

An aerial photograph showing a massive sand mining operation. Several yellow excavators and dump trucks are visible, working on large mounds of sand. The landscape is heavily eroded, with deep tracks from the machinery. To the right, a body of water with a greenish-blue tint is visible, likely contaminated by the mining process. The overall scene depicts the environmental impact of large-scale sand extraction.

ORRIN H. PILKEY
NORMA J. LONGO
WILLIAM J. NEAL
NELSON G. RANGEL-BUITRAGO
KEITH C. PILKEY
& HANNAH L. HAYES

Vanishing Sands

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TO MINING

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Printed in the United States of America on

acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Matthew Tauch

Typeset in Warnock Pro by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Pilkey, Orrin H., [date] author. | Longo, Norma J., [date] author. | Neal, William J., author. | Rangel-Buitrago, Nelson, author. | Pilkey, Keith C., [author] author. | Hayes, Hannah L., author.

Title: Vanishing sands : losing beaches to mining / Orrin H. Pilkey, Norma J. Longo, William J. Neal, Nelson G. Rangel-Buitrago, Keith C. Pilkey, and Hannah L. Hayes.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022003195 (print)

LCCN 2022003196 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478016168 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478018797 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478023432 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Sand and gravel mines and mining—Environmental aspects. | Coasts—Environmental aspects. | Sea level—Environmental aspects. | Beaches—Environmental aspects. | Seashore ecology. | Mines and mineral resources—Environmental aspects.

| BISAC: NATURE / Ecosystems & Habitats / Coastal Regions & Shorelines | NATURE / Environmental Conservation & Protection

Classification: LCC QH545. S37 P557 2022 (print)

LCC QH545.S37 (ebook)

DDC 577.69/9—dc23/eng/20220625

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022003195>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022003196>

Cover art: Forest City, Johor, Malaysia, 2017. Photograph by Sim Chi Yin.

IN GRATEFUL RECOGNITION OF THE SANTA AGUILA FOUNDATION'S SUPPORT OF OUR PAST RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS, AS WELL AS THE FOUNDATION'S GOOD INFLUENCE ON GLOBAL COASTAL MANAGEMENT, ALL ROYALTIES FOR *VANISHING SANDS* WILL BE ASSIGNED TO THE FOUNDATION.

PUBLICATION SUPPORTED BY A GRANT FROM
THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR GREATER NEW HAVEN
AS PART OF THE **URBAN HAVEN PROJECT**.

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This book was a true team effort and brought together a group of people who had a previous history of cooperative research, authorship, and editing, as well as strong ties of family and friendship. In the course of this effort, we had not only the concerns of COVID-19 but other difficulties and losses that deeply affected our family of writers and editors.

WE DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO THREE SPECIAL PEOPLE:

First, to the memory of Claire Le Guern, who passed away as this book was going to press, in recognition of her years of inspiration, guidance, and friendship, especially during our research and writing for this book, as well as for all the years we worked together through Coastal Care.

Second, to the memory of Cameron Pilkey, son of Keith, grandson of Orrin, who passed away during this time. His loss was unexpected not only to the immediate family but to those of us who had followed his growth from child to manhood.

Third, to the memory of Nelson “Yeyo” Williams Rangel Diaz, father of Nelson Rangel-Buitrago, known to us through Nelson as his inspiration.

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BEACHES AND COASTAL DUNES ARE AMONG THE MOST DYNAMIC OF NATURE'S ENVIRONMENTS

—worked on by waves, storms, surf-zone currents, wind, and even ice in the winter. Beaches and dunes occupy a place in coastal space that moves up and landward with sea level rise, or down and seaward if sea level falls. Beginning with Neolithic people and then the Phoenicians and Romans, humans have interfered with these natural processes by blocking waves and currents with hard structures to hold the shore in place, in order to protect valued property placed next to the shore.

Today, we continue this compulsion to hold the dynamic ocean shoreline in a static position with the same ineffective techniques, such as dredging channels and building bigger and better seawalls and groins, to protect property (e.g., tourist facilities, ever-bigger houses, refineries, and infrastructure) that could have been placed in less hazardous positions. Globally, most of this modern activity is driven by the tourism industry and the attraction of permanent seaside residency. The resulting boom in urban-suburban development has grown to the very edge of beaches, often atop dunes. And this construction is based largely on one man-made material: concrete.

