Gary Griggs

Our Ocean Backyard

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California Against the Sea

“The sea has long inspired a human attraction, perhaps even a compulsion, to be as close to the edge as possible. Its sheer power captivates us, even on its most turbulent days, and we can’t help but dream of calling the shore our own. To be out by the surf, to sense the

very limits of where land can go, to feel the rise and fall of each wave like our own breath is to reckon with a force so alive it feels otherworldly. But the ocean is not “out there” beyond the shore, it is upon us, carving away at the coast each day despite our best efforts to keep the water at bay. We thought that with enough ingenuity we could contain the sea, but the rising tide is proving otherwise.”

“Studying this confluence of land, people and sea has kept Gary Griggs busy for much of his life. Seventy-six years old, with a shock of white hair and a long stride, Griggs has

spent decades examining every inch of the California coast. An oceanographer, coastal geologist and longtime professor at UC Santa Cruz, he has a way of explaining erosion with the excitement of someone who’s seeing everything for the first time. The coast is

always, has always been, changing, he likes to say. Every high and low tide brings new surprises.”

So begins Chapter Two in a new book by Rosanna Xia, a writer for the Los Angeles Times and a 2020 Pulitzer Prize finalist. *California Against the Sea – Visions for our Vanishing Coastline*, is an 1,100-mile journey from the rugged redwood-mantled coastal mountains of northern California to the sunny beaches of the south coast. Rosanna talks to coastal people of all stripes, small town mayors, homeowners, environmental advocates, indigenous leaders, and even scientists. Her writing is eminently readable, thoroughly engaging and deeply personal.

She has written a timely, perceptive and important book on the past, present and potential future of our beloved coastline with a balance of concern and hope. Filled with conversations with coastal residents from places like San Francisco and Pacifica, Capitola and Marina, Malibu and Manhattan Beach, Laguna Beach and Imperial Beach, she emphasizes the need for us all to accept some responsibility for the future of our state’s coast.

The earliest Indigenous Californians had a respect and deeper understanding of the ocean and its fluctuations over time that was neither understood nor respected by the state’s postwar developers and politicians.

Despite what most people think or believe, the line between land and sea is not permanent, and right now, as sea level continues to rise, the ocean is reclaiming some of its former extent. This is gradually wreaking havoc on coastal communities around the planet and this shifting position of the shoreline is going to be with us for centuries to come. Venice is sinking, Louisiana is shrinking, Indonesians are fleeing their coastal capitol, North Carolina’s beaches are disappearing and only being held in place temporarily by millions of cubic yards of sand dredged from offshore on a nearly annual basis at great cost.

Ed Yong, author of *An Immense World*, writes "Just as the coast defines the liminal world between land and sea, so too does Rosanna Xia's remarkable book exist in the overlap between development and erosion, between geological forces and human desire, between our ambitious past and our tenuous future. It’s viscerally urgent, thoroughly reported, and compellingly written—a must-read for our uncertain times."

"Xia's *California Against the Sea* deftly charts the past, present and future of California's changing coastlines in order to retrieve hope for more sustainable futures from headlines of environmental loss. This lucid account shows that sea-level rise is less an intractable problem than an urgent invitation to rethink our relationships with oceans and with one another. A beautiful, revelatory and prescient book." —Lucas Bessire, author of *Running Out: In Search of Water on the High Plains*

"In the midst of the climate crisis, can the people of California treat the rising Pacific Ocean as something other than an adversary? In *California Against the Sea*, Rosanna Xia argues persuasively that such a transformation is not only possible but already underway, inspired by lessons from deep history and the recent past. Rigorously reported and beautifully written, this book is a crucial guide to the future." —Michelle Nijhuis, author of *Beloved Beasts: Fighting for Life in an Age of Extinction.*

I don’t often recommend books, but Rosanna Xia’s *California Against the Sea* is an exception. Many or most of us live here because of Monterey Bay and the offshore Pacific Ocean, and our coastline and beaches matter to all of us. The stability we have enjoyed for our lifetimes is changing however; it’s not a future issue, it’s happening now. I usually approach these changes, cliff erosion, littoral sand transport, and sea-level rise from my scientific perspective. Rosanna has taken a very personal approach. I was very touched and moved by her book and I highly recommend it to all of you. It may well change how you think about our coast, our relationship to it and our responsibility for it.