

Review: The Golden Shore, California's Love Affair with the Sea

By David Helvarg

Reviewed by Ryder W. Miller
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Helvarg, David. *The Golden Shore: California's Love Affair with the Sea*. Thomas Dunne Books: St. Martin's Press: New York, 2013. 342 pp. ISBN: 9780312664961. US \$27.99.

With many literary men taking a trip away from the sea and using the "sea" as a metaphor, it is nice to have a book about the *real* ocean available for interested and curious parties. California is one of the tales about The Pacific. It is also sort of an island itself with the eighth largest economy in the world. This book intertwines the story of California with the story of the Pacific, thus serving both as a book about the shore as well as the history of The Golden State.

David Helvarg, who calls California home and is also an activist, provides a fascinating exploration of the connection between the people of The Golden State and the ocean which has had profound influences on their lives. The book is not exhaustive, but it tells a long historical story as well as explores some interesting places. The Pacific Ocean is not just a boundary, but also a means of connection to the larger world; historical events also happened out beyond the waves on the shoreline.

There are many interesting subjects in the exploration of California's connection with the ocean. There is naval history, The Gold Rush, natural history, lighthouses, activism, conservationism, marine biology, and the story of coastal towns in this trip through the state. The book is geared for a general readership, but it will also help Californians and Americans know more about The Golden State.

The book does seem to digress from solely being a fascination with the sea, instead focusing on related subjects. In doing so, it succeeds as a means to let people bask in the longer story of the state and people's fascination with the ocean. The message is at times profound. There are all sorts of different people involved in a story that could be read by a wide range of audiences, especially Californians. Helvarg writes of the expectations of them:

"They expect Californians to protect and restore the things they love and value and set an example, if no longer of "a shining city on a hill," then at least of a nice place by the water." (p. 307)

The Golden Shore succeeds as a history book about California and can be used as part of a class with such a focus. It also can be a book about local California oceanography and marine biology. It is not a book about the Sustainable Seafood Movement; this can be read elsewhere. The book is not strictly academic and the author does not provide citations for the points made and information shared. There is an index, but rather than a bibliography, the author has included a list of books for recommended reading.

Helvarg's flare for language and description make this book an entertaining read. The writing is a bit more complicated than newspaper writing, Helvarg having been a reporter, with some of the writing being a bit denser. It does, however, show a breadth of knowledge. These are generally known stories presented here and after reading the book, you will know enough to be

knowledgeable about the state's general history. One is not likely to think about California and the ocean the same way again after reading this book.

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