The two key ingredients for concrete are cement and aggregate. Cement is produced from limestone, and the production process releases huge amounts of CO₂ into the atmosphere, contributing to global warming. Aggregate is sand and gravel, and often only sand is needed. But just any sand won't do to produce reliable concrete. Quality concrete aggregate must meet a specific set of criteria (e.g., composition, texture). The demand for high-quality sand has grown exponentially with global population growth, creating sand shortages. So, the problem is more precisely that *there is a global shortage of sand suitable for concrete*. Shortages, of course, lead to higher costs, so why not go to the nearest beach or coastal dune to get suitable sand with angular grains for free? You can't beat that for a bargain!

And therein lies the problem—robbing the sand from beaches and coastal dunes. Most of us have heard the old joke about the smuggler at the border. A young boy appears at the border pushing a wheelbarrow full of sand. The border guards are suspicious that the boy is a smuggler. They paw and prod the sand but find nothing. Over the following days, this scene is repeated again and again, but the guards find nothing. The punch line is that the boy was smuggling wheelbarrows! But now there's a twist on the story: the boy is smuggling sand—and it is no longer a joke. Raids on sand resources are now a global activity, utilizing both child labor and impoverished citizens as sand miners, in a business ruled by organized crime that has graduated from wheelbarrows to dump trucks to shiploads of sand crossing international boundaries. All this happens at the expense of the storm protection furnished by beaches and dunes that also are the basis of a huge global tourist industry.

Part of the evolution toward this modern free-range attitude regarding sand resources traces back to the traditional perception of beaches as public lands. Beaches, like waterways and the ocean itself, have been regarded as the public common, and mirroring those water bodies, beaches too are now part of the “Tragedy of the Commons.” This nineteenth-century concept was brought back into focus by Garrett Hardin in the 1960s. *The tragedy of the commons is a situation in a shared-resource system where individual users, acting independently according to their own self-interests, behave contrary to the common good of all users by depleting or spoiling the shared resource through their collective action* (Hardin 1968).

Beach mining parallels the story of the village green, once available to all for grazing their livestock, but the collective overgrazing destroyed the green.

Beaches and coastal dunes have always supplied sand for local use (e.g., the sandbox for the kids; some sand for improving the garden soil; making a beach volleyball court away from the beach). The extracted sand volumes ranged from sand buckets or wheelbarrows to small pickup truck-loads. But starting in the late twentieth century, driven by coastal development, the big guys stepped in all over the world with excavators, bulldozers, front-end loaders, and dump trucks. And of course, large-scale mining immediately created a litany of environmental, social, and economic damages. In particular at the shore, the impact was the degradation and loss of beaches and dunes—the first step in killing the proverbial goose. No more golden eggs from tourism after the loss of the drawing cards of scenic and recreational aesthetics.

What follows is a pattern of decline with loss of local economies, loss of natural storm protection, and loss of offshore resources (e.g., fisheries, reefs). The push for sand resources has become so great that even more damaging corruption and crime has resulted. Within the first twenty years of the twenty-first century, the devastating impacts of sand mining on beaches and coastal dunes, as well as on rivers, have reached crisis proportions.

We are beginning to feel the negative outcomes familiar to us from other boom-bust resource raids, like deforestation, gold-rush ghost towns, and coal-mining wastelands. The passing of John Prine during our research for this book reminded us of his “Paradise,” a song about the devastating environmental impacts of strip-mining by Mr. Peabody for coal in Kentucky. The parallel of global losses of the “Paradise” of beaches and coastal dunes led us to coining the following:

Daddy, won't you take me to the shoreline sands
Down to the beaches and dunes to play
Well, I'm sorry my child, but you're too late in asking
The Sand Miners have hauled them away

The beaches, the dunes, and river plains too
To build high rises, highways, and places to stay
But for those who still come for Sand, Sea, and Sun
They'll just have to limit their play

No Sand for castles, forts, or volleyball courts
No beach to stroll by the bay
No Scotch Bonnet shells, or bonfire rapport
The Sand Pirates have stolen our Paradise away!

