

Chapter 2

Traditional Cultures Editorial: Mobility and Innovation in Traditional Coastal Cultures

John R. Gillis



It may come as a surprise to know that before the modern era, the past weighed much less heavily on the present than it does today. Traditionalism, a mindset that pays obeisance to the past, is in fact more characteristic of our own times than earlier coastal cultures. The kind of nostalgia associated with modernity prevents us from confronting coastal problems with the pragmatism characteristic of our ancestors [1]. What is striking is just how flexible and innovative they were.

The traditional coastal cultures referred to here existed from the end of the Ice Age to the middle of the nineteenth century, when the current sea rise began. By 4000 BCE, coasts stabilized and assumed roughly their current shape around the world. For the next six millennia there was relative constancy, though this was frequently punctuated by storms, floods, and tsunamis. But since 1850 a second epochal inundation has been detected, and, coupled with increased temperature levels, has brought further perturbations that recall earlier epochs of sea rise [2].

Before the nineteenth century historical consciousness did not run very deep, and the future did not loom large. People's lives were narrowly focused both spatially and temporally. History was inseparable from communal memory, which

J.R. Gillis (✉)
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, USA
e-mail: gottgillis@cs.com

was highly selective. It was passed from one generation to the next, was always open to innovation, responsive to changes in the experience of the environment itself. This was particularly true of highly mobile hunter-gatherer peoples, but also of settled agrarians who arrived on the human scene about 9500 BCE. In time, agricultural surpluses would contribute to the creation of kingdoms, cities, and priesthoods. With the arrival of mass literacy in the nineteenth century, local experience would give way to expertise. In our time, people are much less free to innovate and knowledge systems have become more rigid, less responsive to immediate, local circumstances.

Recent research has shown that the original *Homo sapiens* were coastal dwellers, originating on the shores of South Africa roughly 164,000 years ago in response to the drying out of the continent's interior [3]. At the shore, humans discovered a far richer environment, conducive to brain development, tool and language invention, and new forms of kinship focused around a common hearth. It is not unfair to say that the shore was the original home of what we regard as our own species [4]. From that point onwards, human evolution took shape along the shores of Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and the New World, following what has been called the great "kelp highway" alongshore rather than toward the interiors [5].

While coastal people ultimately colonized the interiors of Europe, Asia, and the Americas, I am reluctant to call them "settlers." That was not the original intention of their movements. Their migrations were alongshore, not inland. Where land and water met they encountered what we call an *ecotone*, a hybrid composed of two different ecosystems of exceptional diversity and richness. This special place generated a mixed population of fishers, gatherers, and farmers, a unique coastal people that have existed almost to the present day. They were distinct from landed populations, but were not exclusively maritime. The tendency of both historians and anthropologists to focus almost exclusively on either peasants or mariners has caused coastals to be largely neglected. Geographers have also ignored shores in favor of interior lands, but we are now coming to see them as not just the edge of land or sea but a third space worthy of close examination. Recent studies of human evolution now insist that *Homo sapiens* have not followed a single line of development but several. To understand the world as we know it, we must understand the diversity of our species as this developed in response to various ecological niches.

Ultimately a majority of *Homo sapiens* would turn to agriculture, what the anthropologist Yuval Noah Harari has called "history's greatest fraud." [6]. According to him, agriculture forfeited the kind of Stone Age affluence enjoyed by coastal hunter-gatherers and pastoralists. Peasants toiled more hours, were exposed to higher levels of disease and mortality, and enjoyed less freedom. They were also more class and gender divided. Coastal peoples would remain a minority into the modern era, but their geographical marginalization should not be mistaken for inferiority or backwardness.

Recovering this amphibious history is not easy, but it is important to note what makes coastal people unique. Like all people who occupied something in-between, they are both vulnerable and privileged in important ways. They mastered a geography that is best likened to a frontier, without clear boundaries. Shores are

themselves in constant motion and it is this which sets the coast apart from the interior.

Coastal people have always been freer than inlanders, less subject of kings and priesthoods. They have a longstanding and well-deserved reputation for lawless and irreligious behavior. Until the nineteenth century, coasts and their denizens were perceived as dangerous, even savage. Like nomads and frontier peoples everywhere, they were threats to order organized around fixed boundaries, private property, and static settlements. Like the sea nomads and pirates with whom they were often confused, coastal people were set apart by their very high rates of mobility. They were the last humans to be domesticated and they retained those precious qualities of flexibility and resiliency that are in such short supply today.

