

Retreat or Retrench?

By CURTIS BRAINARD

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Santa Barbara, Calif.

SOUTHERN California's second wettest winter on record has left its mark. Last week a landslide in Laguna Beach severely damaged 21 homes and sent hundreds of residents packing. In January a deluge in La Conchita melted a hillside, destroying homes and killing 10.

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Kirk Mastin for The New York Times

WATCH YOUR STEP: Waves nibble at a bluff in the Isla Vista neighborhood, exposing pillars meant to hold the soil in place.



Heavy rains and hurricanes may grab the headlines, but a more relentless force chews away at coastlines every day. Erosion slowly destroys about 1,500 American homes and the land they sit on annually, according to a report prepared for the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Wherever beachfront real estate lies, from California to Delaware, communities are torn by competing forces: the relentless loss of shoreline and the relentless desire of

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IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE.



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NO PROTECTION: Formerly buffered by a beach, apartment buildings on bluffs near the University of California, Santa Barbara, are now at water's edge.

about \$2 million, a legacy she plans to pass down to her daughters. For another, "I have the best coast spot in the whole state," she said. "As long as I am living, the house won't be for sale."

In Santa Barbara County, where waves can carve a foot a year from seaside bluffs, some officials are less sanguine. Last fall, about 10 miles from Mrs. Bergman's house, they evicted about 90 tenants in five apartment buildings that used to be inland but are now hanging about 35 feet above water at high tide. The evictions, in the Isla Vista area, caught many by surprise, but Santa Barbara's erosion problem is not news. Since the mid-1970's, about 30 blufftop houses on the south-central coast, which extends down to Ventura, have been demolished or rebuilt, their seaside rooms lopped off to stabilize their foundations.

The five apartment buildings, together worth about \$20 million, were built in the 1960's, when erosion was a recognized problem but the cliffs were still protected by a wide beach. Photographs taken during the 1970's show swaths of sand dotted with volleyball courts where waves now lap against the bluffs at high tide.

The county also moved to evict tenants of four other buildings on the same road, but after some owners contested the decision, saying that danger was not imminent, the county agreed to let the tenants stay. All nine buildings sit on relatively fragile sedimentary shale, which tilts toward the beach at a 45-degree angle, making

some people to live on the scenic edge.

"A person doesn't move from a location like the one I have unless you have to," said Mae Bergman, whose house is perched on a 40-foot cliff in the Mesa area of Santa Barbara. For one thing, she said, during her 48 years as an owner the value of the house has zoomed from \$26,000 to



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it less stable. Erosion has exposed pillars that were installed to stabilize the soil. Their exposure, which invites waves to bounce among them and the cliff, is quickening erosion, said the county geologist, Brian Baca.

The owners of the evacuated buildings declined to comment because they are appealing the evictions before the county building and safety department. James Wilson, a lawyer representing them, said that his clients were well aware of the geologic environment, but were never given a deadline for leaving the area; in his words, "there was no expectation that it was going to end at some point."

Whatever the outcome of the appeal, Mr. Baca says, the problem extends beyond nine buildings to the entire south-central coast. "The whole system is moving landward, and there's no stopping it," Mr. Baca said.

The report done for FEMA, by the H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics and the Environment, a nonprofit research group, said some 338,000 structures, strung along 9,500 miles, were susceptible to erosion, with property damages amounting to more than \$500 million a year. Communities regularly lobby Congress to sponsor sand-infusing "beach nourishment" programs: for this year it allocated \$112 million.

Sand naturally shifts around, changing the shoreline. But before California was so heavily settled, its beaches could rebuild with sediment swept down rivers. That natural process no longer occurs in the same way. Meanwhile, the ocean keeps eating away at the bottoms of cliffs, periodically claiming large chunks of land.

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