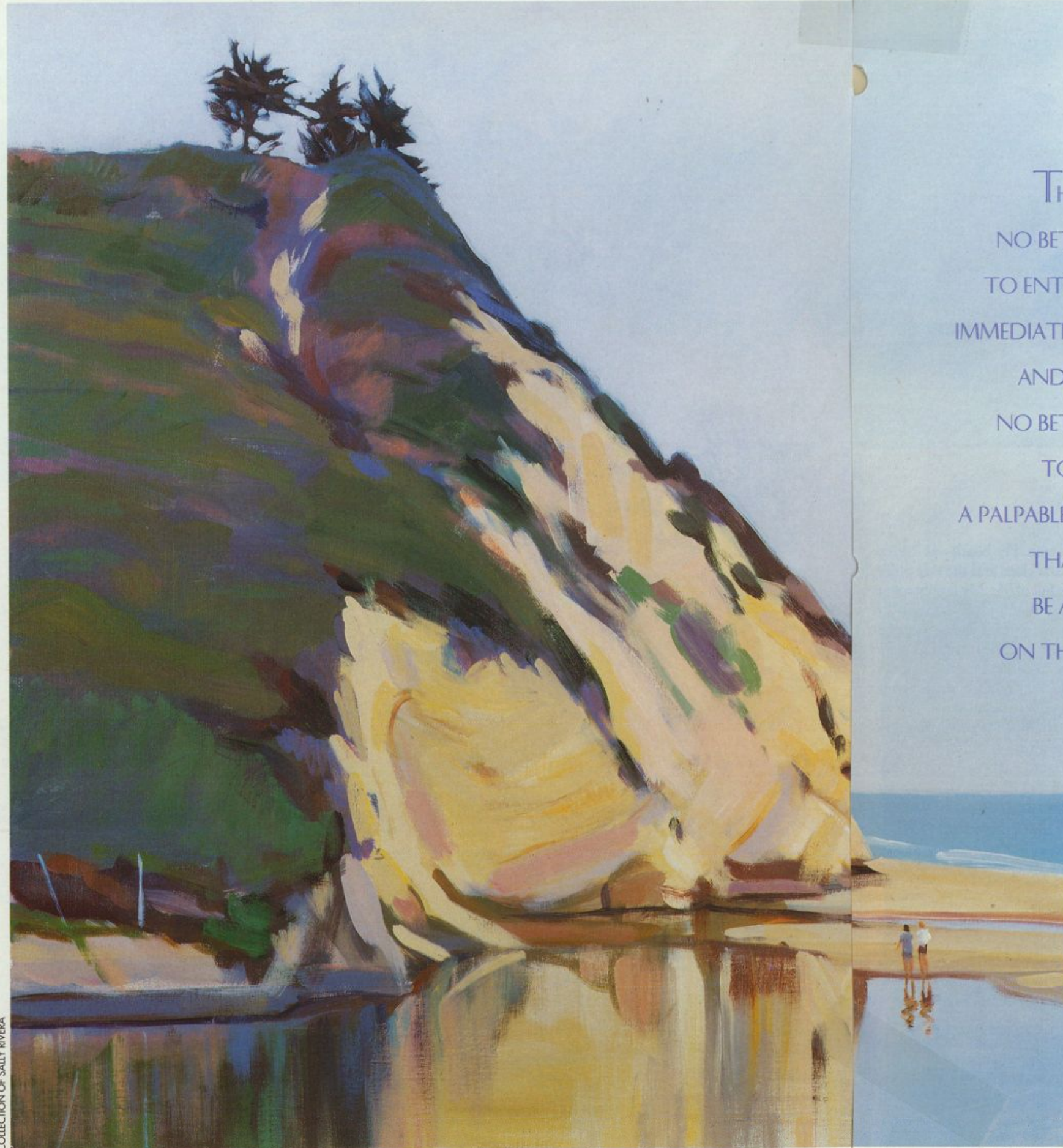


By Hillary Hauser

WILD AT HEART

A writer's
lifelong
love affair
with the
untamed
beaches of
Santa Barbara



COLLECTION OF SALLY RIVERA

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HENDRY'S BEACH LOOKING
UP TO THE WILCOX PROPERTY
• MARCIA BURTT

Early November, just before sunrise. Down the driveway of my old family home on Fernald Point, I run to the sea, still wearing my nightshirt. Leaping over the wall, I step onto the beach.

I am the first one out. From Hammonds to the tip of Fernald Point, the outermost boundaries of Miramar Beach, there is no one. I scramble across the stones to the water, happy as anything. When I'm alone on the beach, I feel as if everything I see is all mine. Even the ocean itself, all mine!

