



*Review
and
Reflection*

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OUR SECOND HERITAGE

THE SEACOAST boundaries are unique in that those nations that have them extend their sovereignty beyond, while land frontiers end abruptly with another nation beginning on the other side. Much dispute has been waged through the centuries about the extent of a nation's jurisdiction beyond its shores and it shows no sign of being settled. Most nations are not satisfied with the traditional three-mile limit, decided upon in the days when that was the extent to which a ship could discharge cannon toward a shore—rather meaningless in these days of ballistic missiles.

Peru claims as much as 200 miles out from her shores, not so much for national defence as for economic reasons, to protect her fishing industry. There is currently talk about recognising a nation's jurisdiction to extend to the continental shelf, with international waters beyond—an arrangement that would affect different countries differently, and thus not apt to quell the dispute.

There is at least a widespread sentiment that the ocean should remain the common property of all mankind—an idea once taken for granted but now meeting a challenge as the prospect is growing for economic exploitation of the ocean. The question of international public revenue from the ocean for such a body as the United Nations has even been broached—and it is an interesting possibility that the waters surrounding us may show us the sense of raising public revenue from the value of natural resources.

As for the coastal waters, what is the nature of a country's sovereignty? On what terms is the seacoast to be used? How can private use and the common right be reconciled? Why not through the principle of public collection of rental value? It would appear that at this borderland of nature, vital issues are being focused.

The seacoast is also a borderland of ecology where the life of the ocean meets the life of the land. A complex interaction of animal and plant life has been evolved in this fluctuating environment. However, man with his modern technology and habits is endangering this habitat as he is doing with so much of nature elsewhere. In the rush of advancing to greater industrial achievements, the side effects have not been sufficiently considered. The seacoast is posing a challenge in this respect, too, which also bears on private use and the common right.

Even the seashore as a recreational area is being endangered. The available desirable space is being narrowed. Miami Beach is the ultimate atrocity serving as a warning for future developments. There, the beach has virtually disappeared, a solid phalanx of hotels is built practically on top of the polluted waters, and people crowd into chlorinated swimming pools. Wherever interest is shown in any other part of the coast, the land is snapped up by speculators, the prices go up season by season, and incipient Miami Beaches sprout up, to the consternation of conservationists.

Some coastal areas have been preserved and remain in the public domain as national seashores and wild-life preserves. Even these do not escape the laws of economics. The public acquisition of new areas costs the public a pretty penny and in one case—Point Reyes in California—the government came close to bartering off a large part of the public domain in order to acquire an area. Only a public outcry prevented this. Would that there were more public outcries when the common heritage gets whittled away.

It would be foolish to try to preserve nature without man's using it. It is there for man to use. The problem is to so use it that it will not be laid waste but will continue yielding satisfactions. The seacoast should be so employed and enjoyed as not to be converted into a vast sewer surrounding us.

To this end, the present system of land tenure has to be re-examined. If, as soon as a portion of the coast becomes economically or recreationally desirable, it is grabbed and held for outrageous prices, the consequences we know so well will continue. The rush is on, the slap-dash developments burgeon, the resources of the coast are pushed beyond their limits in order to make up for the high price of the land, and pollution sets in. A programme of land-value taxation, by lessening speculation, would also lessen the despoiling of this great asset. And it would permit private use while preserving the common right, whereas most current programs for conservation involve much government planning.

Thus the seacoast is posing several important and interesting challenges. A wise handling of these challenges may show us the way to handle similar problems plaguing us inland from coast to coast.