

In the Wake of the Flood

The new-money rich people had a truly unique view of the ocean.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

Steady Eddy says that he's really been following up on the Hurricane Hugo story, reading and watching everything he can, and it has taught him a great lesson.

"The great lesson it taught me," Steady says, "is that rich people can build their houses right on the beachfronts. At least once."

He says he was also greatly impressed by a story that a woman from the Red Cross told a reporter on the radio.

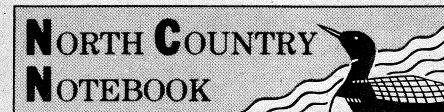
The Red Cross woman said that a local environmental group had tried long and hard to get the beachlands zoned so that the new-money rich people couldn't build their houses right on the water, but the builders and the real estate lobby prevailed, and the new-money rich people went right ahead and built on the water. "Right up to the water," was the way the Red Cross woman described it.

She said that many of the new-money houses were built on stilts and pylons—"just like Wendell Berry's 'long-legged houses' on the Kentucky rivers," Steady Eddy notes—and at high tide the ocean would come flooding in so that the houses sat there like oil derricks.

The Red Cross woman said that the new-money rich people had a truly unique view of the ocean that no one else had, because there was no one else between them and the ocean.

"They were not only on the ocean," she marveled, "at times they were literally in it."

Behind the rich beachfront homes, there was a ridge of dunes, she said, and behind the ridge, the old-money



rich people had built their homes in another time, a more gentle time, when one understood that the Atlantic beaches belonged to the Atlantic Ocean and you could build your sand castles there, but the castle you lived in with the servants should be behind something substantial and out of the wind's way.

All of the beachfront homes were in the full fury of the storm. There was no place to hide from the winds and the waters and what the experts call the tidal surge.

The beachfront homes were not only smashed to splinters; some of those homes had just disappeared. They were gone, and there was just empty space where only hours before there had been a multimillion-dollar oceanfront property.

"The beach in front of the dunes was a disaster area," the Red Cross woman said, "but *behind* the dunes, the old houses had only a broken pane of glass here and a torn off shingle there. But the thing that struck me was that the old houses really looked like a group of sedate old ladies at tea."

The Red Cross woman thought that the hurricane proved a point that the local environmental groups were trying to make when they objected to allowing building on the beach in the first place, and that all those storm-damage images on TV would only strengthen their position.

"Yeah, well," Steady Eddy says, "I wouldn't bet the Old Town canoe on it. How many times do you see those storm-damage images—or flood-damage images—on TV, and there's always the macho statement from some macho guy or from some macho woman, and the statement is always the same no matter who's saying it. It's generic: 'Well, we've lived here for years and years and this is our home and this river has flooded us out before and we always come back here to live and by God, we're coming back here again. A little water and mud sure as hell ain't gonna drive us out ever! This place is home! We live here!'"

That's right, they live there. Right smack in the middle of the river's floodplain. And every time there's high water on the river and the river spills out of its channels, that's where the overflow water is supposed to go—into the lowlands, into the floodplain.

All the snakes and animals take off for higher ground so they don't drown, and the water floods their burrows and stomping grounds and the carp and the catfish nose around the rabbit warrens for a spell.

When the waters recede and the scenery dries out, the snakes and animals return and they never file an insurance claim, and life goes on as usual.

"Maybe if people insist on living in the floodplain," Steady says, "society should insist that they live in a burrow."

The lesson that Nature has for us on the Carolina coast is the same one she has for us in the floodplains and on the mountain slopes: Humans, you dwell here at your peril!

Waters rise up. Rocks slide down. There is always destruction. There is oftentimes death.

John McPhee, in his latest book *The Control of Nature*, explores three examples of man's attempt to control nature: living with the lava flows in Iceland; living with the crumbling mountains in the Los Angeles area and having to build great concrete dams and basins to catch the rocks rolling into canyon communities; and living with the Mississippi River, with the Corps of Engineers fighting desperately to prevent the main channel from being captured by the Atchafalaya River and having to create a new, shorter route to the gulf, which would leave New Orleans miles from the Mississippi.

John McPhee says that in the long run, Nature will defeat man. She always does.

"What the hell," Steady says, "are we stupid or what? Sometimes I think we're all factory seconds." ■