

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

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Beach Trash or Beach Glass?**



*Glass Beach, Mendocino County*

Beach glass has become somewhat of a treasure in recent years, although it certainly didn't start out that way. Fort Bragg, an old lumber town on the coast of Mendocino County, has a well-known cove on the north end of town, appropriately known as Glass Beach. The town now even has a Glass Beach Inn.

This beach was the city dump for decades, well before the days of recycling and home pickup of trash. Residents just dumped their cans, bottles, old refrigerators and stoves, or whatever else they had lying around the backyard, over the low bluff onto the beach. This was pretty standard way of getting rid of trash in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Fires were set from time to time to burn what was combustible and most of the metal gradually rusted away.

But the resistant pottery and glass has been gradually broken down, smoothed and polished by the waves, leaving a sparkly beach with green, brown, clear and occasionally blue beach glass. Dumping on the beach was finally terminated in 1967.

While attempts were made to remove the material to “clean up the beach”, this unique beach was eventually preserved as part of MacKerricher State Park and is now enjoyed by thousands of visitors every year. While removing glass isn’t officially permitted, its probably safe to say that every visitor walks away with some treasures in their pocket. You might want to be careful, however, about carrying away a wheelbarrow or bucket load.

Glass Beach is hardly alone, and we have our own glass beaches; they just haven’t been recognized and named. As recently as the late 1960s, the residents of Davenport dumped their trash and old appliances down the railroad embankment overlooking Davenport Beach. From time to time the debris was set on fire, but lots of stuff didn’t burn very well. Eventually the practice was halted, and the waste was covered over with rock and dirt. Very little of the debris, however, ever made it to the beach to be reworked and polished by waves. It still lies buried on the side of the railroad embankment.

There is some beach glass to be found at the north end of Davenport Beach if one doesn’t mind digging around a bit, but it has quite a different source. A small glass blowing business has operated for years alongside San Vicente Creek on the opposite side of Highway 1. The creek flows through a hand-dug tunnel under Highway 1 and the railroad and has carried small pieces of colorful glass onto the beach where it has been smoothed and polished. The place is no longer a secret, however, and people are often seen on the beach at the mouth of the creek with shovels, searching for buried treasure.

The old Wilder Ranch had their own beach dump as well. Up until about 1970, the narrow cove north of Fern Grotto, which formerly had an arch on its seaward end that was often photographed with horse drawn buggies perched on top of it, was the garbage dump for the ranch. Whatever was broken, worn out, or had no useful purpose, was dumped down the embankment onto the beach.

The green, brown, and clear glass was reworked by the waves, and during the winter months when much of the sand has been moved offshore, leaving the coarser material behind, Wilder beach glass can be found on Fern Grotto Beach. Glass isn’t rounded and polished overnight, however, so anything you find has a history going back at least 50 years, and probably much longer.

Today, leaving glass on the beach, or anything else for that matter, is punishable by death, but it was OK 50 or 100 years ago. We didn’t have curbside recycling to make it easy back then, and few people visited these beaches. But today, if you

have sharp eyes and get to the beach before anyone else at a winter low tide, you just might find the polished remnants of one of your grandma's old plates or your grandpa's old beer bottles.