We hope this book will be a contribution to increasing resistance to the mining of beaches, dunes, and rivers, and to conserving these public commons. We suggest some solutions, including use of existing alternative inland sources of sand. Perhaps the cost of such sand sources is higher than beach-mined sand, but in comparison the environmental cost will be much less.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Significant recognition of the coastal sand-mining problem has already been publicized by Coastal Care (coastalcare.org), and their extensive website is an important source for public education in regard to this issue. We especially express our appreciation to Claire Le Guern who, working with Coastal Care, pointed out significant beach-mining examples for us, supplied many photographs, and provided valuable critical editing comments.

We also express our immense gratitude and sincere thanks to Olaf and Eva Guerrand-Hermes who formed the Santa Aguila Foundation (SAF) and founded Coastal Care. They have been tremendous supporters who also supported the spectacular and award-winning documentary *Sand Wars*, by director Denis Delestrac, who aptly brought attention to the global shortage of sand and the politics of mining.

Geologists Andy Coburn, Andrew Cooper, Gary Griggs, Joe Kelley, Hal Wanless, and Rob Young were important sources of local beach stories and information about beach mining. We express our hearty thanks to them and to numerous other colleagues and friends who have shared their experiences and photographs, and who were willing to share ideas and local observations.

We also gratefully acknowledge Representative Pricey Harrison (D-NC) for her steadfast support of our books over the years. Last but definitely not least, we express our gratitude to two of our ever-patient IT specialists, Andy Minnis and Katheryne Doughty.

In addition to the six coauthors' past experience with coastal processes, coastal management, and international field travels, we originally planned to visit various beach-sand mining hot spots (e.g., Singapore, Morocco, Barbuda, Jamaica, The Netherlands). But the COVID-19 virus scrapped those plans. However, our collective global experiences provide a strong background to address sand-mining issues.

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In fall 1995, Duke University's research vessel *Cape Hatteras* was sampling off the north shore of Puerto Rico, near the town of Arecibo. The goal of the cruise was to learn how river sediments from a recent major flood on the Arecibo River were distributed on the beaches and on the narrow shelf (three-fourths-mile-wide). The ship's eight-man crew and ten scientists and marine geology students spent twenty-one days doing closely spaced coring of the sea floor, while the vessel swayed gently with the swells as they moved inexorably toward the beach. The sampling was always in clear sight of the shore and the traffic on the coastal highway.

It was a hard-working but pleasant cruise in calm weather, taking twenty-foot-long cores of sediment in pipes that were vibrated into the sea floor. During breaks we would occasionally watch whales surfacing nearby and try to identify them from a whale catalog that described specific individuals based on various body markings, particularly scars from bites and scratches.

In clear sight, for all twenty-one days, except Sundays, a sand-mining operation steadily removed chunks of the large, vegetated sand dune that lined the shore. Lines of dump trucks awaited their turn to move into range of a backhoe plunging into the sand and coming up to dump its load into the truck. It was clear, even to an offshore audience, that the loss of this dune was removing a protective line of sand that could defend the island's major east-west highway and some buildings from future storms.

After the cruise was completed, some of the science crew drove out to the mining site and were disheartened to see a sign, posted nearby on



FIG 1.1

A child playing on a beach in Morocco not far from dump trucks being loaded with sand—a striking contrast. Is this a sign of the future? Photo © Lana Wong—Coastal Care.

a coconut palm, proclaiming that removal of sand from the dunes was strictly prohibited.

Upon further investigation, it became apparent that mining beach sand for construction purposes has a long history in Puerto Rico and on most Caribbean islands. In the 1950s, the San Juan Puerto Rico International Airport was built largely with fill from the nearby Piñones Beach and dune system—another protective beach and dune system removed. For years, sand mining has gone on around the community of Isabela, also on the north coast of Puerto Rico.

Clearly, the mining has increased the rate of erosion of beaches that are critical to the all-important tourist industry and the recreational and commercial fishing industries. Adding to the beach erosion problem in Puerto Rico are small sand-trapping dams on the rivers as well as sand mining operations in these same rivers that lessen or even halt the flow of fresh sand to the beaches.

Oceanographic studies have located three large, shallow underwater sand deposits off various parts of Puerto Rico that could be mined by dredging without immediate impact on nearby developed shorelines. These are off Cabo Rojo on the southwest corner of the island, Isabela off the northwest corner, and the largest of these sand bodies, Escolla de Arenas off Vieques Island, just off the east coast of Puerto

Rico (see chapter 8). However, considering the distance, the costs, and equipment required, it is both cheaper and easier to drive a truck to the beach nearest the construction site and load it up with sand.

