

Stranger than Paradise: Nature and Culture in Malibu, California

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Malibu in Southern California is one of the most affluent beachfront cities in the world. In many ways the place resembles a modern day paradise with warm, sandy beaches, lagoons and piers; the city limits include the rugged landscape of the Santa Monica mountains, canyon views and exotic flora. But the city of Malibu with its “27 miles of beaches” is also one of the most dangerous places to live in. It may well be America’s natural hazard capital. As wildfires have depleted the kind of vegetation that can retain the soil, heavy rains have regularly caused dangerous mudslides. Above and beyond that, Malibu’s beaches are disappearing under rising sea levels. Why do people live in Malibu? In what way have Californians, their perceptions and their politics increased or reduced the risk of natural catastrophes in the Malibu region? Why is there less sprawl in Malibu than in the neighboring city of Los Angeles? What role have conflicts over land use played in Malibu? And how, most generally, has the relationship between nature and culture evolved over the centuries – from the times of the Chumash natives to the present? How can one write an environmentally informed cultural history of the strangely paradisiac town of Malibu?