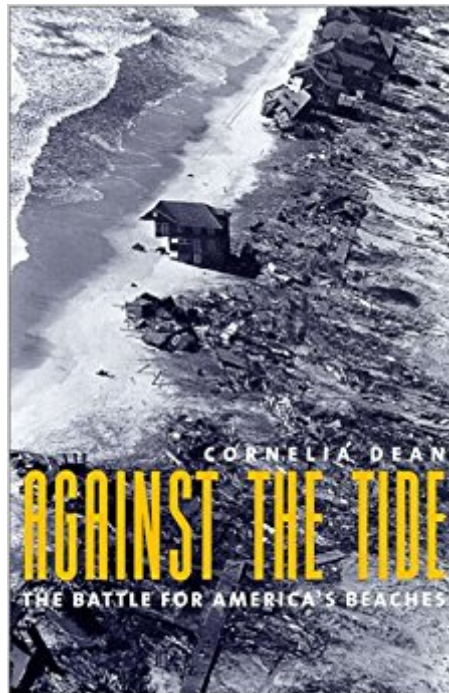




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Against The Tide: The Battle For America's Beaches



Synopsis

Americans love to colonize their beaches. But when storms threaten, high-ticket beachfront construction invariably takes precedence over coastal environmental concerns—we rescue the buildings, not the beaches. As Cornelia Dean explains in *Against the Tide*, this pattern is leading to the rapid destruction of our coast. But her eloquent account also offers sound advice for salvaging the stretches of pristine American shore that remain. The story begins with the tale of the devastating hurricane that struck Galveston, Texas, in 1900—the deadliest natural disaster in American history, which killed some six thousand people. Misguided residents constructed a wall to prevent another tragedy, but the barrier ruined the beach and ultimately destroyed the town's booming resort business. From harrowing accounts of natural disasters to lucid ecological explanations of natural coastal processes, from reports of human interference and construction on the shore to clear-eyed elucidation of public policy and conservation interests, this book illustrates in rich detail the conflicting interests, short-term responses, and long-range imperatives that have been the hallmarks of America's love affair with her coast. Intriguing observations about America's beaches, past and present, include discussions of Hurricane Andrew's assault on the Gulf Coast, the 1962 northeaster that ravaged one thousand miles of the Atlantic shore, the beleaguered beaches of New Jersey and North Carolina's rapidly vanishing Outer Banks, and the sand-starved coast of southern California. Dean provides dozens of examples of human attempts to tame the ocean—as well as a wealth of lucid descriptions of the ocean's counterattack. Readers will appreciate *Against the Tide's* painless course in coastal processes and new perspective on the beach.

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Customer Reviews

Castles built on sand are doomed, they say. But in our hunger for an ocean view from the living-room window, we keep building things we expect to last on beaches that never stay still. In *Against the Tide*, Cornelia Dean, science editor of *The New York Times*, outlines the global coastal management crisis and all the elaborate engineering methods developed to stave off erosion--revetments, sand-trapping devices, seawalls, groins and jetties, even artificial seaweed beds. In clear, journalistic style, she explains how all of these devices have failed to stop the inexorable march of coastal erosion. And they've failed at a staggering cost to taxpayers, despite the fact that they're usually deployed to protect private property. The world's sandy beaches continue eroding, and nowhere is this more visible than in the U.S., where oceanfront construction has been proceeding at a fast and furious pace for decades. Of course, the perfectly natural process of erosion is only considered a "problem" if it threatens buildings or property. Dean writes: "There is a kind of constituency of ignorance, people who have so much invested in coastal real estate that they do not want to hear how vulnerable it is." Using examples from Galveston to Cape Cod, and a few places on the West Coast, Dean shows how building each "protective" structure has led to the need for more protection in a game humans are destined to lose to the ocean. "American political institutions," she writes, "are ill-suited to the indeterminacy and elasticity of nature." Part of the problem is that people are reluctant to admit that natural processes threatening our carefully planned and paid-for civilization are good and necessary parts of a dynamic ecosystem, and our efforts to prevent them will invariably buy us more trouble. Dean believes that it's time to make peace with the rising sea level and stop fighting nature. *Against the Tide* should be required reading for waterfront property owners, coastal zone managers, the Army Corps of Engineers, and beach lovers everywhere. --Therese Littleton

