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WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

## **The seductions of the beach**

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***Robert Drewe argues in his new book that the beach is part of the Australian consciousness at many levels, writes Toni Hassan.***

If the bush represents the sweat of hard work and childhoods in suburbs sprawling into a scrub frontier then the bleached sand and cool sea is where we choose to escape our pimpled and later ageing selves. So contends author Robert Drewe in his new book, *The Beach*.

He argues the beach is part of the Australian consciousness at many levels. We are called to the edges of the continent to find refreshment and the promise of renewal. But it's also where early intrepid travellers, settlers and convicts first encountered Aboriginal peoples; where mutual curiosity turned into clashes.

There are more than 11,000 sandy beaches in Australia, each with their own secrets, sand flies, jellyfish and near or actual drownings. They are where our anxieties play out (shark!) and where our moral values are tested.

They are where people experience intimacy and intrusion, rescue and rejection. The backdrop for the Cronulla riots a decade ago, the beach represents a lifestyle and philosophy, viewed under threat. When too close to the beach, asylum seekers are given numbers and taken to prison camps girt by sea. The coastline is littered with propaganda and demons.

If we see the desert as a place of redemption, with its sublime emptiness and silence, the beach for citizens is a place for fulfilment. A lot of us love the beach because it's where we had our first crush. It's where our innocence was lost.

Drewe notes that retirement and nursing homes are increasingly scattered along the coast where residents gaze out, recalling earlier years, staring at Norfolk pines and 50 shades of blue.

I grew up and became freckled in Manly; more of a neighbour of the sea rather than a lover who surrendered to it. The boardwalk and sandy stretch from Shelley to Queenscliff was then, as now, a highway of diversity and flesh, a sticky collage of ice-creams and cola, and

increasingly sunscreen-painted people. Folk either lose themselves or become more conscious of their cellulite.

A friend of mine recalls a familiar walk down sandy steps to a favourite beach where he finds a strange but wonderful solidarity with strangers. "I feel I am being good to myself. My soul relaxes and lightens. When I sit watching people having fun in the water, I feel I am one of them."

He feels lucky at the beach: "Everyone's there for the simplest but most important things in life: joy, freedom, relaxation, friendship. Every time I dip into the ocean ... it makes me feel more generous, and more patriotic."

There is a kind of democracy at work at the beach. The absence of clothes equalises bums, legs and arms under the southern hemisphere's uncompromising light. The constant motion of the sea links swimmers together. Under the force of waves, they share a dangerous freedom denied to those walking on the ground.

Abandonment and freedom come to mind for Drewe too, who says he's pleased there are no private beaches in Australia. "You can choose to walk the perimeter of this vast continent with relative freedom." But, he asks "Why do we need to pee as soon as we enter the sea?"

Perhaps the sea invites us all to let go, relax, more than we otherwise might.

Another mate, although a long-time resident of the coast, notes that she is just not a "fish-type"; saying she has always lacked a courage she thinks is needed for the surf. "The waves always overpower me. The cold thing freaks me out. Maybe I'm just not hard enough. I get swept away. And I'm so fair, I end up looking like a lobster."

"But I do appreciate the ocean for its freshness, its clean air," she adds.

Even though climate change makes the coast increasingly threatening with rising sea levels and monstrous waves that bludgeon the coast, the beach in all sorts of weather is still seductive, promising mental and physical relief any time of year.