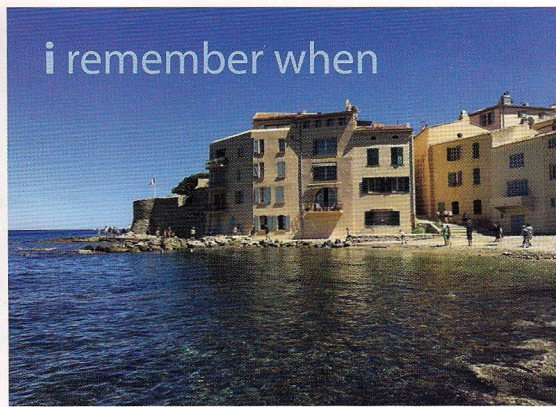
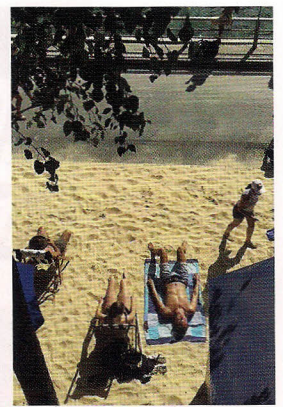




New beach along the Seine River in Paris, France



The beach at St. Tropez on the Cote d'Azur



A sidewalk separates sunbathers from the water

What Is A *Beach*, ANYWAY?

Parisians suffer from "beach deficit disorder." Otherwise, how can you explain putting dump-truck loads of sand on the banks of the Seine River, which has been beach-less while elegantly meandering through Paris for a long time, and calling it a beach? Perhaps Paris does have a deep psychological insecurity when it comes to beaches, especially compared to St. Tropez, Nice or Cannes. (Admittedly, the French are masters of marketing, and some would say that they can make something out of nothing with great success.)

Yet this fantasy seems to be fulfilled as you watch people arrive in the middle of downtown Paris at lunchtime and take off their clothes to sunbathe (in bathing suits, this is not Germany). Strangely enough, the sunbathers are unable to get to the edge of the river, much less in it, since there is a small road between the beach and the river filled with tourists strolling along enjoying the river and the sights on the artificial beach. For those of us who have visited Paris in the past, there's something tragically sad about this beach in the middle of Europe's most picturesque city. It makes me think about the surplus of beautiful Florida beaches that I remember as a child.

Until recently we took sandy beaches for granted in Florida, but now we are seeing some of the detrimental effects of ignoring their health. From the disaster on the East Coast Indian River area to dead zones of coral reefs in the Keys to red tide outbreaks on the West Coast, there are a variety of places, reasons and excuses for problems on our beaches. Unparalleled population growth, uneven zoning, lack of environmental responsibility for mining and agricultural interests, inadequate oversight on construction permits, and totally inadequate sewer infrastructures all contribute to the demise of Florida beaches.

In many beach communities from Key West to Apalachicola there are high bacteria counts in the water, making swimming extremely questionable and putting an end to the long held traditions of oystering, scalloping and clamming in most offshore areas. Inadequate or outdated sewage systems in times of high rainfall dump untreated sewage into the nearest body of water. St. Petersburg often has to close beaches from Gulfport to Coffee Pot Bay. To their credit, St. Petersburg officials at least inform the public and close beaches when the bacteria count is high. Key West, however, long ago stopped alerting the public and closing beaches because it was hurting the "beach image" tourist trade.

Perhaps we should hold our elected officials accountable for these problems. Of course, their response is predictably: "There are no funds for any improve-

ments." Since it would mean raising taxes in order to pay for infrastructure inadequacies and oversight of industry and agriculture, few governmental officials offer support, as it probably would mean the end of their careers in this political environment. Maybe someone should point out that this is what government is supposed to do: look after the well-being and health of its citizens. Unfortunately, private enterprise does not seem to be inclined to clean up the problems independently without the potential to make a profit.

However, if we are to enjoy the Florida lifestyles that we are accustomed to, which usually have something to do with the beach, the waterways, rivers and springs, we had better start paying attention, elect responsible state officials and do something soon. We have all put our heads in the sand hoping the problems would not disturb our favorite beach and would disappear on their own. The problems are not disappearing; they are looming larger and larger, while state government personnel, due to our governor's mandate, are not allowed to discuss rising sea levels, global warming or man-made pollution.

We are quickly reaching a critical point of ecological imbalance in our state, and I am concerned that in the near future we will soon have to adopt the policies of the Parisians who just sit on the beach: sunbathing and reading, while children play in the sand, while no one can go swimming.

Bayshore Bob

*Reported by Bayshore Bob,
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