Our Ocean Backyard

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Fifteen Years of Our Ocean Backyard

In April 2008,15 years ago now, I wrote my first Ocean Backyard column with a substantial amount of trepidation. While I had written many articles for scientific journals, and also written some books, this was different. People I knew in Santa Cruz might actually read the article. I also didn’t think at the time that I would have more than about 6 months or maybe a year of things to write about. My fears gradually diminished and this Sunday marks my 391st column. And I have learned over these years that some people actually do read the columns, and I even occasionally get emails from readers, most of them positive and supportive.

As you can read at the end of each column, the Seymour Marine Discovery Center at UCSC’s Coastal Science Campus has been kind enough to host the posting of all previous columns: (https://seymourcenter.ucsc.edu/ouroceanbackyard/)

They are conveniently filed under categories including Climate Change; The Global Ocean; Energy, Power and Moving to Renewable Energy; Coastal Erosion, Protection and Shoreline Change; Beaches; Coastal Geology; Waves, Currents and Sea-Level Rise; Natural Disasters; History of the Monterey Bay; Sea Life and Other.

I have also ­discovered that whenever I think there is nothing left to write about that there is always another story, something interesting, new, old or exciting that comes up. The ocean, Monterey Bay in particular, has always been important to the lives of those who live here for as long as people have occupied this region of the planet and there is much to write about.

While I have some obvious environmental concerns that no doubt come across in my columns, I have endeavored to stay focused on educating and not advocating; although I believe if one reads objectively, that the truth and the science behind the issues will emerge and our future steps or paths for survival will become clear to most people.

I also believe that no matter now grim or depressing things can seem at times, that we always need to have hope. As a father, grandfather and teacher, it’s even more important to have hope for tomorrow and for the future. I think of it as sober optimism.

Fifty-three years ago this spring, I taught the first Environmental Studies class at UCSC. There was an excess of environmental issues confronting the then small and somewhat insulated city of Santa Cruz that weren’t widely appreciated or of much concern. This was the same spring as the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970. Earth Day happened during our class and was the time when significant awareness for environmental issues began to emerge as a national concern and movement, something 53 years later we are still working on. Peter Douglas, the first Executive Director of the California Coastal Commission, once said “The coast is never saved. It is always being saved”. I would say the same about the Earth. “The Earth is never saved; It is always being saved.

During that Spring 1970 Environmental Studies class the students and I decided to look into the major environmental issues facing Santa Cruz, and there were some big ones. There was a lot of reading and research undertaken that we decided to write up and put together into a booklet. These issues included the proposal by PG&E to build what would have been the nation’s largest nuclear power plant on the coast at Davenport; a plan by a developer who had purchased the Wilder Ranch to build seven “villages” that would have added 12,000 homes and 35,000 new residents to the city of Santa Cruz; the cement plant at Davenport had been covering the north coast with cement dust for decades which presented health hazards; a slaughterhouse at the north end of Santa Cruz was disposing of blood and wash water into a sea cave just north of Natural Bridges where Long Marine Laboratory now takes out our seawater for tanks, marine mammal pools and the Seymour Marine Discovery Center.

There were some other issues as well that got included in the report (the biological impacts of DDT, wastewater discharged into the bay, among others). We raised a little private money and printed perhaps 250 copies of the booklet entitled “Santa Cruz and the Environment”. The students all went home for the summer and I ended up with several boxes full of the reports. I took some of the booklets down to the two local bookstores to sell for 50 cents each. Some of them also found their way into city and county offices.

While I was expecting there to be some positive feedback or acknowledgement of what this group of students had accomplished and the environmental issues that had been raised, this is not what happened. Local officials took offense at a university professor and a group of “radical students” who had pointed out these community issues, perhaps because they had not themselves addressed the issues or raised concerns. Over the next several weeks there were daily front-page articles and editorials in the Sentinel criticizing the report and the University.

I was called into the Chancellor’s office on a Saturday morning and we discussed a little damage control involving one local business that we had been critical of. From the local backlash by local officials, I was quite certain that my short two-year career as a university professor might well be over. We were just a little early for the city of Santa Cruz, however, but eventually, each of these issues were confronted. The nuclear power plant wasn’t built, the cement plant cleaned up their emissions, Wilder Ranch became a state park, and the slaughterhouse closed down. I kept my job and began writing this column in 2008. Some stories have happy endings.