Fundamental among humanity's original adaptive capacities was mobility itself. The original colonization of African shores was the product of the massive drying out of the continent roughly 160,000 years ago. Movement to the sea opened up a range of food resources that would ensure the future evolution of *Homo sapiens*, whose larger brains and enhanced cognitive abilities made possible migration out of Africa, eventually populating both the old and new worlds. Before the end of the Ice Age, when the seas were shallower, this was accomplished largely by moving along coasts. But when deep water wayfaring skills were developed even the most isolated island peoples were able to avoid environmental disasters by island hopping, transporting not only themselves but their animals and plants across vast stretches of the Pacific. Hunter-gatherers on the coasts of Alaska and elsewhere were equally skillful at moving alongshore and inland to avoid natural disasters. Today, their access to similar strategies is inhibited by property laws which have prescribed the ancient rights of the wayfarer as well as those of the hunter-gatherer.

As we usually tell the story of human progress, it begins with foraging, proceeds to agrarian settlement and then, recently, to urban development. We think we have domesticated nature, beginning with crops and animals, but in reality we have domesticated ourselves, turning indoors, barricading ourselves within the walls of the *domus*, closing our doors to both nature and the outside world. Thinking we have achieved security, we have gained only its illusion. And in the course of domesticating ourselves, we have reduced our resiliency by a considerable degree.

As Rachel Carson famously put it, "the edge of the sea remains an elusive and indefinable boundary." [7]. There are not only the temporal transformations wrought by daily, monthly, and seasonal tides, but where shores are composed of sand or mud, another fluid element. Sand moves alongshore, stopping to rest but rarely standing still for very long. Coasts were the last places to be mapped in detail; and the "coastline" was not identified and objectified until the late eighteenth century. Until then, certain landmarks, headlands and bays, were known to mariners. Until the modern era, the greater part of seafaring was shallow rather than deep water, along coasts rather than between them.

The boats employed in the coasting trade were shallow-bottomed, built for river as well as ocean traffic. They were easily drawn up on shore; and temporary landings far outnumbered permanent harbors until the nineteenth century. Ports with deep harbors were located largely inland, upriver, where they were more easily

defended against storms and pirates. We imagine shores to have been lined with fishing villages, but, in fact, these became prominent in Europe only in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Until then, peasants came down to the shore when the fish were running, keeping there only storage sheds for their gear. They camped rather than settled on the shore, deliberately choosing flimsy, floatable constructions that could be easily abandoned or moved out of the way of storms, tides, and tsunamis.

In contemporary Maine, the shore cottage is still called a “camp,” a clue to the transient, even nomadic nature of earlier coastal generations. Brian Fagan writes: “Generational memory and cherished oral traditions would have underlain a way of life defined by movement, not environmental change.” [8]. Like pastoral or nomadic people to whom they should be compared, the fishers/farmers (often one and the same) of coastal regions moved freely across wide areas their lives focused on a few points of safe refuge, but entirely oblivious to the kinds of boundaries which had come to define the lives of agrarian peoples. Their seafaring was akin to the wayfaring of the aboriginal peoples of North America and Australia, reliant, like the birds and animals whose tracks they followed, on natural landmarks rather than instruments or maps [9]. They had their marine version of aboriginal songlines, providing them with a sense of viable routes, unburdened by the notion of roots that would inhibit the movements of later generations of people tied to land rather than water.

Leaving behind few written records and even fewer monuments, coastal history has remained obscure in comparison to its better documented interior. Coastal people had a much more fluid sense of time and space, capable of moving out of the way of danger presented to them by the sea. We can trace their flexibility back to skills long practiced by hunter-gatherers. Yet, historians and anthropologists continued to insist that the Neolithic Agricultural Revolution was humanity’s great leap forward, a myth reinforced by the Biblical story which would have us believe that everything begins with the Garden of Eden. The truth is that the simultaneous domestication of humans, plants, and animals exposed our species to pollutants and diseases which peoples on the move rarely encountered. Until the emergence of modern medicine and sanitation, movement had been the only way to reduce mortality. In this case, low mortality paired with low fertility contributed to a way of life that was in many ways preferable to that inland, despite the obvious dangers posed by the ocean itself.

