

1995

Losing the Littoral Zone

Carl W. Tobias

University of Richmond, ctobias@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/law-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Environmental Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Carl Tobias, *Losing the Littoral Zone*, 22 B. C. Envtl. Aff. L. Rev. 693 (1995) (reviewing John Stilgoe, *Alongshore* (1994))

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Law at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Law Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

BOOK REVIEW

LOSING THE LITTORAL ZONE. ALONGSHORE by John Stilgoe. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994. Pp. 416.

*Reviewed by Carl Tobias**

I'm reading *Alongshore* by John R. Stilgoe, the Robert and Lois Orchard Professor in the History of Landscape at Harvard University. It's July, 1994, and I'm in Corolla, North Carolina, approximately located equidistant from Roanoke Island, North Carolina and Jamestown, Virginia, the first two English settlements in the land that became the United States. Corolla is the village where the paved road heading north from Nags Head, Kitty Hawk, and Kill Devil Hills ends. Corolla is fifteen miles north of Duck, a town that is replete with fashionable stores and miniature shopping centers sporting such endearing names as the Shoppes at Duck and Scarborough Faire, which is actually named for a prominent family that has inhabited the Outer Banks since the 1600s.

I'm staying in a revolting development in Corolla, named Corolla Light after the century-old lighthouse in the village. The five-bedroom house, which is owned by an investment banker from New Jersey, boasts his and hers jacuzzis and rents for more a week than my salary. The house faces the Sound, which has been neatly bulk-headed for the convenience of those staying in the development. Corolla Light provides numerous distractions, including a large pool adjacent to the ocean, a gigantic indoor sports center with tennis courts, weight rooms and another swimming pool, outdoor tennis courts, a miniature golf course, shuffleboard, etc.

The setting, therefore, is an appropriate locus for reading *Alongshore*. Stilgoe affords a sweeping, detailed account of that area which lies between the surf and the fastland. *Alongshore* is divided into thirteen chapters. Some chapters have provocative titles and material on hazards, treasure, and bikinis, several chapters provide interesting discussions of such apparently mundane topics as skiffs, and a few chapters offer readers more than they will probably ever want to know about wharves and other arcana. Certain information even seems wholly extraneous or flatly irrelevant, such as a dissertation on the federal income tax.

* Professor of Law, University of Montana School of Law, Missoula, Montana.

Stilgoe relies substantially on historical materials, literary information, including novels, non-fiction and poetry, scientific data, artifacts of popular and pop culture, sociological work, and much, much more. *Alongshore* is full of illustrations, ranging from cartographers' representations of the New World's coast, to advertisements of women powering boats equipped with Evinrude outboard motors pitched at liberated women of the 'teens, to picture postcards spanning the twentieth century, to the author's own collection of photographs.

Stilgoe also offers numerous striking insights about the coastal area and its inhabitants, animal, vegetable, and mineral, and their interactions with humans. For example, *Alongshore* amply documents the dangers that await people who fail to learn about, or to respect, the natural, but frequently disguised, perils of the seacoast. Stilgoe's most telling observations are those that weave together interdisciplinary ideas from art history, literature, and sociology or that cut across multiple media like painting, posters, and magazine advertisements. In short, *Alongshore* provides a sort of intelligent reader's guide to the coastal zone.

Several caveats and a few criticisms are warranted. Perhaps most important is the insufficient treatment accorded the great significance of this area to the environment as a fragile, but critical, habitat for many creatures ranging from phytoplankton to whales and to the ongoing battles over its future. For instance, all alongshore, developers and conservationists incessantly fight about the use and protection of this dwindling, beleaguered national treasure. Insofar as Stilgoe does analyze the issues raised by these disputes, he seems to emphasize the politically correct nature of the environmentalists who participate in the controversies rather than the crucial character of the resource itself.

Readers who are familiar with the coast, at least along the Atlantic Seaboard, know that the area has been beleaguered for the last quarter-century. Almost everywhere on the Atlantic Ocean, there are enormous pressures to develop the comparatively small amount of pristine land which remains. That debate is principally about money because of the substantial economic value for development of these places. Numerous publicly-owned areas, such as Assateague Island National Seashore and other components of the National Seashore System, experience threats from public overuse and resource depletion within the seashores. The public segments of the seaboard and others, such as many of the Virginia Barrier Islands which the Nature Conservancy's protective efforts have preserved, are jeopardized by activities involving adjacent and even distant air, land, and waters.

These threats include agricultural runoff of pesticides and sewage and industrial waste disposal.

I may have an attorney's penchant for legal solutions to environmental problems, although it does seem that the law has been, and will continue being, central to the resolution of numerous issues respecting the coast. Law, in the form of legislation and its implementation through administrative regulation, as well as litigation over these statutes and common law, will be important. Even options that differ from these schemes, such as private efforts to acquire or protect coastal areas or alternatives to traditional dispute resolution, will implicate law, attorneys, and legal solutions.

In short, the very nature of many coastal areas, as they have existed for centuries and even quite recently, are seriously threatened. Because so much is presently at stake, issues involving the future of precious coastal resources deserve greater and more careful treatment than Stilgoe accords them. To the extent that *Alongshore* does raise these questions, the book treats them less felicitously than it might. For example, Stilgoe simply seems to assume that development of the coastal area is bad and preservation of it is good.

The author fails to resolve, or even acknowledge, the issues of elitism that may inhere in this position or the conflicts that numerous individuals who are concerned about the environment experience. One of the clearest examples of Stilgoe's failure to appreciate these phenomena is his reification of locals or natives. By characterizing all locals as good and all summer people, transients, or vacationers as bad, Stilgoe caricatures both. The author correspondingly ignores the fact that natives frequently find themselves caught in the middle of development-preservation fights. For instance, locals may well be dependent upon the employment that development supports and be forced to make difficult choices between jobs and preserving traditional ways of life.

I immensely enjoyed *Alongshore* and found that nearly everything in the book engaged my interest. The volume struck many responsive chords, relating, for example, to saltmarsh cordgrass, wading birds, crabs, and clams. However, since childhood, I have spent alongshore the better part of several summers and untold vacations at all times of the year, principally on the Outer Banks of North Carolina and the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia.

I wonder whether individuals who are comparatively unfamiliar with the coastal realm will understand, like, or appreciate *Alongshore* as much. Certain readers may consider the thirteen chapters too disconnected, experience long periods of boredom interspersed with

moments of striking profundity, or even find the book to be an enormous storehouse of essentially useless information.

A number of readers, as I did, may find that Stilgoe is somehow too self-absorbed or self-indulgent, inserts too much of himself into the account, or is too much the affected aesthete alongshore. From the title, "barefoot historian," which the author assigns himself, to Stilgoe's heavy, and often strained, reliance on various media and art forms, he is too politically correct at the coast. Moreover, Stilgoe may be too much the pedantic instructor, for instance, when he lectures on class distinctions in exploring the topic of yachts or on who knows how to behave properly alongshore (natives, of course). I considered these phenomena somewhat distracting, but they can probably be forgiven in someone who obviously has such deep concern for, and abiding love of, his subject.

A related criticism is that certain matters may be so important and so personal that their revelation, at least in written form, is unwarranted. For example, the delight that I discover in seeing an osprey or a great blue heron catch dinner in a salt marsh or in clamming or crabbing myself is simply an experience that I do not want to express on the page.

In sum, Professor Stilgoe has provided a tour de force of the coast in *Alongshore* and has significantly expanded understanding and appreciation of that area which is so vibrant and so vital to the future of all forms of life. The book is a must read for anyone who is interested in the region between the fastland and the ocean.