Our Ocean Backyard

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The village that waits to flood again

The combined impacts of high tides and very large waves on the morning of December 28 on Capitola village were all too similar to what happened on January 5th, 2023, and also in the first week of January in 1983. The storm damage in Capitola has historically been the greatest when large waves arrive simultaneously with very high tides and when the waves arrive from the west or southwest. Waves from this direction hit the shoreline here head-on in contrast to the more frequent storms from the northwest, which lose energy as they refract or bend around as they enter the bay.

Looking back at the historic accounts of the major storms that have slammed into Capitola and the northern part of the bay, these damaging waves from the west and southwest typically occurred during El Niño events, which elevate water levels along the shoreline. During the last week of December, sea levels were as much as 9 inches above the predicted tides at the Monterey tide gauge. The closest other gauge is at the Golden Gate and water levels there during the last week of December were as much as 13 inches above predicted tides.

While 9 or 13 inches may not seem like much, where the shoreline or beach is relatively flat, say Capitola, Rio Del Mar, Seabright or Main Beach, an additional foot of sea level can advance the shoreline or the zone of wave impact 50-100 or more feet closer to any oceanfront development.

The impacts of the late December waves on the Esplanade restaurants and the Venetian Court may seem like uncommon and extreme events to recent arrivals, but the historical record contains a long and well-documented list of similar events.

The physical setting of both the commercial development along the Esplanade and the Venetian Court goes a long way to explaining why this area has been so frequently flooded and damaged by storm waves. The oldest photographs from the late 1800s show that this entire shoreline area was a combination of a beach and the wide mouth of Soquel Creek. While there is a long history of development, the earliest permanent settlement of this low-lying shoreline area was for a summer camp, Camp Capitola, and an Italian fishing village, which consisted mostly of small wooden cabins where the Venetian Court is today.

But this area was all back beach and dunes and had been repeatedly swept over during either floods on Soquel Creek or storm waves. Development encroached onto this environment perhaps in an effort to get closer to the water’s edge, but at increased vulnerability to winter storms and floods.

Most of the following headlines and accounts were taken directly from the original editions of the Santa Cruz Sentinel and its predecessors. These original descriptions were all included in Between Paradise and Peril – The Natural Disaster History of the Monterey Bay Region, which was published in 2018.

The earliest record of storm damage occurred on November 25, 1865, when five hundred feet of the Soquel Landing (now Capitola) wharf were lost and the remaining 600 feet were deemed “useless”. Pilings were deposited in a potato field beyond the beach. Waves were described as “mountain high”.

On March 13-14, 1905, what was headlined as the worst storms for 27 years visited Monterey Bay. Capitola paid for its advantageous location on the sea beach Sunday night with broken porches, flooded cottages and general wreckage of many of its summer homes. The hotel (which was at the downcoast end of the beach where the Esplanade Park is today) suffered especially from the storm. About four feet of water stood in the hotel on Monday morning. The bandstand and the hotel porch have been swept away, and the windows torn out on one side of the main office and club room, which face the beach. Sidewalks were washed against the cottages and for a time created a fear that the whole summer settlement would be swept away.

November 27, 1913- A severe storm with “monster” waves arriving at high tide washed across the beach at Capitola to the Esplanade and spread “clear to the railroad tracks”. Water reached the Hihn Superintendent’s Building (at Capitola and Monterey Avenues). The huge waves destroyed about 200 feet of the middle of Hihn’s wharf stranding a fisherman, Alberto Gibelli, on the outer end. He was rescued four hours later when another fisherman, Giacomo Stagnaro, who had run his boat over from Santa Cruz, threw a rope and life preserver to him. Alberto put on the life preserver, tied the rope around his arms, took a deep breath and jumped off the pier into the ocean. Rescuers on the shore end of the pier pulled him to safety.