In September 2018, the impact of beach and dune mining along the shores of Puerto Rico came home to roost. As Hurricane Maria devastated the island, much of the coastal damage was intensified by the absence of the sheltering effect that the mined-away dunes would have provided to a number of places along the north shore. Waves and high water penetrated inland in places once protected by high, vegetated dunes.

The Puerto Rican story is being repeated all over the world. We are removing coastal sand, and beach-sand sources, at the very moment that we need these landforms the most. Sea level is rising now at an accelerating rate, and storms are intensifying; both are expected results of global climate change and, in particular, the warming of the oceans. Along many thousands of miles of sandy shorelines around the world, beaches and especially dunes offer critical, though temporary, protection from both storms and the rising sea. Moreover, loss of beaches and coastal dunes is a blow to the world's tourist industry. What is driving this coastal sand-mining boom? Sand has many uses, but sand aggregate for concrete is the need that is driving the exponential increase in sand mining (figure 1.1).

SAND: A LIMITED RESOURCE

In just over two decades, sand went from being a local product — with transport to the site of use economically unfeasible beyond thirty miles — to a commodity with global trade, explains Susan Froetschel, managing editor of Yale Global Online: “Fast-growing economies and a growing middle class in Asia, particularly China, fuel demand for sand even as environmental concerns and permitting requirements limit supplies. Nations and communities that want to restore beaches, or expand territory as is the case in Singapore and China, often eye low-cost sand in nearby nations with ample supplies and fewer regulations” (Froetschel 2017).

Although intuitively it may seem otherwise, sand is not a limitless resource. In fact, by some measures, less than 5 percent of the world's supply of sand can be used for concrete. The problem is that in order for sand to be useful for industry, it must be located reasonably close to the place where it is needed, and the individual grains must be irreg-

ular in shape to make strong concrete. Beach sand grains are usually uniform in size and irregular in shape; the deposits are close by to most of the coastal development around the world, and it's easy and cheap to mine. Just drive a dump truck and a backhoe to the beach or to the dune behind the beach, and you can get all the sand you need—until it's gone. All of this has led to the mining rush to the beaches.

As it turns out, the assault by storms and sea level rise on sandy coasts is far less damaging than the assaults by humans who are mining the beaches and coastal dunes. Beaches left to Nature may change shape, size, and location, but they will always be there as climate and sea level change. But mining may permanently remove both the beaches and the coastal dunes, especially where mining has removed all sand down to the bedrock as in some parts of Morocco (figures 1.2A and 1.2B).

Pushback on beach-sand mining comes from several directions. *Sand Wars*, a spectacular, award-winning documentary by director Denis Delestrac (2013), follows contractors, builders, smugglers, and sand mafia who are all part of widespread, largely illegal, global operations that are mining beaches, dunes, and rivers. The film makes a strong case for the need to halt mining of the world's beaches and coastal dunes in this time of great need of sand for construction purposes (concrete). The corruptive influence and environmental damage of the sand-mining industry and the violence of the sand mafias described in the documentary are stunning. *Sand Wars* may have provided the inspiration and data for the 2019 United Nations report "Sand and Sustainability" (UNEP 2019).

The website for the Coastal Care organization provides a gold mine of information concerning a global range of topics including beach-sand mining, sea level rise, shoreline retreat, armoring, plastic pollution, and climate change. The stated goal of the organization is to raise people's awareness about the ongoing decimation of beaches, with emphasis on sand mining. Much of the information and many illustrations in this volume come from coastalcare.org. Both *Sand Wars* and Coastal Care are supported by the Santa Aguila Foundation.

Vince Beiser (2018), in his book entitled *The World in a Grain*, informed the nonbureaucratic world that there is a huge global shortage of sand used mostly for construction purposes. Because of this, there are sand black markets, sand mafias, and sand thieves, as well as governments that have fallen over the issue of sand mining. Beiser sounded an alarm that must be heeded.

Joyce Msuya, acting executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme, puts it this way: "The problem is that we have



FIGS 1.2A & 1.2B
Large sand-mining
operations in
Morocco.



FIG 1.2A The end result of mining. A large-scale sand mine slowly destroying a typical high coastal dune that lines the Atlantic Coast of Larache, Morocco. Photo © Lana Wong—Coastal Care.