An eloquent, forceful plea to save America's rapidly eroding beaches and coastline, this revelatory and disturbing report from the science editor of the *New York Times* is reminiscent of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in its sense of urgency and moral passion. From the motels and T-shirt shops of beachless Florida "beach towns" to Los Angeles County, most of whose beaches are artificial, the story Dean tells is the same. People build on unstable landforms, then attempt to avoid the inevitable consequences through quick technological fixes: concrete seawalls, artificial reefs,

sand-trapping steel groins, jetties, underground "dewatering" systems of pipes and pumps, etc. These techno-fixes may prolong the life of coastal buildings, but they usually accelerate erosion and environmental degradation. And taxpayers end up spending tens of millions of dollars to protect the property of those who knew they were building or buying in an unsafe place. Dean's book is a lucid primer on coastal engineering; it is also an appalling tale of shortsightedness, greed and willful ignorance, as property owners and developers square off against environmentalists and beach preservationists. It opens with a dramatic account of the hurricane that blasted Galveston, Tex., in 1900, leading the city to make a "Faustian bargain" by erecting a seawall that hastened the beach's demise. Dean sees Hurricane Andrew's devastation of the Gulf Coast in 1992 as a warning about overdevelopment of the shore and the failure to make houses hurricane-resistant. As the book's title suggests, Dean's call for restraint in building, strategic retreat and conservation of our shores goes against the current, but it is well worth listening to, especially as many climatologists predict rising sea levels due to global warming. Photos. (June) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

If you LOVE the beach or have the SEA in your veins, this is a must read book! It was sad to learn that mankind and our quest to make what we believe is a perfect beach front has and will destroy the beaches. The book is very informative and teaches us that we are responsible for most of the beach erosion that we see today because we are ultimately destroying the ability of the sea to replenish what it lost during storms, by placing retaining walls. We just do not have the patience to wait !

No complaints except that it was missing the cover graphics.

only book I have read about changing shorelines, how to protect a beach, what causes it to move.

An excellent summary of everything wrong with current public policy regarding America's beaches that is especially relevant after Hurricane Sandy.

This book is mandatory reading for anyone living in a coastal community. Well written and well researched, it is helping our Beach and Dune Committee understand what options to consider. Thank you very much for an interesting and informative book.

I read this book now more than a decade ago. But as I consider the damage just sustained along

the New Jersey coast and in the city of New York by hurricane Sandy, this book has constantly been on my mind. An armored coast, essentially without natural defenses, was tested by a major storm, and the results are appalling. Now, predictably, the newspapers are full of stories suggesting the solution to the problems experienced in the Northeast? More armoring of the coast! Thankfully there are a few exceptions, and the discussion of using the natural habitat of the coast as a way to mitigate the impacts of storms is seriously on the table in places. But the fact that I have perspective and understanding on this issue I attribute to this book which made a truly lasting impression.

I don't know Cornelia Dean but I wish she was my neighbor. This daring, wonderful, woman should be given a national award for her works in "Against the Tide." She blows the whistle on widespread negligent coastal management practices that are evident everywhere. It was extremely unsettling to me to read about almost identical patterns of coastal abuse that I have observed where I live at Alligator Point, Florida. A revetment was constructed in 1994 despite the warnings of coastal experts that it would contribute further to erosion rather than preventing it. This was done at a staggering waste of taxpayers' money and with the permission of county, state, and federal governments. Today, the beach area that once provided recreation and a protective buffer is gone because of revetment-caused erosion. Turtle areas are destroyed. Dwellings are sitting dangerously in water. The road is ruined and unsafe. And, there is no required accountability for removing the wall. It is now a permanent monument to disaster. Cornelia Dean articulately reveals how shamefully common this is. She has superbly documented the inept practices of coastal management efforts that are prevalent all along America's coasts. Nothing was written, however, about how to undo this American tragedy. I will, therefore, offer one suggestion based on Cornelia Dean's numerous contacts and her rapport with coastal planners. She should be given a special Presidential appointment to head up a commission to consolidate all coastal management agencies and to develop and enforce a unified set of standards. Ms. Dean's outstanding book certainly qualifies her for such a step.

This book is a must-have for anyone interested in beach erosion and overdevelopment. The author clearly lays out the arguments against such beachfront "improvements" as armoring, sandtrapping, etc. As a hydrologist, I was already well aware of the futility of most attempts to preserve beaches in their existing configurations, yet this book explains these issues in a very compelling and succinct fashion. The author also describes those rare occasions when intervention can indeed be helpful, and the special circumstances under which it is justifiable. Yet what is most compelling is the overall

argument that in the majority of cases, most attempts at beach and property preservation actually hasten the destruction of the very things requiring protection. Ultimately, a particular beach structure is by its very nature a transient thing, yet it is most durable in its present form if left alone.

Unfortunately, with beachfront development continuing at its currently rapid pace, it is unlikely that much of this important information will be heeded. Nevertheless, it is necessary to disseminate this knowledge. Perhaps this book can help inform the public of the need to let beaches be beaches.

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