February 13, 1926- Headlines: "High Waves do Damage to Beaches". Never in the history of Capitola, according to its oldest residents, has such havoc been wrought to the beaches and buildings of Capitola than during "The Famous Lincoln's Birthday Storm" of February 12,13,14. At 10:10 a.m. when the highest tide of the season arrived, a huge 20-foot wave broke. The two bandstands collapsed almost simultaneously, and the Capitola bathhouse and boathouses were washed away by the waves along with beach concessions. High tides reached a block up the main streets and downtown Capitola was under a foot of water. The Venetian Court apartments, which had just been completed and replaced the old Italian fishing village, were flooded and their seawall promenade was broken. Wave run-up reached the second floor of the Hotel Capitola.

December 9-10 & 23-29, 1931- A violent storm affected much of the California coast. In Capitola, damage was confined to the waterfront area as “waves smashed in several doors and windows in the first row of the Venetian Court apartments, drenching the furnishings and compelling a hasty exodus of residents there”. The casino suffered considerable damage. A number of pilings were also broken loose from the Capitola wharf, which led to its being posted as unsafe for vehicular traffic. The Esplanade was blocked to vehicles because of the enormous quantity of driftwood strewn about.

January 4, 1939- Capitola seemed to have taken the brunt of this storm as the ocean swept over the Esplanade during the night and brought sand and seawater into the dance floor and up to the bandstand. High tide and waves carried sand and rocks, some 6-8 inches in diameter, a block and a half into downtown. Sand and rocks were also washed into the lower terraces of the Venetian Court and onto the covered porches of the Casino on the waterfront.

January 8, 1940- The Capitola waterfront was lashed by one of worst storms in recent years this morning leaving a trail of havoc. As the tide peaked, the Capitola Casino on the Esplanade “began to collapse as immense waves pounded it unmercifully and by noon it was a complete wreck”. A.V. Woodhouse, president of the Capitola Amusement Company, said plans had already been made for rebuilding the structure for the next season.

April 3, 1958- Headlines: "Spectacular Waves- Damage is Heavy". In Capitola, waves surging under the pile-supported businesses along the Esplanade, “exploded with hydraulic force, buckling floors, flooding and breaking windows”. At one point in the storm, the waves picked up the Cove Bar from its pilings and then dropped it with a jolt. Waves washed over the low seawall on Capitola Beach and flooded six to eight of the Venetian Court apartments on the beach. The waves also carried mammoth redwood logs over the low wall fronting the Court, which bashed in doors and broke windows.

February 8-10, 1960- Headlines: "Capitola and Rio Del Mar Hit Hard by Gale Winds and Heavy Seas". Along the Capitola Esplanade, huge waves smashed the beach restaurants and amusement concessions and destroyed the picturesque merry-go-round. Waves rammed against the beach level Venetian Courts, causing extensive damage to at least 12 of the apartments. Once windows were broken, rocks, logs, sand and seawater poured in. A sign was ripped off the end of the wharf, rolled into a ball and deposited in one of the apartments.

January 9, 1978- “Savage Sea Attack Santa Cruz Area Coastline”. This was the first major El Niño winter in decades and the Monterey Bay area coast was attacked by severe storms from the southwest. These had greatest effects on west and southwest facing beaches, and flooded houses and businesses between Capitola and Rio Del Mar. Capitola, Rio Del Mar and Potbelly Beach were the hardest hit. Waves and logs also broke up some of the asphalt parking area directly behind the wall. Capitola wharf was damaged as pilings were broken loose. The end of the wharf was torn off, and a shed at the end of the wharf was teetering precariously over the waves. Waves overtopped the low wall fronting the Venetian Court apartments on Capitola Beach and carried sand into the first floors.

In addition to this older history, many locals will recall the most recent storm damage, but to summarize, Capitola was impacted and damaged by additional storms in the winters of 1980, 1982, 1983 and 2023. In the years since record keeping began, Capitola’s waterfront development has been seriously damaged at least 15 times. All evidence, particularly with a rising sea level and larger waves projected for the future, indicates that these impacts will continue.