For much of the agrarian era, coastal dwellers were relatively few in number and sufficiently mobile to avoid mass disasters, but all this has changed with modern population rise in the nineteenth century and now with the onset of further sea rise. Originally unnoticed by observers, sea rise coincided with a historically unprecedented surge to the sea by inland populations around the world. Colonized initially and lightly from sea, coasts are now overrun by inlanders who want to live *on* the sea, but have not the slightest idea of how to live *with* it. Industrial fishing and the rise of container shipping has reduced the numbers of working waterfronts of all kinds, displacing them from shores that have been taken over for recreational purposes. The shore has become thoroughly domesticated and urbanized, and the once mobile camp became a “teardown”, allowing the shore property to rocket in

value. To protect such assets, the shore has become a place of objectified, engineered boundaries, bounded by massive sea walls which are generally agreed to be the cause rather than the solution to erosion and storm damage [10].

The disasters we have experienced in the last two decades are not natural, but human in origins. What was once a fluid frontier, a broad and flexible margin bridging land and sea, coasts have become increasingly narrow and intransigent edges, full of unforeseen dangers. Vernacular knowledge has been cast aside in favor of engineering expertise based standards developed for terrestrial rather than aqueous environments. In the era of globalization and the nation state, local people have lost control of the shore, for what was once a frontier, a realm of freedom of movement, is now a closely guarded coast. For the people who have experienced Hurricane Katrina or Sandy, their paradise has become a purgatory [11]. The values of the landlubber have triumphed everywhere, although, in some of the least developed areas of the world, like Somalia, it is still possible for indigenous people to assert themselves through piracy. England's coasts are sprinkled with names like "Smugglers Cove," which recall a different kind of coastal culture, but there will be no return to the days when the shore was the castaway's refuge and the migrant's last resort.

Tourism has invested the shore with nostalgia, but we must hold up the true history of our coasts as a mirror to current conditions if we are to get a viable perspective on our contemporary dilemmas. We need to recognize that we are essentially the same human species that first came down to the African shores; we need to remember that sea rise has happened before without resulting in total catastrophe or extinction. We need to appreciate the examples of adaptation that coastal peoples of every place and time over the last fifteen millennia can offer. There is nothing worse than to condescend to our ancestors, especially when the modern era has erased so many of the adaptive skills that they bequeathed to us. Having replaced so many traditional navigational and fishing skills with mechanical devices and electronic aids, it is we who have lost touch with the ways of nature as well as our natural selves.

There is so much to be learned from the coastal past, from the mound builders of the northern Europe as well as the stilt houses of the Pacific. There is the history of the so-called Sea Peoples of South Asia, many of them refugees from mainlands wrecked by war or famine. While Sea Peoples almost never spent their entire lives on the water, they can show us how to live between land and sea, drawing on the resources of both without devastating coastal environments. We need also to take into account the history of waterlands, estuaries, and wetlands, which for millennia were among the most productive places on earth until marginalized by the drainage and dyking projects of recent times. Here we can look to the Netherlands, the European country with the longest experience with inundation, where the learning curve is sharply up. Massive engineering projects have been supplemented by experiments with floating buildings, including schools, prisons, and factories. Restoring wetlands and creating soft edges between land and sea is another strategy that draws on past experience. It seems it is not too late to enlist ancestral wisdom in our inventory of coastal solutions [12].

In this new era of sea rise, we have the opportunity to return, as the first *Homo sapiens* did, to the shore and to its past in order to use the lessons it can teach us. The coast can again be a frontier that we move with and adapt to. Embracing fluidity over fixity requires rethinking many of our most deeply held spatial and temporal myths, but humankind has shown its genius for adaptation before and can do it again if it can summon up the political will.

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Author Biography

John Gillis—Historian, Author, and Professor John Gillis is a Rutgers University Professor Emeritus of History who resides for most of the year in Berkeley, California. In the summer, he can be found on Great Gott Island, off Acadia National Park in Maine. He has taught at Rutgers, Stanford, Princeton, and the University of California at Berkeley, and is a Life Member of Clare Hall, Cambridge. Mr. Gillis has been a Visiting Fellow at St. Antony’s College, Oxford, and was a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, and the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences at Uppsala University. He is also a Fulbright Senior Scholar. John Gillis is the

author of numerous books and other publications including *The Shores Around Us*, 2015; *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (2012) and *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World* (2004).

Dr. Gillis holds a B.A. from *Amherst College* and a Ph.D. from *Stanford University*.

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