FIG 1.2B Eventually this site will look like the rocky beach south of Larache. A few miners remain at and beyond the low-tide line cleaning out sand from crevices. Ironically, many of these mining sites are removing beach sand to construct facilities for tourists who come to enjoy the beach. On such shorelines, tourism and the ecology are dead and gone. Photo © SAF—Coastal Care.

been exceeding easily available sand resources at a growing rate for decades. . . . Even though these materials are the second largest resources extracted and traded by volume, after water, they are one of the least regulated in many regions. Increasingly sand is being produced through environmentally damaging extractive processes in sensitive terrestrial, riverine and ocean ecosystems” (UNEP 2019, xi).

Unfortunately, there is no better (or cheaper) source of sand just the right size for construction than a nearby sandy shoreline. As usual, there is a fly in the ointment. To use sand from the ocean or beach, you must thoroughly wash it to remove all vestiges of salt before it is used in concrete. Salty sand does not affect the concrete per se, but it will corrode steel reinforcing rods encased in concrete. Salty sand has created a crisis in Shenzhen, China, where inspections have revealed that at least fifteen buildings under construction used salty sand, which is illegal in China. Among these buildings is one that was intended to be the second-tallest building in the world. Because the buildings could eventually collapse years down the road, China halted construction, at least temporarily (Huifeng 2013).

The June 24, 2021, disastrous collapse of the Champlain Towers South condominium in Surfside, Florida, the cause of nearly one hundred deaths, has forced a sudden rush of attention to the problem of salty sand in concrete (Goodell 2021). Clearly there were multiple causes of this collapse, but one of the suspected problems was the use of beach and dune sand in concrete. The condo, like many shorefront buildings in Florida, was located a few feet from the base of the nearby ocean-facing dune. Degraded reinforcing rods (rebars) were reported to be visible in some of the lower parts of the building, a degree of degradation that would take decades to form in this forty-year-old building. Salt could have been contributed to the concrete by other means:

- Storm overwash
- Salt spray from the nearby surf
- Super high (King) tides
- Underlying porous limestone containing sea water

The Surfside condo collapse tells us that not only should beach sand mining be prohibited, but if such sand is used, it must be thoroughly washed. The requirement for washing should be closely enforced worldwide. The Champlain Towers South collapse is a warning that shorefront construction of any building may be a fool’s errand. Buyer beware!



FIG 1.3 Beach-sand mining in Portugal. In this case, the sand is being mined from a very wide beach created by a large jetty or rock wall perpendicular to the beach that traps sand on its updrift or upstream side, much like a river dam. Just like a dam, the downdrift or downstream beach side (not shown here) is missing a lot of sand, and that shoreline is rapidly eroding. If the beach were to need nourishment, sand could be removed from upstream and placed on the downdrift side of the jetty, or sand could be brought in from inland sources. Photo by William Neal.

In Sierra Leone, Africa, as many as twenty or more dump trucks line up side by side, each surrounded by three or four men with shovels to quickly demolish the upper beach and dune. In Morocco, fleets of dump trucks are destroying the massive dunes that line the Atlantic coast, removing as much as two hundred full truckloads a day (see chapter 9). In Portugal, sand trapped on the updrift sides of two jetties at the Rio de Aveiro and Rio Mondego is being mined, while the beaches on the downdrift sides of the jetties are eroding rapidly and could desperately use the mined sand (figure 1.3).

Flash ahead a few years from the Puerto Rico cruise, and one of us was traveling around the shorelines of several Hawaiian islands looking at the beaches. Leading the trip was Professor Chip Fletcher, a coastal geologist from the University of Hawaii. At one stop, we saw a mysterious, huge depression in the dune sand, perhaps ten-by-fifteen-feet wide

and three-feet deep. Now, we had seen lots of holes on beaches everywhere that were dug by various animals like sea turtles and ghost crabs as well as, of course, by kids who dug small pits in the beach. But nothing like this hole had we ever seen.

A day later on another beach, we spotted another hole of similar dimensions, also in the dunes close to the high-tide line. This one was different, however. There were obvious tire tracks around the pit, a clear indication that the pit had been mechanically excavated, the sand taken away by a dump truck.

On many beaches, we have spotted what we now call foxholes, ephemeral depressions in the beach or dune, the size of a pickup truck-load. On the Pacific shoreline of Colombia, we saw a man filling up a horse-drawn wagon with beach sand. The man was using the sand to make ornamental concrete blocks, and he explained that the high tide refilled the holes daily. For him there was no net loss of sand. On the same beach, an elderly man, partially buried in the sand, explained that he did so to cure his arthritis. Since the sand contained some radioactive monazite sand grains, who knows?