Suddenly a flame appears at the top of the mountains and torches a path across the ocean. Liquid oranges and yellows begin to bleed with dusty pinks, mauves, and a hint of pale blue. The sea looks like a Florentine ceiling spread out. I walk to the surf and jump in.

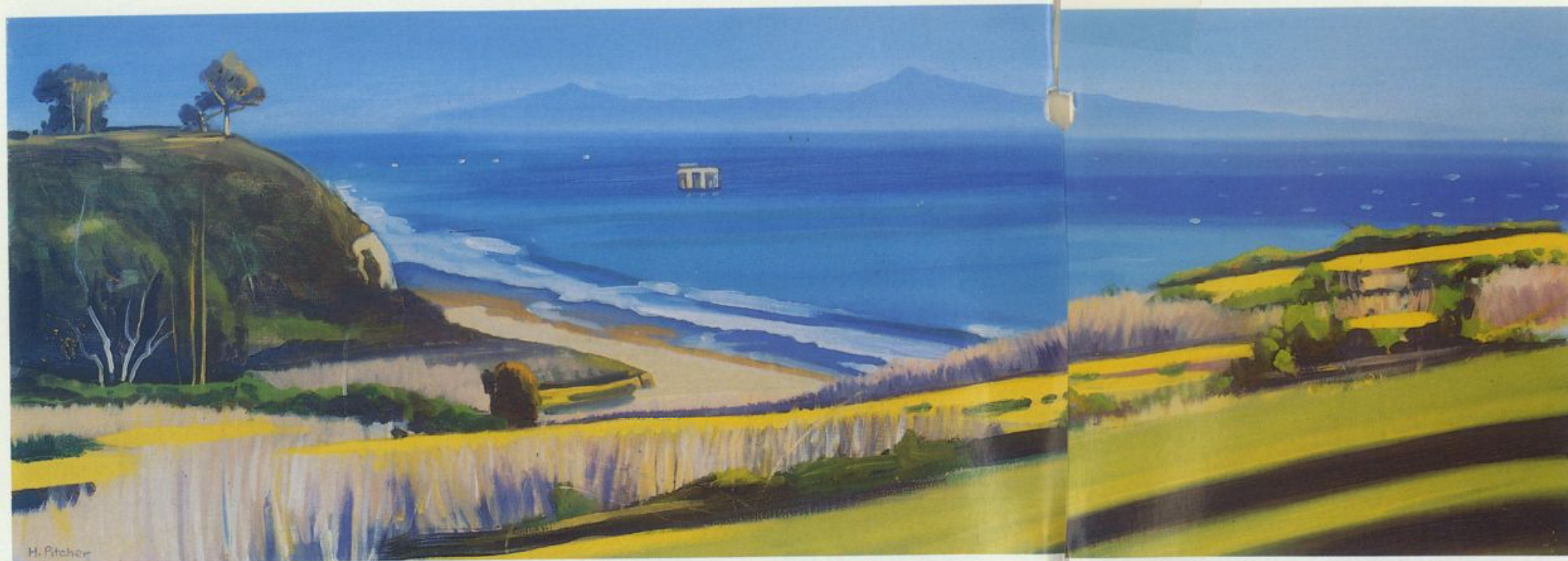
Swimming out from shore with the flannel sleeves of my nightshirt flopping about, I roll onto my back and float. I admire the puffy clouds with their golden underlinings, the mountains turning lighter purple, a jet airplane far above on its way to somewhere important. The water is crystal clear: autumn has chased away the last of summer's plankton blooms. This clarity will vanish suddenly one day soon, when a storm wind roils the sea into winter swells and permanent cold. There will be heavy rains, and the creeks will clog the sea with mud and debris. But I will swim then, too. Even when there are giant chunks of driftwood riding by on raging, muddy waves, I'll swim.

Sometimes just walking alone on the beach is enough to fill my soul. I know no better way to remove myself from all the chores and errands and job pressures than to take a walk, alone, on the beach. There is no better way to enter a state immediately beautiful and quiet, no better way to feel a palpable gratitude, than to be alone at the beach.

This is not something one can experience at many beaches in Southern California, where there are too many people, condos, parking meters, leash laws, no-nos, lifeguard stands, benches, manicured parking lots, and trash cans. The beaches of Santa Barbara are in fact among the last on the Southern California coast that let a person be truly alone—which may be why the beaches here seem to me to have so much soul.

