

## THE LOS ANGELES COAST AS A PUBLIC PLACE

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**ABSTRACT.** In the public-space discourse Los Angeles is usually portrayed as more “anti-city” than city. Its landscape is overrun by houses, “private-public” squares and plazas, theme parks, shopping malls, and so on and lacks inclusive public places. Yet this discourse has essentially disdained to contemplate a major public space that contradicts its general thesis: the Los Angeles coast. The coast is meaningful public place in two specific senses. First, it symbolizes Los Angeles as a whole and therefore provides a basis for regional public identity. Second, Angelinos themselves take the coast seriously as a public place, and they have striven to make it inclusive in practice. *Keywords:* beaches, California, coastal access, Los Angeles, public place.

An article in the 25 August 2003 *Los Angeles Times* entitled “Malibu Civics Lesson” describes a confrontation on one of Southern California’s most famous beaches. The specific incident took place on a stretch of the Malibu coastline known as “Broad Beach” (Figure 1), which sits in front of a line of beachfront homes noted for their celebrity owners. The incident involved a confrontation between a private security officer and a Malibu resident over access to a particular part of Broad Beach. The event eventually escalated to involve the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department. Such confrontations are not unusual in this area in that it has been a site of frequent conflict between homeowners and the beach-going public over disputed terrain. What made this particular event newsworthy was the fact that the incident was instigated by sixty-four-year-old Malibu resident Sara Wan, a member and former chairperson of the California Coastal Commission. The commission, which is given the general charge of regulating the development of California’s 1,100-mile-long coastline, takes as one of its responsibilities the guarding of public access to the beach. Wan intentionally placed a blanket in an area that signs indicated was private property, and her action had the desired result of provoking a reaction from the private security guard, who warned Wan that she was trespassing.

This incident would seem like one of many such minor conflicts that occur along this beach and others in Southern California, one that could have been relatively simply, yet hardly precisely, resolved by invoking the California public-access law. But California’s law is more difficult to enforce than are those of many other states because it designates the high-tide line as the dividing line between public and private property. When Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department deputies arrived at the request of the security guard, they learned that even their training to apply this ambiguous territorial limit proved to be insufficient to counter Wan’s claim. She explained, with appropriate documentation, that the situation at Broad Beach was

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