

Comments on the Intersection of Land, Water, and People

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Any place where land meets water might be called a shoreline. There are shorelines along oceans, bays, lagoons, lakes, rivers, and creeks.

Any shoreline illustrates its essential importance to people. The relationship between people and shorelines is practical and spiritual.

People have always chosen to live and work along the shore because of the availability of food and water, transportation and commerce, and waste removal.

Shorelines are esthetic focus points. Whether our appreciation of shorelines has evolved through our practical association with them, or because of something more innate, is debatable.

More and more people demand the services of shorelines. This raises conflicts between practical and spiritual interests. People disagree about what is abuse and what is good use of shorelines.

Some shorelines can be privately owned, others cannot be owned, and in some cases the public reserves some rights over private shorelines.

What is missing is a public process to envision shoreline health. What is required for such a vision is shared understanding of the past, the present and change. Based upon an understanding of how a shoreline has changed, its future can be planned, almost.

An historical view is useful. Many changes are revealed. Shoreline changes in the Bay Area illustrate some basic shifts in popular views.

None of these changes is more fundamental than our modern disregard for shorelines as natural templates for human endeavors.

Although shorelines define the middle of watersheds, the centers of ecological diversity, and the union of land and water, they define the edges of cities, counties, states, and nations. They're in the middle of the natural world, and at the edge of popular thinking.

Please consider this: people used to move along shorelines, parallel to the natural flow of materials and energy. People used to move up and down creeks and rivers, and along the shores of lakes and bays, looking for food, visiting each other. They could not help but watch and understand the transformation of material and energy along the shorelines. They knew how shorelines work. They knew the essential services of shorelines.

Now consider the effects of bay shore construction and roadways on how we see and think about our shorelines. Because highways take us from one anonymous creek crossing to another, and because our views of the shoreline are obstructed, we do not experience the flow energy or transformation of materials that happen along the shore. We lose track of what the shoreline is doing, and what is happening to the shoreline. We lose track of the life the shoreline should support. We lose track of what we had. And we settle for something different, maybe something less.

So what? We might suppose that healthy shorelines are vital to us in practical and spiritual ways. They always have been. They are still essential for food and water, transportation and commerce, the removal of wastes, and our good spirits. History tells us that we need healthy shorelines. They belong in the middle of our thinking.