

***Superstorm Sandy: The Inevitable Destruction and Reconstruction of the Jersey Shore*****Diane C. Bates****Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 2016****192 pages, 17 Photographs, 6 Maps****Hardcover, \$80.00****ISBN: 9780813573403****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v2i2.51>**

In this concise volume, sociologist Diane Bates offers a compelling case for the predictability of Hurricane Sandy's destruction along the Jersey shore – and why environmental sociology can provide a critical lens through which to understand and make sense of the devastating storm that struck the eastern seaboard in October 2012. As Bates writes, “by investigating Sandy through the lens of environmental sociology, this book concludes that the way that the Jersey Shore prepared for, was damaged by, and rebuilt from this storm has been structured by human organization that is patterned, explainable, and predictable.” (21)

Bates begins her study by tracing the cultural, political, environmental, and economic interests that have created the Jersey Shore experience. In this swift socio-historical narrative, the author deftly moves from the early development of the coastline to the expansion of a booming tourist industry, from the post-war economic decline to the explosion of second-home construction in the latter half of the twentieth century. She offers a nuanced demographic profile of the four counties along the coastline, and draws on a rich body of sources to reflect on the cultural constructions of the shore. In this, she transposes its national reputation, born out of Springsteen, the *Sopranos*, and MTV's iconic reality show, *Jersey Shore*, with one rooted in localized notions of family togetherness, childhood nostalgia, and beachfront leisure. In crafting such a rich and textured picture of the Jersey Shore, Bates successfully casts the shore as it was experienced and imagined before October 29, 2012.

Bates uses this pre-Sandy conception of the shore to tease out the conflicting and at times contentious relationship between the environmental vulnerability of the coastline and the region's varied political and economic interests. "People... want permanent occupation of the Shore," she writes, "even in the most precarious locations." (142) The powerful tourism industry that so predominates the New Jersey economy – in 2012, tourism accounted for close to \$40 billion of the state's economy and provided jobs for more than 300,000 residents – has accounted for much of the land- and power-grab along the coastline, according to Bates. A robust year-round population, however, particularly along the Sandy Hook and Raritan Bays, forms a critical part of the state's blue-collar sector. Along the 210 miles of coastline, residents are drawn to the environment of the shore – "the scenic landscapes and recreational opportunities along [the] oceans, bays, and rivers." (89) To live by the shore, Bates tells us, is not just to escape from the Garden State's declining cities; it is to live in close proximity to nature. But by continuing to build along the beaches, communities are further stressing that natural splendor, making those who live there increasingly vulnerable to the whims of the devastating storms that pass through.

On occasion, Bates' writing moves into lengthy expositions on sociological theory and categorizations of the debates within the field. This can perhaps be attributed to the *Nature, Society, and Culture Series* at Rutgers University Press, in which this monograph resides. The goal of the series is to offer "carefully crafted empirical studies of the socio-environmental change and the effects such change has on ecosystems, social institutions, historical processes, and cultural practices." Though the decision to include such discussion does serve as a theoretical foundation for Bates' work, these lengthy interjections at times have the effect of distracting from her broader analysis.

The subtitle of the book – *The Inevitable Destruction and Reconstruction of the Jersey Shore* – may confound some readers as well. Her work demonstrates that the destruction of the shore was, in fact, the result of careful planning and willful disregard for the environmentally vulnerable shoreline, quite the opposite of the inevitability that the title suggests. As Bates writes, “why... did we collectively put these communities at risk in the first place, and how can one explain this Sisyphean commitment to rebuild? This book attempts to provide insight into this query, drawing upon both the unique character of the Jersey Shore and the more universal aspects of the way that humans structure their relationship with the environment.” (5)

Still, Bates’ work offers a critical intervention in the burgeoning and evolving field of disaster studies, convincingly advocating for a sociological investigation into the relationship between environmental forces and human agency. Herself a resident of the shore, Bates takes care not to blame the residents of the Jersey Shore, but rather to *explain* their actions and decisions through the lens of sociological theory. In her discussions of such frameworks as ecological modernization, Molotch’s Growth Machine, and the constructionist paradigm, Bates makes the case for the relevance of social theory in understanding the patterns of development and predicting the destruction of natural disaster. In this way, she balances well her own experiences of the shore before, during, and after Sandy with the broader factors that contributed to the push for redevelopment in the immediate aftermath of the storm. For Bates, the efforts to “restore the shore” are problematic in that they circumvent the fundamental question of whether we should rebuild in the first place.

In the end, Bates carefully links her scholarly aim with a more personal one – by understanding the predictable patterns of development before Hurricane Sandy and the recovery thereafter, perhaps we as a society can be better equipped to prepare for and respond to future

storms, those which, she notes, are predicted only to grow stronger and more frequent. As Bates suggests, “we need to consider more than free markets and engineering when we make social decisions.” Using the framework of environmental sociology, “we can become not just stronger than a storm, but better suited to live on this planet.” (144)

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