

# A LITTLE LESS BEACH

El Niño storms have swept away some precious shoreline



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

*Beach erosion*  
A crew works to replace sand lost near a storm-damaged stairway Friday at Seacliff State Beach.

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SANTA CRUZ — There's a lot less beach in the county after the El Niño winter.

The good news, if you can call it that, is that the unseasonably cold weather so far this summer has kept tourists from fighting over the shrinking shoreline.

Most beaches have lost 30 to 50 feet from the outer edges, and some as much as 100 yards.

They are also two to five feet lower than last year, said George Gray, a resource ecologist for the state Department of Parks and Recreation.

"All of our beaches lost more sand than anyone remembers happening," Gray said. "We kind of have the mentality from watching 'Baywatch' and whatnot, that beaches hold tight."

Some of the hardest hit in the county this year included Seacliff, Manresa and Sunset state beaches, he said. "In some places you always see sand, I saw actual bedrock exposed," said Eric Bloom, a ranger at Sunset. "It was interesting to see for the first time in the area of Sunset and Manresa."

He also said historic treasures long buried, such as the old wharf of Port Watsonville, were exposed on Palm State Beach.

Capitola Beach made headlines last year with a record amount of sand, but this year took such a beating that it is only half the size of the summer of 1997.

"This year, it's almost the smallest it's ever been," said Toni Castro, of the Capitola Chamber of Commerce. "We've had a lot of calls from visitors asking how much of a beach we have and we have to be honest."

But the weather, especially in June, took the biggest toll on tourism, she said.

Sand areas little touched included Rio del Mar Beach, said Karen Hibble, of the Aptos Chamber of Commerce. Most of the sand taken by storms from that beach has come back, she said.

Dave Matthews, a park ranger for New Brighton and Seacliff state beaches, said he thinks the beaches will rebuild, but more slowly than in previous years. He said visitors don't seem to mind the mini-beach, however.

"They're all finding a place to have a good time with little or no complaints of the beach really," he said.

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The Capitola junior lifeguard program had to be moved to New Brighton initially because of an unusually large Soquel Creek running into the ocean.

"I know our beach was better than theirs — sandwise anyways," Matthews said. The number of visitors to Seacliff, even with the long closure of the Cement Ship just offshore, did not suffer, he said.

The seasonal extension of Cowell Beach was the exception in the county — it actually gained sand.

As predicted earlier this season, the shallow sandbar off Cowell Beach made for an expansive tanning area and safe learning ground for novice swimmers and surfers.

"It's one of the most accessible places particularly at low tide for kids and people learning to surf,"

said Gary Griggs, director of the Institute of Marine Sciences at UC Santa Cruz. "The surf break is much more gentle." Also, he added, "You don't have to deal with the tourists as much, which for locals is a big issue."

He said all beaches took a hit this summer, but most should be at their peak come September. Several stretches of sand along the base of West Cliff Drive are much narrower, he said.

"Its Beach on the other side of the lighthouse is pretty much still wiped out," said Dan Perry, beach captain for the city of Santa Cruz.

But Santa Cruz Main Beach did not suffer, he said.

Alex Peabody, a State Parks lifeguard supervisor, said elevation of the sand at Twin Lakes State Beach made it prone to flooding.

Santa Cruz harbor officials had to

bring in nearly twice the amount of sand just to open the harbor, said Port Director Brian Foss.

"For all our efforts, we still had a beach narrower than normal even after we stopped dredging," Foss said. He said about 399,000 cubic yards of sand was brought in compared to the usual average of just under 200,000.

"The beaches are coming back, but I think it will be all way until next year before we start seeing our beaches return to normal," Bloom said. "In some places it's still 100 yards thinner than usual."

Still, officials in the northern county say there's room for everyone.

"I think everybody's fear was that the beaches would disappear and that's certainly not the case," Griggs said. "There's a lot of beach out there."