Q&A on “The Narrowing of Broad Beach”
Kara Murphy Schlichting

It seems that, from the outset, your work has focused on both urban and coastal areas, on the east coast of the United States (New York, Rhode Island, Connecticut). If I’m not mistaken, this is your first “foray” into California. How did you come to work on this particular beach, Broad Beach, located on the country's west coast?

You are correct. I came to this research on California because I wanted to know more about West Coast interpretations of the Public Trust Doctrine (PTD). I had researched and written about the PTD in New York State in my book New York Recentered. I remained interested because U.S. waterfronts are a unique type of real estate. They are imbued with a unique legal standing. The PTD is the legal framework that polices the divide between public and private property on America’s coasts. Under the PTD, derived from Roman civil and English common law, the government is required to preserve public use of tidelands and protect against private monopoly. In practice, each state has the authority to define the doctrine; states have, at various times, failed to define this trust in legislation, leaving its application to the courts; have failed to uphold the trust; have passed grants that allow private development of trust lands; have variously defined what sort of access (or what sort of behaviors) the trust protects; and have variously defined the extent of land held within the trust. The trust imbues tidelands with a jus publicum and a jus privatum, unlike regular property, which is generally endowed with a singular title. In theory, the trust allows conveyance of the jus privatum to a proprietary interest, but this title remains subservient to the jus publicum: a state’s first duty is always to preserve the public interest. While in theory a national framework, in reality, the PTD is complicated and localized.

In the nineteenth century, the PTD was generally interpreted as a way to support economic development, which included conveyances to riparian landowners. The PTD is perhaps best known today for its post-WWII application by environmental activists, when states like California added ecological protections, public access, water-orientated recreation, and open space preservation to the trust. In the twenty-first century, waterfronts are some of the nation’s sought-after real estate. Consider the waterfront of New York City, which I study. New York’s waterfront is important for shipping and economic interests, for transportation infrastructure (highways, airports), for municipal services (waste transfer stations, sewer treatment plants), for recreation (parks and beaches), and residency. Waterfront property is also finite. Lots of potential users, only so much land. Not surprisingly, varied interests have fought to control.

This is a long lead-up to say: I was interested to compare different states’ experiences with the PTD, and curious to see how and when the PTD came into relief. Those moments interest me for what they can tell me, as an environmental historian, about the material and cultural values embedded in coastal spaces and environments.

2. You quote historian Andrew Kahril, writing that "while the social repercussions of the privatization of public space in America continue to generate innovative and important scholarship and commentary, the environmental impact has received far less attention, and the relationship between the social and the environmental has gone virtually unnoticed.” Seen from France, this omission/oversight may seem rather surprising, especially since environmental history in the US emerged several decades ago now. How can this lack of interest be explained?
Environmental historians have been very much interested in the ways privatization has impacted material and cultural issues related to the U.S. environment. This focus, however, has not been evenly distributed across topics. Andrew Kahrl brilliantly studies the historical intersection of urban processes, real estate, environmental change, and waterfronts. One of the things I admire about his work is the way he has foregrounded the issue of privatization in this history. Private property rights have been leveraged to constraint the use of public spaces. Geographers, legal scholars, and historians have particularly explored what this looks like in cities. In the 20th and 21st centuries, landowners have historically used all sorts of arguments that boil down to a similar goal: control over public spaces. Music, barbequing, parking, pets, and, at beaches, swimwear choices have all been positioned as issues of “public good”. This can include having a say in what counts as “appropriate” public use and having influence over that definition. It can also include influencing who “the public” is—and who is unwelcome. Discrimination rooted in race and class often plays a roll. These issues are not unique to beaches—they are at the heart of what Setha M. Low and Neil Smith call “the politics of public space.” Kahrl’s work is a model of how productive this framing can be when turned to beaches.

