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Unruly Paradise—Nature and Culture in Malibu, California

A World of Seclusion

“27 Miles of Scenic Beauty” is what a sign at the city limits of Malibu promises its visitors. Sandy beaches, great ocean waves for surfing, exotic trees, and spectacular villas are the hallmark of the legendary Southern Californian town. The coastline and the canyons of Malibu have attracted the rich and famous—Hollywood actors, producers, and directors—for almost 100 years, and the ocean views from the hillsides are truly breathtaking, unlike any others in America. Malibu, though very close to Los Angeles, is not a city. There are no high-rises, no highway networks, no factories, no railway lines. Malibu does not even maintain a bus station. Life seems laid back in scenic Malibu. “We’ve got a nice, quiet beach community here, and I aim to keep it nice and quiet,” is what the fictional police chief in the Coen Brothers’ 1998 motion picture *The Big Lebowski* says about Malibu. Thousands of postcards and posters depict a Malibu that often looks too good to be real: “Elegant and edgy, provocative yet meditative,” to use a phrase from *Boxoffice Magazine* in their review of *Malibu Eyes*, a 2001 Vanguard Cinema movie. Malibu advertisements tend to feature exotic beaches with surfers, stunning sunsets, palm trees, and, more often than not, female models in bikinis. Malibu aims and claims to be a paradise—an American Garden of Eden, a world of seclusion and seduction. Nowhere is this more evident than at “Paradise Cove,” a small Malibu beach framed by bluffs where television programs—including *Baywatch*—were filmed, as well as movies such as *American Pie 2* and *Beach Blanket Bingo*. But like all earthly paradises, Malibu is all too entangled with human weaknesses and desires.

From the Chumash Community to the Hollywood Colony

Malibu has a long history that started long before the visual culture of Hollywood. Between 6,000 and 8,000 years ago the area was home to the Chumash hunters and fishermen who were famous for their redwood canoes that allowed them to travel up and down the coast for hundreds of miles. The Chumash gave the land its name, “Humaliwu”—meaning

something like “the surf sounds loudly.” The Spanish began to move into California in the sixteenth century, but neither Spanish soldiers nor the missionaries who settled there took a particular interest in Malibu. This changed after California became part of the US and Frederick Rindge, vice president of the Union Oil Company in Los Angeles, bought the “Malibu Rancho” with its more than 13,000 acres. For Rindge a dream came true when he built a home in Malibu canyon and a “farm near the ocean, under the lee of the mountains, with a trout brook, wild trees, a lake, good soil, and excellent climate.”¹ Rindge had traveled all over the globe—from the Mediterranean to South Africa and from his native Massachusetts to Chile. But Malibu surpassed in beauty every place that he had visited before. He called it an “American Riviera” and praised its “resemblance with Palestine.” Malibu was Frederick Rindge’s paradise. In his autobiography, *Happy Days in Southern California*, he exclaimed: “The happiest thought of all thoughts in connection with this beautiful land is that only in Heaven is it more beautiful, and that we can live there, too, if we are faithful.”

Rindge had no doubt that he would live “to a great age” like “many of the native race”: Victorianno, a native chief, lived to be 136, and—so he asked his readers—“Is it not natural to believe that his subjects lived to be two hundred, at least?” But things turned out different for Mr. Rindge. He died a sudden death at the age of 48, and his wife, May Knight Rindge, the so-called “Queen of Malibu,” was forced to sell part of her Malibu property, the La Costa area, to a developer. This exclusive beach soon became a hideaway for such illustrious Hollywood greats as Jack Warner, head of Warner Brothers Studios; Dolores del Rio, the “Princess of Mexico”; silent movie sex symbol Clara Bow; Western hero Gary Cooper; and Duke Kahanamou, the “father of surfing.” By the early 1930s Malibu had become a gated paradise for the rich, a refuge from buzzing Los Angeles, the quiet garden of the city. Or so it seemed.

Nature Is an Actor Too

The peace and quiet was deceptive. Even Rindge, who thought of Malibu as a “calm and sweet retreat” in “these almost holy hills,” was aware that natural forces lay dormant where he had made his home: “Reclining on the beach,” he wrote in his autobiography,

1 Frederick Hastings Rindge. *Happy Days in Southern California* (Cambridge, MA: HG Houghton & Company, 1898 [reprint Anaheim, CA.: KNI Inc. Book Publishers 1984]), 64.

