Our Ocean Backyard—*Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Distinguished Professor of Earth Sciences, UC Santa Cruz

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West Cliff – What’s Next?

West Cliff, whether the roadway or the sidewalk, or an often dusty wagon road in the old days, has been a favored Santa Cruz destination for well over a century. Whether at sunrise or sunset, there are always people, young and old, locals and visitors, out enjoying West Cliff. And while many from out of town think they are looking west, which is a logical conclusion, with some reportedly asking if that land out there is Hawai‘i, we are actually looking south towards the Monterey Peninsula.

We are all fortunate, unlike much of East Cliff and Opal Cliffs, that the original wagon road followed the cliff edge, and so, with one exception, all of the lots created and the homes subsequently built were on the inland side of what became West Cliff Drive. So everyone gets an unobstructed ocean view and access to the shoreline, whether just walking or climbing down to any of the pocket beaches or the tide pools. Along Opal Cliffs Drive the homes were all built on the ocean side of the road, so views and access are much more restricted.

Over the years, however, the winter storms and large waves at times of high tides have taken their toll on the cliffs, as they have this past week. Natural Bridges State Beach is the most visible example, where what was originally known as Moore’s Beach, then Hall’s Beach, followed by Swanton Beach, has had two of its three natural bridges disappear over time. The outermost arch collapsed shortly after 1905, and the innermost fell on the night of January 10, 1980. There have been at least a half a dozen others, however, including what was known as Crown Arch, which was a triple arch for a while near the end of Woodrow (formerly Garfield) that was frequently photographed with people standing or sitting on top.

Anyone who walks or bikes West Cliff often will have noticed that there are several areas where portions of the pedestrian/bike path have collapsed. This has not been lost on the city, which is now completing a two year-long study culminating in a West Cliff Drive Management Plan. One major issue is how those who use West Cliff would like to see the ongoing cliff erosion issues dealt with in the future. As sure as the sun comes up in the east every morning, the waves will continue to batter the cliffs, sea level will continue to rise, and the cliffs will continue to erode and collapse.

Efforts to protect the cliffs from wave erosion began nearly a century ago in 1926, and have continued nearly to the present. Today, 44% or almost 5,000 feet of West Cliff’s 11,100 feet of coastline has been armored, most of this consisting of rip-rap or rock revetments. One of the main questions the city has been evaluating, and soliciting public input on, is what is the best long-term response to the eroding cliffs? While there will no doubt be different approaches for specific areas, the fundamental question is whether more protective rock should be placed on the beach, or will some rock be removed and replaced with tie-back concrete walls as were constructed along Pleasure Point; or some rocks could be removed and we let the cliffs gradually retreat naturally. Rocks on the shoreline take up valuable beach area, and letting the cliffs...
continue to erode in some areas will mean that the pedestrian/bike path will eventually need to be moved inland. At some future time, West Cliff may be reduced to a single lane, as took place at Pleasure Point. These are big issues, and the city through its consultants has studied all options carefully, with a final management plan to emerge soon.

In addition to the changes that the cliffs, natural bridges and arches have gone through over time, development along West Cliff has also come and gone. I’ve attached two older photographs for you to locate. Both of these were taken about 1930, give or take a few years. One was taken right on West Cliff and the second was less than a block away. Let me know if you can figure out where these were taken. You can also take photos from where you think these were taken from and send them to me.

Somewhere along West Cliff, circa 1930
Photo Credit: University of California Santa Cruz Library Special Collections