3. You show that wealthy landowners now don’t just justify their actions by defending private property, although of course they do that too (drawing on the longstanding “proprietary attitude” you mention p. 211); recently, and rather unintuitively, they also refer to the “public good” and even the “commons”, as they are "reframing Broad Beach as a public asset and fragile environment in need of public protection.” (p. 213) Is it something you expected or is there to some extent an element of surprise? Is this just a change of strategy, or does it reveal something like a paradigm shift?

That Broad Beach residents use multiple justifications to square their attempts to discourage public use of public beaches does not surprise me. My book New York Recentered tells a number of variations of this story in greater New York City in the early twentieth century. Waterfront property owners have also long employ arguments that root the “public good” in environmental issues, like dangerous currents, poor water quality, and erosion. Sometimes the historical record is clear that an environmental benefit is ancillary to bolstering property owners’ proprietary perspectives. But the record is not always clear on this front. I think it remains to be seen is the reframing underway at Broad Beach becomes a pattern across other sought-after, often fragile and shifting, environments. What would a grassroots (if we are willing to call the organizing on supremely wealthy Broad Beach grassroots) push to protect environments in the face of the climate crisis look like? Where else in the past, in the U.S. or elsewhere, might be find such a movement if we looked?

4. There may be a tendency to assume that awareness of the issue of coastal erosion is a recent one, dating back to the turn of the 21th century. And yet, as you point out, the problem is a century old, as it was already explicitly raised in the 1930s. Can we speak of a kind of historical amnesia? And if so, how can we explain it?

If you look for a pattern of historical forgetting in the face of environmental hazards, you can find plenty of examples. Consider, for example, places where hurricanes have devastated coastal communities—and landowners have rebuilt and moved back into the path of danger. I have written about just this sort of redevelopment after a series of severe New England hurricanes from 1938 to 1954 in Rhode Island. Before the hurricane of ’38, Rhode Islanders lived with the vulnerability of seasonal erosion and winter storms but believed their state was, and would remain, safe from hurricanes. The storms changed this understanding of the coastline. But
extreme hurricane damage did not necessarily change behavior and development patterns alongshore. Scholars of community memory and disaster argue that resilient communities sustain collective or social memories that ensure past decisions and social arrangements inform future preparations. Yet a robust social memory can be difficult to maintain, as geographer Lindsey McEwen and her colleagues show, when events are not “actively remembered” but “actively forgotten.”iii Robert W. Kates, a geographer who specialized in coastal hazards wrote in the 1960s, described the typical coastal resident, even individuals who had weathered a damaging hurricane, as exhibiting a desire to deny hazard…coastal users are relatively well educated and well-to-do. They have come to the shore to partake of the attractions found at the interface of land and sea or to serve those who are so attracted. They are, by and large, knowing and well-informed about the general nature of the hazard they face, and as to the details, they are little worse off than the technical-scientific community. A high proportion of coastal dwellers take minimal steps to reduce their hazard, but many of them elect to live at considerable risk rather than reduce their seaward amenities.iv

The lure of waterfront views and coastal environmental amenities remain strong.

5. "The climate crisis and changing coasts are incompatible with government understanding of private property as sacrosanct”, you write. It may seem quite surprising that the beach could be a touchstone for (or a test of) property relations. Is this something you clearly had in mind before working on the topic?

I did have this in mind. As you can see from my first answer, I find the question of the public good versus private property provocative and inspiring in the way I approach urban and environmental history. I think back to the urban theorists who have been so influential to how I understand urban spaces (from Henri Lefebvre, the right to the city, to how Don Mitchell takes up this idea, to Neil Smith on the political economy of geography of the public sphere; to Mike Davis and the “end” of public space). The more I read about coastal history, the more coastal environments illuminated new aspects of this body of thought. I became interested in the ways the PTD made public-versus-private not a clean binary, but an unclear, often disputed, and fundamentally local phenomenon, rooted in the culture, politics, and environment of specific coastlines. And of course, beaches are in flux, environments always on the move, makes this divide dynamic—it is fabulously complicated. And I think, all the more fascinating.

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