“it is hard to believe that a tidal wave has ever occurred” in this area, “yet such is the case.” Rindge was aware of “seismic disturbances” and of the force of the dry Santa Ana winds that came down from the Mojave Desert all the way to the coast, and in 1903 the castle-like ranch that he had built for his family and domestics fell victim to an uncontrolled fire. The fire was not a freak accident, however. On the contrary, catastrophic fires were not the exception but the rule on the Malibu coast. Shortly after the Hollywood actors moved into their beachfront homes in 1929, 13 new homes were ignited and destroyed by wildfire. Los Angeles writer Mike Davis once called Malibu “the wildfire capital of North America and, possibly, the world.” He pointed out that the area of the western Santa Monica Mountains was “burnt three times over” during the twentieth century, and large fires of more than a thousand acres raged frequently—on average “every two and a half years”—on the “fire coast” of Malibu. Over the years, Rindge’s widow kept building and rebuilding palatial ranches and retreats in Malibu, in addition to a little pottery factory that produced unique tiles with Mediterranean (Moorish, Saracen, and Spanish) designs. But all of the buildings were hit by fire, and many of them, including the pottery factory, were never rebuilt.

Wade Graham, a Los Angeles-based landscape writer, remembered moving to a small wooden house close to the Malibu beach in the 1980s. For him the modern gardens of California resembled what he called an “American Eden.” But soon after his family moved to the beach, some of their neighbors were driven out of the Garden of Eden: “We watched fires raging down on us from the Santa Monica Mountains, lines of forty-foot-high flames advancing over the peaks and ridges, red fire engines and crews hauling out hose lines on the PCH [Pacific Coast Highway] to make a stand.”² And in a scene reminiscent of Nero watching the fire of Rome while playing the lyre, Graham continued: “We climbed up a ladder onto our roof with the garden hose and she [my mother] shared gin-and-tonics poured from a thermos into plastic cups with the neighbor and the basset hound he had hauled up the ladder. The firefighters saved our house, but not some other people’s houses.”

Wildfires are not the only catastrophes that nature has had prepared for Malibu’s residents. Heavy storms are just as common, and Wade Graham’s description of an El Niño carries with it somewhat apocalyptic traits: “One pounding bright day in 1984,” he

2 Wade Graham, *American Eden: From Monticello to Central Park to Our Backyards. What Our Gardens Tell Us About Who We Are* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013), 290.

writes, “we watched the house next to our next-door neighbor’s—a little, low, pitched-roof affair, clearly from another era—wash away in the waves, broken into a slosh of kindling and boards that clattered frighteningly through our pilings before vanishing.”

Perhaps nowhere in the US is nature as unruly as in Malibu. The Malibu Coast Fault Zone is seismically active. In the wake of earthquakes, hills and canyons and the coastline have changed their faces, and the threat of a tsunami hangs over the sandy beaches of Malibu like a sword of Damocles. Yet it is water and fire that have caused the worst damage to homes over the last hundred years. Floods, wildfires, and landslides have pounded the region relentlessly and with almost rhythmic regularity. In fact, different types of disasters and hazards have the tendency to reinforce each other. Almost half of Malibu’s mansions are built on steep land, which is prone to mudslides. Once wildfire has stripped the hills of vegetation, the risk of erosion, flooding, and slides increases. Chemistry does the rest. After a fire, the remains of the creosote-laden shrubs and woody plants covering the hills and canyons leave an oily deposit. This, in turn, augments the flow of soil and water.

The dramatic setting of Malibu, with its steep canyons and striking beaches, is a product of nature. The very same forces that generate Californian earthquakes and put Malibu at risk also created the mountains millions of years ago. When, year after year, rain comes down in torrents, it fills the valleys with roiling waters and rolling rocks, shaping and reshaping the canyons and cutting them ever deeper. The sand of the beaches is a product of nature too: of wind and waves, of surf and turf. It may sound all too obvious. But we—humans—should never forget that we did nothing to create the stunning scenery of Malibu. It was nature, or God, if you will.

Playing God in Paradise

Semi-arid shrubs and plants—so-called chaparral—provide the green backdrop of Malibu’s hillsides. “Nature knew her business when she developed the chaparral,” wrote Francis M. Fultz, an early Californian conservationist and member of the Sierra Club. “How defenseless mountains are without their coat of chaparral against the elements.”³ Once called “elfin wood,” chaparral used to cover most of Southern

3 Francis M. Fultz, *The Elfin-Forest of California* (Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Press, 1927).

California's hillsides and protected it from erosion. With the establishment of Chumash villages thousands of years before our time—there are eight archeological sites in today's Malibu—Native Americans started to burn the green thicket in an effort to plant crops, increase the deer population, and drive out grizzly bears. Chaparral is drought-resistant, full of natural fuel, and is certainly one of the most flammable types of brush on the globe. In its own reproductive cycle it tends to burn every 15 to 30 years, and when the Chumash natives were around it would not grow old. The cycle of wildfire that has ensured the recycling of nutrients and the sprouting of seeds has been largely beneficial for keeping the unique Californian ecosystem (with its coastal sage, chaparral, and oak) intact.

