is paradise. It is a beach of clear, aqua-hued water, soft, sandy shores, and a stunning pier that resembles a circus or county fair. A Ferris wheel towers over the ocean's depths, its red, blue and green lights sparkling. The smell of popcorn and cotton candy wafts through the air, mixing with the salty scent of the ocean breeze. Twenty-foot waves crash against the sand, breaking violently and retreating: a surfer's Mecca. This is the Coney Island of the West, the Waikiki of California. This is Long Beach, California before World War Two. Before the breakwater was built, before everything changed.

This idyllic beach exists now only in the anecdotes of old surfers. In fact, even its historical reality is in dispute. Postcards and photographs from the 1930s show beaches packed with bodies, surfers, and crystal clear waves. The breakwater — a roughly 2.25 mile wall of man-made rock and sediment — lies just off the coast across from Ocean Avenue, between North Redondo and Orizaba Avenues. Its construction was a turning point in the natural environment and social habitat of Long Beach. Combined with the adjacent San Pedro and Middle breakwaters, this undersea wall constitutes the largest man-made breakwater in the world. Now, more than fifty years later, the city faces another turning point: what should be done about it, if anything?

The breakwater itself is a 60-foot wall composed of rock, sediment, and cement beneath the ocean. Its rocky crest peeks out slightly above the surface, creating a shadowy, onyx line against the sprawling horizon. From an aerial view, it looks like nothing more than a pale gray line in the ocean. It extends deep under the sea, preventing waves and fresh ocean water from penetrating the beachfront area, a wall that keeps nature out and harbors the mechanized municipality, protecting its interests.

The Army Corps of Engineers began construction on the breakwater in 1941 and completed it eight years later. Its original purpose at that time of international conflict, and just after the bombing of the American naval base at Hawaii's Pearl Harbor, was to protect the Long Beach Naval Base from submarines, torpedoes, and wave erosion. When the naval base closed fifty-five years later, the beach facing the breakwater remained largely untended. Instead, the waters are a gateway for commerce via the Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles, the largest ports in the United States. These ports bring in goods from Asia — namely Japan and China—and distribute them to the rest of the country. The Long Beach port is a critical economic enterprise for the city. In 2006, the Port of Long Beach processed approximately \$140 million dollars in U.S.-international trade. It sits at the mouth of the Los Angeles River, a contaminated entity that dumps trash into the waters of Long Beach. Since the building of the breakwater, Long Beach has perceived itself as a military, industrial and commercial port rather than a recreational destination, and the city has focused little attention on the state of its formerly pristine beaches. The result is beaches that are considered inhospitable coastal wastelands.

The removal of the breakwater in its entirety is unlikely. Long Beach is no longer a surfer's dream, if it ever really was. It is a city with an industrial, rather than beachside environment. The two cannot coexist. One must, and indeed always does,

dominate the other. The city's shift from a natural environment to a man-made industrial habitat has had a profound impact on social conditions. The result is a Long Beach with all its craziness, poverty, and toughness; Long Beach, at the meeting point of the state's greatest freeways; Long Beach, with its supernaturally large port, its royalty in the form of the retired cruise ship *The Queen Mary*, its state university, and peninsula homes. It is Long Beach, home of the Crips street gang, birthplace of Snoop Dogg and gangster rap, Roscoe's Chicken N' Waffles, and the Carmelita Housing Projects. Long Beach a city that made a deal with the devil, by sacrificing its beaches in exchange for capital provided by industry and commerce.

This was not always the case. The Long Beach surfing community reached its pinnacle during the 1930s. Oral histories and written anecdotes of its heyday are available on the Surfing Heritage Foundation's website. They depict an exciting, relaxed, and lively beachside community. According to the archives, a legendary surf spot in the region was known as "Flood Control." It sat at the mouth of the Los Angeles River — where the breakwater sits now — close to the dock where the *Queen Mary*, the former flagship of the Cunard cruise line, is now moored. According to Alex Bixeler, a surfer of the day and source in the Surfing Heritage archives, Flood Control had "famous humpers. I believe I had ridden a tidal wave." In John C. Elwell's *Surfing in San Diego*, Bixeler appears in several photographs as a young, thin man with dark hair and a wide smile. Photographs displayed in the women's restroom of the Belmont Brewing Company, a pub and restaurant on the beach directly across from the breakwater, also show the beach in its prime. One photograph shows the pier teeming with people enjoying leisurely, seaside strolls. Another shows small children frolicking in the water, dipping their toes in the ocean. Yet another photograph proudly displays the Long Beach swim team: seven women and two men grinning proudly in their demure bathing attire. A fourth photograph shows swarms of people spilling out from under wide umbrellas to soak in the sun and enjoy the beauty of the beach.