The soulfulness of the Santa Barbara shoreline is why many of us live here and can't imagine living anywhere else. Within minutes of our homes is the isolated grandeur of Loon Point in Summerland, where the emptiest stretch of beach is bordered by a towering Half Dome-like cliff studded with eucalyptus trees. I experienced my most glorious Easter sunrise service on the beach at Loon Point, alone.

The beaches below the Carpinteria Bluffs are so isolated that seals and sea lions haul out there, just as they do at the offshore islands. Over by Cliff Drive, the Wilcox property abuts a stretch of coastline so pristine that it seems Cabrillo himself



HASKELL'S BEACH • HANK PITCHER

never saw it. And the beaches near UC Santa Barbara—More Mesa (accessible from the Turnpike Road exit off U.S. 101), Ellwood Shores (Storke Road exit), and Haskell's (Winchester Canyon Road exit)—are similarly wild seascapes of cliffs and tangled cypress, sand and stone cluttered only by driftwood, kelp, and raw solitude.

Each of these pristine vistas is threatened today. A 161-unit housing development is being considered for 38 acres of Ellwood Shores; Hyatt has a permit to build a hotel on Haskell's Beach; four luxury estates have been approved for Loon Point; and the Wilcox property is in the hands of developers. The mere thought of any of these things happening is frightening to me, and I consider it more than an environmental issue. Keeping these beaches wild is a campaign on behalf of the human soul and its ability to continue to find a solitary haven in nature.

Santa Barbarans who know and love these beaches keep a vigilant watch. Twenty-six Santa Barbara artists who call themselves the Oak Group continue, as they have since 1986, documenting with oils, acrylics, pastels, and watercolors this wild, endangered scenery. Three times a year the Oak Group, including such artists as Ray Strong, Glenna Hartmann, Marcia Burt, Meredith Brooks Abbott, Arturo Tello, and Karen Foster, stage an exhibit of their work, some of which is reproduced on these pages, to show the public what's at stake.

I have loved Santa Barbara's beaches since the middle 1950s, when my family moved into a big old beach house smack at the dividing line between Fernald Point and Miramar. I was 10 years old, and for me it was a magical mystery land. The sea was full of kelp in those days, such as one sees today at Hollister

Ranch, and also full of lobsters and crab. The beach was wilder, littered with shells and colorful beach glass, and the tide pools at either end of Miramar cove were full of life. My family spent many hours walking the beach, summer and winter, rain or shine. We glued pieces of kelp onto paper to make stationery. My brother, Craig, built makeshift bridges over storming creeks and charged people a nickel to cross. I wrote poems to the ocean and waves and seabirds, and "To the Seal Who Swims in Front of My House at Posilipo Lane."

I didn't know how much I depended on this seashore until my family moved to Seattle. Every summer for seven years we would drive back to the Santa Barbara beach house, and usually when we reached Gaviota, I'd cry at that first view of the Pacific. I was surprised the first time this happened, for I loved Seattle. But I cried every time we got to this place in the road, and eventually I realized that for me the tidal beaches of Puget Sound could never take the place of the Santa Barbara shoreline.