In Uruguay, geologist Rob Thieler witnessed a young man filling a horse-drawn wagon with beach sand, and in Sumatra, wheelbarrows were being used (figure 1.4A). On Majuro Atoll in the Marshall Islands, we observed a boy, perhaps ten or twelve years of age, struggling to push a wheelbarrow to the beach where he gathered sand for his father who was building a new home (figure 1.4B).

Flying over the beach fronting the premier beach resort in Ecuador, the Hotel Splaris 25, we witnessed a backhoe loading beach sand immediately in front of the hotel building into a dump truck. In a magazine advertisement from the 1960s, a US automobile manufacturer illustrated the hauling capacity of a new model of dump truck being loaded with sand from a beach at Nags Head, North Carolina.

Not all sand stealing is done on a dump truck or even a wheelbarrow scale. In 2019, a French couple took fourteen plastic jars of spectacularly white sand from Chia Beach in Sardinia, Italy. Taking sand from this famous white-sand beach is illegal, and the couple faced a possible fine of \$3,000 and six years in prison (Giuffrida 2019). The discovery of sand stolen by the French couple was unusual only in that it was a larger volume of illicit sand than usual. Apparently, the word didn't get out, and again in Sardinia, in 2020, another tourist was fined more than \$1,000 for stealing 4.4 pounds of sand. Local officials at the time said fines ranged from "Sardinian Sand Theft" 3,550 depending on the amount stolen (DiDonato and Kolirin 2020; BBC 2020b).



FIGS 1.4A & 1.4B
Examples of
small-scale
sand-mining
operations.



FIG 1.4A Sand mining is done on many scales. Gravel mining on a wheelbarrow scale in Sumatra. Photo © Andrew Cooper.

FIG 1.4B Here in Uruguay a horse-drawn wagon is being filled with sand. Photo © Robert Thieler.

At nearby Olbia airport, bag checks are routinely carried out seeking stolen sand, and over the past ten years, about ten tons of sand, much of it in half-quart bottles, have been seized. With the help of geologists, the sand is returned to the same beach from which it was stolen. Locals at Stintino, another popular beach in Sardinia, are so protective of their beach sand that they have even mulled over banning towels because towels can carry a lot of sand when wet. In Bermuda, the airport has a special security station where bags are searched for beach sand—the beautiful pink sand for which the island is famous. If discovered, it is immediately confiscated.

On Etretat Beach in Normandy, France, an estimated three hundred to four hundred kilograms of pebbles are removed from the beach each year, in spite of signs stating that removal of pebbles is strictly forbidden. The pebbles are valued for use in gardens and decorative walls. On the beach, the gravel is valued because the deposits protect the base of the coastal cliffs, with buildings on top, from erosion. A sign on another Normandy pebble beach notes, “To take one single pebble away would put our shore in danger.”

In April 2020 on Zahara de los Atunes Beach near Cádiz, Spain, a very strange form of beach management was carried out. In response to the coronavirus pandemic, a day before Spain allowed children out of six weeks of lockdown, local officials sprayed 1.2 miles of the beach with a bleach solution to make it safer for children’s play. That was the end of any living thing on or in the sand, and of course the beach was even too dangerous for children’s recreation. A local official, Agustín Conejo, apologized (*BBC News* 2020a).

On St. Lucia Island in the Caribbean, in an effort to keep individuals away from a beach where sand was commonly taken, a sign declared that a number of rattlesnakes had been released near the beach. Whether the rattlesnakes were for real or not, beach visitation and sand stealing were most likely reduced.

Another strange sand-stealing incident occurred in July 2008 at Coral Springs, Jamaica. In a single night, perhaps five hundred dump truck-loads of pristine white beach sand were spirited away to two other beach resorts. Prime Minister Bruce Golding took a personal interest in the sand theft and arrests were made, but charges were dropped when a key witness became unavailable, reportedly due to death threats (Gayle 2011). Forensic scientists used neutron activation analysis to identify sands from the resorts on the receiving end of the stolen sand.

Beautiful white beaches also line the Isle of Tiree in Scotland, which wind surfers called the Hawaii of the North. Midnight sand thieves have