One of the area's fabled surfers is a man named Ed Hendricks. At 84 years old, he is one of the few remaining surfers in the region who remembers what it was like to surf in Long Beach before the breakwater was erected. He is also the Vice Chairman of the Long Beach chapter of the Surfrider Foundation, as well as a Breakwater Government Liaison. "The city of Long Beach was fortunate in that it had the best surf on the west coast," Hendricks recalls. "There was tremendous surf; the kids loved it. The power of the breakers was quite a ways off, so by the time they got to the shore, they were safe for everybody. They were beautiful waves."

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He wistfully recalls enjoying the beach as a young man. "Every summer we'd have a state picnic. It was always potluck. The ladies brought all the food." He chuckles, remembering that picnickers turned away women who brought store-bought food — in those days, homemade was the only way to go. People from Texas, Nebraska, and Iowa sat on the sandy shores of Long Beach to revel in the summer sun. Some visitors from Iowa loved it so much they decided to retire in Long Beach, creating a community of Iowan expatriates. "It was the ideal place to be," Hendricks says. "It wasn't what you see now." His small eyes crinkle beneath his large, black framed glasses as he recalls going to the beach as a child. His voice turns high-pitched with glee at the memory of his youth.

“In the summer, we’d go down to the beach all day. The surfboards were made of redwood, they weren’t like the ones people have today. So you had to learn to bodysurf first. You had to learn to read the wave, learn timing. You have to catch it when it’s breaking. When you’re up on top and look down, you feel like you’re on the top of a ten-story building.”

He fondly recalls teaching his granddaughter how to bodysurf. He could not teach her to ride the waves he once rode in Long Beach – the breakwater has done just that: broken the water; rather, he took her to the less-polluted Huntington Beach in Orange County. When she grew frustrated, he instructed her, “You have to hold your breath. You have to get your body at the same speed as the breaker.” Hendricks repeats the most important advice he gave his granddaughter with a smile: “You have to hold your head down.” As she plunged into the ocean and took command of the next wave, Hendricks knew she followed his sage advice. “She had the biggest grin on her face. I knew she had kept her head down. From then on she liked to go out there and beat all the boys,” he says with a chuckle.

Hendricks knows better than to take his beloved granddaughter to surf Long Beach, where poor water quality created by the clash of the breakwater and the L.A. River run-off turns these oceanic wonders into chemical cesspools. The pollution from the L.A. River is so bad that, according to Tom Modica, the city Manager of Government Affairs, the beaches must always close for three days after a rain, due to run-off pollution and toxic levels of *E. Coli* in the water. The water in Long Beach is not for enjoyment, nor is it a place to frolic in the shallows on a sweltering summer day. It’s more like a freeway: a useful method of transportation, nothing more. Children who swim and play in this water will experience gastrointestinal upsets as a result of poor water quality.

Within the confines of the breakwater sit several man-made oil islands, named Freeman, Grissom, White, and Chaffee, after the first astronauts to die in the line of duty. The four islands cluster within several hundred yards of one another, with large, geometric buildings and palm trees protruding from their rocky surfaces. They sit in the shallow, murky water, blocking the horizon. Built in 1964 and owned by the THUMS¹ oil consortium (Texaco, Humble, Union, Mobile, and Shell oil companies, respectively) these four islands, which are really nothing more or less than permanent and expansive oil rigs and shipping stations, are part of the greater Wilmington oil field, which produces approximately 46,000 barrels of oil per day. The combined construction of the oil islands and the breakwater cemented Long Beach’s industrial environment. The ports, the naval base, the oil industry, and the federal government’s construction of the breakwater defined Long Beach: this is a habitat of urban industry.

While Long Beach’s industrial habitat certainly did not begin with the construction of the breakwater, the barrier is a crucial part of its industrial space. It allowed the city to develop oil fields, a naval base, and protected ports and luxury beachfront homes. But the naval base closed, the oil industry mechanized and became less dominant, jobs from these sources disappeared, and the city of Long Beach as an industrial and military colony was no longer a reasonable or workable concept. Still, the

¹ American Association of Petroleum Geologists <http://www.aapg.org/explorer/2007/03mar/thums.cfm>

breakwater remains, a guardian of economic interest. Its existence solidifies the sea as a means of commerce. It maims the mighty power of the wave, quiets the ocean, and reduces the awe-inspiring depths to mere human scale; it is nothing more than a trade route. The natural wonder of the beach surrounding the breakwater exists in an industrial prison, encompassed by the former naval shipyard, boiler insulators, drill ships, mechanical rigs, and compressors.

There is no enjoyable natural realm in Long Beach; it is gray, urban, and mechanized. The city dominates and destroys the nature that surrounds it. The little nature that does exist is controlled, manipulated, and molded to fit human convenience in the forms of peninsular oceanfront properties, a world-famous aquarium, piers, ports, and islands built for the production of oil. The sea is controlled, suppressed, its fate dictated by the interests of commerce. It's a microcosm of modern man's depraved relationship with nature.

