

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

#110 July 14, 2012

Italian Beaches



A crowded beach along the Tuscan coast.

I experienced some coastal culture shock while driving along the Tuscany coast of Italy last week after our 3-day June walk around the shoreline of Monterey Bay. While Main Beach in Santa Cruz can get a bit crowded on most summer weekends, from New Brighton Beach to Monterey most of the bay's shoreline is relatively unpopulated.

Despite the presence of millions of people only an hour or two away, it is easy to find a stretch of Monterey Bay beach with only a handful of people, even on a Saturday in June. There are sections of shoreline where we hiked for an hour or more without ever seeing another person.

Things were a bit different along the Tuscan coast. Italy was hot over the past two weeks, very hot in fact, like many other places in the world this summer. Locals said it was unusually hot. As a result, the Italians were finding their way to the beach in very large numbers.

At any access route to the water along the west coast of Italy between Pisa and Rome, there were hundreds of cars parked along both sides of the highway, bumper to bumper. The tiny Smart cars, which are far more common there with gas at \$6 to \$7/gallon, took advantage of any small gap between cars and parked at right angles to the others, bumper to the curb.

There are few large rivers along the northern Tuscany coast, and as a result, very little sand is delivered to the shoreline and sandy beaches are relatively rare. This doesn't stop the Italians from enjoying the coast, however. They were descending steep rocky trails to get to the water's edge where they were laying out towels on slabs of rock, large boulders or any other available surface. And they were doing this anywhere they could find a path to the sea.

Riprap, breakwaters, jetties or slabs of concrete were frequently covered with people. Any reasonably flat surface large enough to sit or lay on worked fine and the earliest arrivals laid claim to the spot, although they might find someone else a few feet away before long.

Where an actual beach exists, whether sand or gravel, a business arrangement is set up, apparently between an entrepreneur and the local government agency. Virtually every square meter of dry beach is rented out for the day, along with an umbrella and a few beach chairs. An 8 x 10 foot area along with the furniture might go for \$20 to \$30/day, which includes use of a small changing room. And there are people stuffed right next to you on all sides.

In many of these commercialized beach areas, there is essentially no place for the casual visitor to sit that is not under control of one of the concessions or is not under water. There is really no free or unrestricted public access to most beaches without purchasing your little piece of the shoreline for the day.

It's just the way it is and people don't seem to mind. The result is a colorful sense of order along the shoreline. Each concession and their stretch of beach has its own colored umbrellas and lounge chairs, connecting everyone in a quaint sort of way.

While we do have a modest fee to visit a state beach and park in some places, we are indeed fortunate to have hundreds of miles of California shoreline that we can get to without paying a dime. Because of our underlying geology and the many rivers and streams that provide large volumes of sand to nourish our beaches, we have no shortage of accessible beaches.

And while free beach access and a place to spread out your blanket or towel has always been something we take for granted in California, it's not this way along much of the Mediterranean coast. We were surprised to have to pay 15 Euros (\$18 dollars) to have a place to sit for the day on a gravel beach, but with the oppressive

heat all around and the cool water beckoning, we were quite happy to pay the going price.