



BOOK REVIEW

Leatherman, S.P., 1998. **America's Best Beaches**. Miami: SP Leatherman, 112p. Paper, \$17.95. ISBN 0-9663451-0-X.

America's Best Beaches probably is not what most readers would expect from the title. I know that when I received the book for review I was not sure what it might be about, but I must admit that I did have some preconceived notions. A quick glance through the book showed lots of color pictures of beaches *per se* and beach scenes or beachscapes from around the USA. That much I expected, plus some indication of how America's best beaches were rated, classified, or categorized. This information was there in a general sense, although somewhat scattered about the pages.

According to the preface, the book is based on evaluation of the 650 major public recreational beaches in the United States. The author developed fifty criteria by which the beaches are evaluated in an attempt to quantify the elusive "quality" factor. The criteria are broken down into three groups viz. physical factors, biological factors, and human use and impacts. Each category within the three groups is rated on a numerical scale from one to five. The numbers are relative and qualitatively identified, depending on the category, by comparative terms such as few to many, large to little, strong to weak, common to none, obstructed to unobstructed, and so on. The sample "Beach Rating Questionnaire," reproduced at the end of the book, gives the reader an opportunity to peruse the various criteria. With the beach rating form in hand, readers could rate beaches on their own. Lack of quantified units or discriminating criteria makes the rating system rather subjective. The author's experience in rating America's beaches for the past ten years provides a decade of continuity but may leave a wide berth for interpretation by other individuals, however. For those who are interested in the development, application, and evaluation of the beach rating criteria, the author has published a more detailed and informative paper in the *Journal of Coastal Research* (Leatherman, 1997). Leatherman's technical communication in the JCR was designed to stimulate useful discussions about beach quality, a particularly difficult subject area that is plagued by individual perceptions and preferences. Perhaps a good example of the subjective component is personal preferences for certain colors of beach sand. White sands are preferred over all other colors by most beachgoers. The sugar-white beaches of the Florida panhandle are the most highly prized of all beach-sand colors and preferred by most tourists as they rate them more aesthetically pleasing than pink or gray sands. Such preferences are difficult to quantify as there are gradations from pure white sands to tan or gray-colored sands, not to mention individual reactions to beaches with green, red, or black sands.

Within geographical regions [e.g. the northeast (Maine,

New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia), the southeast (North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida), the Gulf coast (Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas), the southwest (California), the northwest (California, Oregon, Washington), and the Hawaiian Islands], the author rates beaches in terms of categories such as best surfing beach, best overall beach, best novelty beach, best sports beach, best city beach, best swimming beach, best walking beach, and best wilderness beach. Clearly, each state may not have all categories of "best beach" and there may be some categories not yet identified viz., best nude beach, best service beach (cocktails anyone?), best family beach, best singles beach, best pet beach (horses and dogs love to run and swim, too), best beach for kids, best upscale beach, best surf-fishing beach, best shell-hunting beach, best driftwood beach, best picnic beach (food and drink is not allowed on many public beaches), and so on. The list could be expanded and maybe not all of these kinds of beaches exist in the USA and so we better limit Stephen Leatherman to the USA and save ratings from elsewhere for others. The book provides ratings for continental beaches and Hawaii but what happened to Alaska, Puerto Rico (a commonwealth of the United States), and Guam (a protectorate)? It seems like the author has some more travelling to do in order to fairly cover all of America's public beaches. Alas! It's tough job, but someone has to do it. I only wish I were the one who thought up this scheme. It's a difficult avocation to beat and it's even harder to believe that someone can actually get paid for doing this kind of work. To some extent we all must be a little envious of Stephen Leatherman for having the foresight to plan fully paid, working, family vacations. This might be an idea whose time has come but I think that Stephen got the jump on the rest of us. Alas!

The book is handsomely produced with lots of great color pictures of beaches and related scenes. The photographs (aerials, obliques, and scenic ground shots) are crisp and clear, and some take up a full page. Each photograph is accompanied by a caption but the photos are usually not specifically keyed to the text. Informative stories, anecdotes, and tidbits of information flood the pages where there are no photographs. For example, if you want to know about the capital of the "Redneck Riviera" (Panama City Beach), "the finest, whitest sand in the world" (Crescent Beach—Siesta Key, Florida), the "Golden Isles of Georgia" (Sea Islands), "Washington's sandbox" (Ocean City, Maryland), Cape May "diamonds" (quartz pebbles on the beach), the "Graveyard of the Pacific" (Cape Disappointment, Oregon), where the classic movie "South Pacific" was filmed (Hanalei Bay, Kauai, Hawaii), the beach where "Bay Watch" (the most popular TV series in the world) is filmed (Santa Monica Beach, Califor-

nia), this is the place to come for information. Because there is no index, one would have been helpful, the reader is forced to peel through page after page of pictures and text. Not knowing exactly what I was looking for, however, proved to be a pleasant experience finding choice bits of information along the way.

Although the book is handsomely produced, clearly laid out in format, and easy to work with in the long-page sideways layout, my copy is already falling apart at the binding. Perhaps I have been overzealous in my review, flipping pages back and forth, but the cover seems, to me, to be insecurely attached to the rest of the book. The cover pages are separating from the body text as there does not seem to have been enough glue placed along the binding. The book is self-published by the author and lacks some of the usual bibliographic and publisher information found on frontice pages of most books. This does not detract from the book itself but makes it somewhat cumbersome to include in proper bibliographic citations. But that may not be a real problem as the book is apparently intended for general consumption by beachgoers, holiday makers and vacationers. I wonder about distribution and whether the book will reach the wide audience it de-

serves and which was intended. Although coastal researchers will find the book interesting, it really needs distribution in novelty, curio, and gift shops along boardwalks and other outlets near public beaches.

The author is to be commended for his first attempt at producing a popular book about beaches. Subsequent editions of *America's Best Beaches* will no doubt address some of the shortcomings noted here. Overall, the book is worth purchasing at the modest price of \$17.95. I, for one, am going to buy several copies as gifts for people living on or near some of the beaches that are mentioned in the book. The book is a nice conversation piece and takes us a step closer to getting the public interested in beaches and coastal environmental quality. I recommend this book as a relaxing and fun experience, lest some of us take our work too seriously.

LITERATURE CITED

- LEATHERMAN, S.P., 1997. Beach rating: A methodological approach. *Journal of Coastal Research*, 13(1), 253-258.

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