Things changed rapidly when the hillsides were settled in the twentieth century. The ideal of Malibu homeowners was no longer that of a hunting ground or of a wilderness that saw rhythmic cycles of burning. It was instead a lush and colorful garden, a paradise safely shielded from the risks and dangers of wildfires. When Rindge moved to Malibu in the late nineteenth century his utopian vision was that of a "Riviera transplanted." He, as well as many of his contemporaries, began to "improve" the landscape of Southern California by bringing exotic and awe-inspiring trees and bushes and flowers to the coast. Much of the new flora came from the Mediterranean, South Africa, and South America, and was soon to cover the countryside, especially where it appeared to be barren. Step by step, the thicket and brush of Malibu's hinterland was replaced by villas and mansions, by pockets of camellias, azaleas, and roses, by lawns and of tree groves. To protect private homes and gardens, small fires in the brush were routinely extinguished. As a result, the old, dry brush could grow and build up enormous quantities of flammable material. Andrew Gosser, one of Malibu's firefighters, told me in a conversation in 2010 that while there have been fewer fires over the last few years, they have also become more raging and more devastating. Gosser predicted that future fires may be exceptionally harmful because of the unheard-of accumulation of biomass in the chaparral. For some of the canyons—Topanga Canyon for instance—Gosser predicted fires of vast intensity since the last big fire had occurred two generations ago. Palm trees burn "like Roman candles," he explained, and "some of the trees and bushes—pine, eucalyptus, juniper, and the Italian cypress"—have a tendency to burn "like gas."

Fire is always highly "unruly," but the combination of strong winds and fuel and high-end houses that are nestled into Malibu's chaparral landscape has no equal in the

United States. As more and more villas and mansions were built, the calls of Malibu residents for public “protection,” “defense,” and “relief” have grown ever louder. And they were answered: millions of tax dollars are being spent on tax relief and insurance subsidies. Furthermore, firefighting has taken on a whole new dimension. In an attempt to protect the homes of Malibu’s nouveaux riches, regional firefighters employ the largest civilian air fleet in the world. When big fires break out in Malibu, the coast and the hills turn into a battlefield between humans and the elemental forces of nature: Black Hawk helicopters and Sikorsky Skycranes appear in the sky. Each of them takes thousands of gallons of water from the ocean and dumps it over the raging blaze. When things get really bad, airplanes such as Quebec Super Scoopers, DC-10s, or even Boeing 747s that can drop up to 20,000 gallons of flame retardants are being leased. Yet no matter how many fire troops and aircraft are rallied, it may be in vain if nature does not “cooperate.” A sudden change of wind can frustrate all efforts. Firefighting in Malibu is, indeed, a Sisyphean task.

It is not hard to explain why people want to live in Malibu: the landscape is dramatic, its blue skies and sunshine are proverbial, the view of the ocean is stunning, and the interaction between water, waves, and wind provides a natural spectacle. But despite great efforts and expenses to build permanent structures, impermanence will always be Malibu’s signature. Geology and wind, sea and water will be the winners in the end. Despite conservation efforts, soils keep sliding down the mountains each winter. And even the best engineering—steel and concrete, anchors and caissons—will not prevent cliffhanging castles from collapsing and coastal mansions from eventually flowing out with the sea.

Nature is always “on the move.” But in Malibu natural processes occur in rapid succession: change occurs dramatically, in months and years rather than centuries or millennia. The history of Malibu is a modern-day story of paradise, and a rather American one at that. For centuries, US Americans have seen themselves as the “chosen people of God” in working their land, as expressed by prominent individuals such as Thomas Jefferson. They have formed an understanding of progress as a linear development, closely linked to civility and the cultivation of nature. Efforts to turn Malibu into a tame and orderly garden are a reflection of this ideal. Going against the forces of nature is the story of temptation and fall, of creation and expulsion from (our self-created) Eden. The story of Malibu reminds us that our ideals are often expressed in what we grow, and it teaches us how we are caught up in the cross-currents of culture and the ultimate rule of nature.

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Part of the information here is based on interviews with environmental writer Jennifer Price, Los Angeles; Andrew Gosser, Malibu; and Mati Waiya of Wishtoyo Foundation, Malibu, and on the *Malibu Disasters and Hazards* website.