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The Success of the California Coastal Management Program

The California Coastal Management Program (CCMP) is widely regarded as one of the world's most successful examples of integrated coastal management. Over the past fifty years, it has protected California's iconic coastline through a unique combination of science-based planning, public participation, local implementation, and enduring commitments to public access and environmental stewardship.

While no regulatory program is without controversy, the broader record demonstrates that California's coast remains one of the nation's most accessible, ecologically rich, and economically valuable coastlines because of deliberate public policy and long-term stewardship. This brief summarizes many of the program's principal accomplishments, drawn primarily from *The Next 50 Years of California Beach Management: End of an Era or New Beginning?*¹

At a Glance

Over the last fifty years, the California Coastal Management Program has:

- Preserved much of California's open coast from unchecked urbanization.
- Secured more than 1,600 public beach access dedications.
- Protected nationally significant coastal habitats and scenic landscapes.
- Built one of the nation's strongest state-local coastal planning systems.
- Applied science to guide coastal decision-making.
- Demonstrated that environmental stewardship and economic prosperity can reinforce one another.
- Become an internationally recognized model for integrated coastal management.
- Positioned California as a national leader in climate adaptation and coastal resilience.

¹ Lester, C., in press. The next 50 years of California beach management: End of an era or new beginning? *Journal of Coastal Research*, 00(00), 000-000. Charlotte (North Carolina), ISSN 0749-0208.

Principal Accomplishments

Protected Public Access to California's Beaches

- Secured more than 1,600 public access dedications through coastal permitting.
- Obtained both vertical accessways to the shoreline, lateral access corridors along the beach, and significant segments of the California Coastal Trail (CCT).
- Expanded public access to beaches that otherwise would likely have remained effectively private, including along the Malibu Coast, in Pebble Beach, and at resorts such as Bacara, Montage, and Ritz-Carlton properties.
- Established one of the world's most successful public shoreline access programs.

Preserved California's Open Coast

- Protected remarkable stretches of open coastline while maintaining stable urban-rural boundaries across much of the coast.
- Prevented speculative subdivision and conversion of agricultural and natural lands through coordinated state and local planning.
- Helped preserve iconic landscapes such as the coast between Half Moon Bay and Santa Cruz and the Hearst Ranch coastline through conservation easements, State Parks acquisitions, and local land conservation efforts.

Protected Nationally Significant Coastal Resources

- Conserved beaches, dunes, wetlands, estuaries, coastal streams, marine habitats, agricultural lands, scenic landscapes, and environmentally sensitive habitat areas.
- Protected some of California's most distinctive coastal ecosystems, such as the Santa Monica Mountains unique mediterranean ecology, while supporting restoration and long-term ecosystem resilience.
- Helped preserve beaches as ecological, recreational, and cultural resources central to California's identity.

Built One of the Nation's Strongest Coastal Planning Systems

- Shifted California from project-by-project decision making toward comprehensive statewide planning implemented locally through certified Local Coastal Programs (LCPs).
- Certified Local Coastal Programs for more than 87% of the coast that implement Coastal Act policies through local planning and permitting.
- Integrated land use, watershed management, habitat protection, agriculture, recreation, coastal hazards, and public access into a unified planning framework.
- The landmark 1975 California Coastal Plan—with 162 policy recommendations and 61 subregional planning maps—continues to shape coastal planning today.

Protected the Environmental Foundation of California's Coastal Economy

- Demonstrated that protecting beaches, scenic landscapes, agriculture, and coastal ecosystems can coexist with thriving coastal communities and economic prosperity.
- Helped sustain one of California's largest regional economies by protecting the natural resources that support tourism, recreation, fisheries, coastal businesses, and highly valued communities.
- California's coastal economy now generates tens of billions of dollars annually, supported by healthy beaches and coastal resources.

Built a Transparent and Collaborative Governance System

- Established an independent Coastal Commission with balanced appointments, open meetings, extensive public participation, professional staff analysis, strict disclosure requirements, and a commitment to Environmental Justice.
- Created an enduring partnership between state and local governments through certified Local Coastal Programs rather than centralized state control alone.
- Developed one of the nation's most transparent and publicly accessible environmental decision-making processes.

Integrated Coastal Management Across Agencies

- Coordinated the Coastal Commission, local governments, the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC), State Coastal Conservancy, Ocean Protection Council, State Lands Commission, Department of Parks and Recreation, Department of Fish and Wildlife, NOAA, and numerous federal, state, regional, Tribal, and local partners.
- Created perhaps the nation's most comprehensive coastal and marine governance system.

Applied Science to Guide Coastal Decision-Making

- Incorporated evolving ecological, geological, and engineering science into coastal planning and permitting.
- Protected sensitive habitats using the best available science.
- Applied scientific analysis to issues ranging from offshore oil development and once-through cooling to shoreline erosion, sediment management, marine ecosystems, and underwater sound.
- Established California as a national leader in science-based coastal management.

Provided National and International Leadership

- Became a globally recognized model for integrated coastal management.
- Demonstrated effective use of federal consistency under the Coastal Zone Management Act to influence federal activities affecting California's coast.
- Served as a model studied by other states and countries seeking to strengthen coastal governance.

Ensured Long-Term Stewardship Through Effective Enforcement

- Successfully defended public beach access and public trust resources through long-term enforcement.
- Pursued difficult cases requiring litigation and negotiation to open public accessways, remove illegal encroachments, and uphold Coastal Act policies.
- Demonstrated that effective implementation is as important as strong policy.

Positioned California for the Next Generation of Coastal Management

- Addressed shoreline erosion through setbacks, hazard planning, and careful regulation of shoreline armoring beginning in the program's earliest years.
- Began incorporating sea-level rise into planning and permitting decades before many coastal jurisdictions.
- Supported dozens of local sea-level rise vulnerability assessments, adaptation plans, and Local Coastal Program updates through technical guidance and state grant funding.
- Positioned California as a national leader in climate adaptation and coastal resilience planning.

Looking Ahead

Perhaps the California Coastal Management Program's greatest achievement has not simply been regulating development. Rather, it has created a durable system of democratic stewardship that integrates science, land-use planning, local implementation, public participation, environmental protection, and public access while preserving California's coast as a shared civic, ecological, cultural, and economic resource.

As California confronts sea-level rise, climate change, housing pressures, environmental justice, Tribal stewardship, and evolving public expectations, the challenge is no longer whether coastal management is needed. The challenge is how to build upon one of the world's most successful coastal governance systems while adapting it to meet the needs of the next fifty years.

Questions?

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