The view from East Ocean Boulevard is only one example. Driving south, away from the looming and shuttered naval base, the street is lined with cars and tacky apartment homes. One apartment complex – a turquoise and white building at 1762 Ocean Boulevard – boasts a flamingo-pink sign with the words “Now Renting” emblazoned in bold letters. A few blocks before, the Ocean Club Homeowners building sits on the edge of the sandy beach, beside Mike's Camera and Stereo. Deeper inland, and further to the north, the streets become slums. The apartment complexes look older, more crowded. The chain-link fences become barred fences, and the bright colors turn pale, muted.

Close to the naval base, the same palate of muted grays and beiges, the colors of industry, span the streets. At 2600 Ocean Boulevard, all you can see are parking lots, shipyards, and factories. The crisp salty scent of the sea is absent, even though the water is only steps away. Instead, the putrid smell of sulphur – the mark of an industrial plant – fills the air. It's a smell that's rightly associated with the fires of hell.

The beach in front of the breakwater itself reflects the mechanized municipality in which it resides. The sand is a light beige with a gray tinge that makes it resemble cement. After a stormy weekend, it is still damp, firm, and densely packed. The beach is largely empty. A few couples and older women walk their dogs along the asphalt pathway. A young woman on rollerblades whizzes by while a few college-aged boys play football in the dry, yellow grass. Not one person ventures into the water. No one dares go near it. Where the water meets the brown earth, the shore is littered with garbage. Doritos bags, bottle caps, pens, pencils, plastic water bottles, and an empty Top Ramen package lay strewn in the wet sand. A white can of Lucas motor oil rears its red plastic head. There are no seashells, no crabs, no sand dollars or tide pools to enjoy here. No waves to ride, no endless horizon to make you feel tiny, unimportant, or insignificant. Instead, the horizon here reminds you that you are in a place where man is gigantic; a mechanized province, an industrial terrain.

This city's commercial interests shaped the human culture of its residents. As a result, Long Beach is mostly industrial space. Of the 32 zone areas mapped by the city, eight are industrial or aircraft-related. The other 23 zones are divided among commercial,

residential, and private land². One zone is devoted to environmental protection and nature preserves. Places like these — colonized by industrial interests, and home to expansive industrial spaces instead of residences that people care about on an individual basis — tend to create high crime rates. With 40 murders, 120 rapes, 1,507 violent assaults, 1,859 residential burglaries and 3,151 violent crimes in 2008, Long Beach is no exception. Conversely, Newport Beach, which sits a mere twenty-two miles south on Pacific Coast Highway, had just 235 violent crimes in the same year³.

The correlation between environmental degradation and poverty is complex and multi-faceted. An industrial environment provides few jobs that require higher education. Instead, the majority of jobs favor low-skilled labor, with a few exceptions for engineers and supervisors. The result is an expansion of the poor and working class, where one in five residents lives below the poverty line. Of the 492,000 residents in Long Beach, 18% live below the poverty level, which, according to the U.S. Census Bureau is \$21,834 for a family of four. In San Diego, the figure is lower at 14%⁴, and in neighboring Orange County, the number is a modest 8.9%⁵.

The breakwater is at a turning point. Some members of the community — mostly the vocal members of the Surfrider Foundation, a local environmental group focused on the vitality of California beaches — are calling for its removal. In fact, Ed Hendricks and the Long Beach chapter of the Surfrider Foundation pioneered a “Sink the Breakwater” campaign. They believe that the “sinking” or reduction of the breakwater by 20 feet will bring vitality and health back to the community by restoring beaches and waves, attracting tourists, and increasing beachfront and other property values. Their hope for the future of the region lies in the idea that restoring the waves and the beach will bring increased tourism, money, and a new identity for the city. The restoration of a surf culture brings hope, they say; perhaps the gray, muted, industrialized city can return to its former glorious, natural state. Perhaps the return of a surf culture and a beautiful natural environment can change the social habitat of the city.

Ed Hendricks says that convincing the city that the beach is more than a pawn in the game of commerce is a difficult task. “It’s politics,” Hendricks says. “We have a lot of stakeholders in this now. You can’t convince ‘em.” While there is much grassroots support for the reemergence of a surf and beach culture, city officials are concerned about preserving economic interests. “You have to put an economic spin on it. Let’s spend our time on the port — staff, commissioners. It behooves us to do so,” Hendricks says. He is

² http://www.lbds.info/planning/current_planning/zoning_ordinances.asp

³ http://www.nbpd.org/crime/statistics/crime_by_year.asp

⁴ http://legacy.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20040827/news_1n27poverty.html

⁵ <http://ocbiz.freedomblogging.com/2008/08/26/poverty-drops-slightly-in-oc/2573/>

working with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association to produce an economic study that puts a price on the value of the beach. He modeled the study on price analysis techniques used by economists. The current value is \$120 million annually.