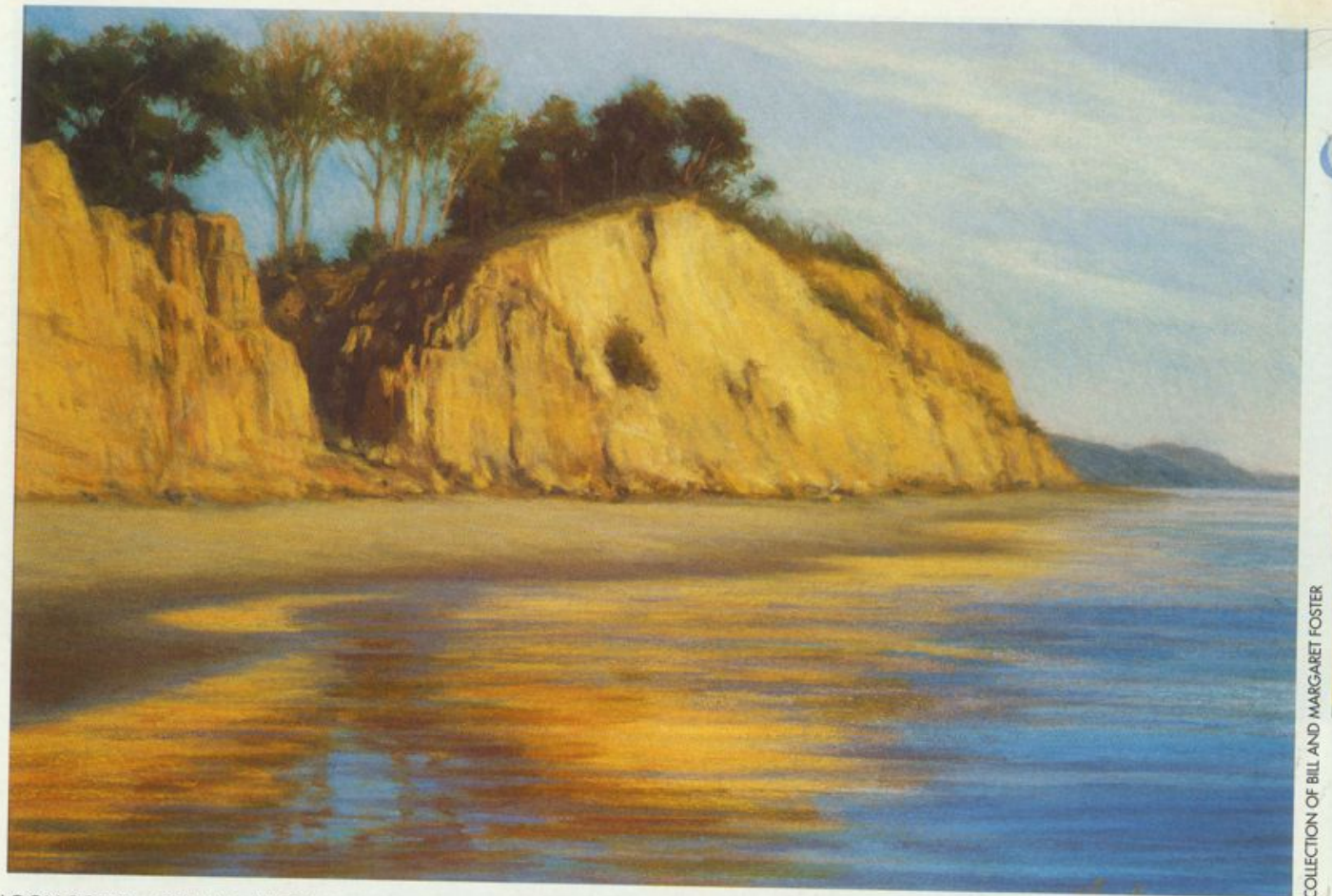
For 11 years after college, I pursued a career in Los Angeles. I lived on the beaches of Playa del Rey, and on Catalina Island. I lived near the beach at Topanga. I swam at all these places and also Malibu and Zuma Beach. But none had what Santa Barbara beaches have. I often drove miles up the Pacific Coast Highway, looking for a beach that had it, this quality of soulfulness, and I only found it when I got to Santa Barbara.

Some people complain about the water's cold and refuse to experience the zany thrill of a polar bear dive into the winter sea. But I well remember expeditions I have made to the Bahamas, Mexico, Hawaii, where I have dreamed and pined and ached for that coolness. Some people get squirmy about kelp, brown seaweed that washes ashore in a tangled spaghetti ball or

CARPINTERIA BLUFFS • ARTURO TELLO



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COLLECTION OF BILL AND MARGARET FOSTER

LOON POINT • GLENNA HARTMANN

KEEPING
THESE BEACHES WILD
IS A CAMPAIGN
ON BEHALF OF
THE HUMAN SOUL

appears like a slimy something waiting to drag them into the briny deep. But the kelp forest is one of the great wonders of the Pacific Coast. Divers accustomed to the miracle of swimming through its forests miss it in more tropical climes, where the underwater scenery seems strangely open and bare.

Santa Barbara beaches offer great extremes, and there is something for every possible mood and persuasion. We can have solitary walks at sunrise in Summerland or catch a first wave of the day at Miramar; we can play volleyball at East Beach or enjoy a lovely swim at Butterfly; we can go diving and surfing just about anywhere we choose.

During a recent flurry of big waves my husband, Jim Marshall, and I were at a "secret" surf spot up the coast with our good friends Bruce and Karen Raph. We had spent an entire day in the water, and at sunset we collected mussels from the rocks and steamed them over an open fire in lemon juice and wine. It was warm, a rarity just then, and as we shared our impromptu dinner, we watched the sun disappear into the sea in a glorious orange flame. Then an enormous full moon peeked over the horizon in the east.

"Where else but here?" somebody said. We were sitting by a fire on an isolated beach, the only people there.

Where else, indeed? Because of scenes like this, there is for many of us nowhere else but here. ≈

Hillary Hauser has written six books and numerous magazine articles about the ocean.