Still, the demolition of the breakwater is not likely to come soon, nor will it result in a drastic change. “It would be a mistake to imagine that any one incremental environmental change will change the lives and circumstances of the people living in the city,” D.J. Waldie says. Waldie, is a retired official from Lakewood, a Long Beach suburb, is the author of *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* and an acclaimed commentator on the suburban culture of Southern California.

The possible increase in tourism and property values that a revitalized beach might offer would certainly be an asset to the city; however, it would in all likelihood only benefit a small segment of the population. Long Beach already has one example of this: The Pike.

The Pike was built in 1902 as an amusement park. Known as “The Walk of a Thousand Lights,” it was an entertainment district that featured carousels, circus acts, bumper cars, a midway, and a rollercoaster called The Cyclone. Postcards from Long Beach in the first half of the 20th century proudly display the majestic beachside culture that now exists only in anecdote. The black and white postcards – available at the Long Beach Heritage Museum – display a long pier and a rampant tourist culture. The area has since been renovated, and now features the majestic Queen Mary, the Long Beach Aquarium of the Pacific, as well as various upscale hotels and commercial food chains like Yard House. The only remnants of its heyday are the empty arcade and dingy pastel-colored carousel that lie a few yards away from the Yard House restaurant and brewery. The Walk of a Thousand Lights is now the walk of chain restaurants and valet parking.

The renovation of The Pike has certainly been advantageous for the city in that it serves as a spot for dining and nightlife. Not only does this attract local tourism, but commerce and business as well. Clearly, this strategic move to renovate Long Beach’s downtown district is motivated by financial interests. Gentrification was the focus of the project, Waldie says. The city “put federal, state, and local money into projects that replaced the immigrant nonwhite population with a population that has more disposable income. It’s a bipolar social structure. If amenities to the beach were improved, who would benefit?”

The world of Long Beach was one place. Then the breakwater went up. Now, that world is another place. A gentrified, wave-lapped beach would attract tourism from the suburbs, certainly. And there would be some economic gain for Long Beach itself. But surely it would follow the broad outlines of The Pike’s renovation project in that these amenities would only be patronized by a small, wealthy segment of the population, despite the fact that it remains a public beach. This makes it difficult to return to a time when the majority of Long Beach’s residents could afford a weekend enjoying the beachfront attractions. While proponents of the “Sink the Breakwater” campaign clamor for a return to a former state of paradise, this may be nostalgia for a mythical past. The reality and heart of Long Beach now lie in the commerce, trade, and port traffic that are its lifeblood.

Tom Modica, Long Beach Manager of Government Affairs, is diplomatic on the subject of the breakwater. While he expressed concern about water quality and a lack of tourism, he is quick to mention the oil islands, shipping operations, piers, and homes. “We need to take these areas into account and make sure we do nothing to harm them,” he said. “We need to take into account what’s there now and improve on it.” Modica thinks a successful solution can restore the beach “without harming the environment: the port, peninsula, oil industry. We don’t want negative impacts on these operations.”

The \$90,000 city-funded reconnaissance study, completed in July 2009, recommended several options, none of which included the removal of the breakwater. Modica thinks that a reconfiguration of the breakwater and structural changes to the L.A. River are more likely. “Removing the breakwater would degrade the ecosystem,” he said, explaining that several marine species now reside in, on, and around the man-made breakwater; complete removal would be a threat to their (un)natural environment. Modica’s words indicate that sinking or removing the breakwater completely would not be in the city’s best economic interests. The breakwater keeps the water level, allowing for the transport of millions of dollars of consumer goods and electronics from Asia. He worries that the oil and shipping industries would be imperiled by any changes made to the breakwater, both of which are a mainstay of the current city economy.

The issue of the breakwater will not find resolution soon. The financial interests and ecological interests of the community are at odds with each other. This is often the case when man alters his natural environment. The long-term effects prove dismal, and the city of Long Beach is no exception. The interests of commerce, business, oil profit and exploitation overpower the community interest in beauty, wonder, recreation, and true enjoyment of nature.

The small stretch of beach that faces the breakwater may not see waves and clean water in the near future. The political debate that surrounds the removal or alteration of the breakwater prevents the beach from returning to a place where people can revel in the existence of the sea, a natural force both powerful and captivating. The beach may never again be a spot where children can squirm on their towels, explore tide pools with their parents, or experience the squelch of their toes in the firm, wet sand. It may never again be a place where couples steal kisses under the moonlight, or where veteran surfers fuse their flesh with the waves or pass their knowledge on to the next generation. It may never again be these things, for it is Long Beach, the seaside city with a breakwater and a lonely coast.

