

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Steve Smith, June 2009

They say that first impressions are lasting impressions. When it comes to South Coast, that's good news and bad news.

Visitors are particularly susceptible to being permanently influenced by their earliest encounter with a place. Who can forget their first glimpse of the Manhattan skyline as it emerges from below the horizon when approaching by car? It never fails to impress.

For generations, New Englanders of all ages vividly remember the bright green grass at Fenway Park that greets them as they emerge from a dark tunnel under the grandstand. Even Yankee fans have to be in awe of that image.

A personal favorite is Albuquerque, New Mexico when approached from the west on Route 66 (now I-40). As you near the city, you see nothing for miles except plateau in the foreground and the Sandia Mountains behind. You begin to wonder if this city exists at all. Then suddenly, about six miles out, you get to the plateau's edge and there spread out below you is the Rio Grande valley and the entire City. That first impression has always favorably colored my opinion of Albuquerque.

On the other side of the ledger, New Jersey is frequently associated with negative images of pollution and heavy industrialization that one encounters when entering the state from New York City. It's unfair to judge the whole state based upon that impression because there really are areas that live up to the Garden State moniker. But the negative impressions linger.

In the South Coast, visitors account for a significant segment of the economy and we need to cultivate them. To do that, it is important that we see our home the way visitors do and look at our surroundings through fresh eyes. Familiarity will tempt us to look past things we don't want to see. We must resist the urge.

First the good news. Our natural settings are good – often spectacular. Approaching Fall River from the west by I-195 is amazing. The city appears before you clinging to the hillside right down to the water's edge. It could be the east coast San Francisco. New Bedford has a lazier distant look with a skyline that hints at the city's history. Its Paul Revere billboard is a nice teaser as one approaches the city.

Our major highways offer glimpses of rivers and estuaries with villages along their banks that beg to be visited. Church steeples poking above the trees offer a tease about the development that surrounds them.

Arriving by water (and many of our visitors do) may provide the greatest rewards. The harbors of Marion, Mattapoissett and Padanarum offer New England charm with full amenities. Westport's tricky navigational challenges are well worth the stress when you

dock at Back Eddy for a sunset cocktail. And a trip up the surprisingly wild and scenic Taunton River sometimes feels like Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness.

But not all first impressions of the South Coast are apt to be positive. Unfortunately, a closer inspection reveals our ugly side – most prominently displayed as litter and trash. When compared with Midwestern cities like Chicago or Minneapolis, our cities are dirty. Litter and weeds accumulate at every exit ramp and every vacant lot. Cigarette butts are ubiquitous because some people think they are too small to count as litter. Losing scratch tickets can be as plentiful as falling leaves in October. We've seen this scene so often that we have grown immune to its impact.

When compared to other places, our countryside falls far short as well. In Portugal, England and Germany, small towns overwhelm you with flowers in public places and sidewalks clean enough to eat on. Yards are small and neat with nary an abandoned car to be seen. You will not find the nearest coffee shop by following a trail of discarded styrofoam cups with orange and purple lettering.

In the overall scheme of things, trash and litter don't rise to the level of double digit unemployment or structurally deficient bridges. But the problem is an indicator of our level of pride in our communities, and by that measure, we are failing. Take a look at your community with the eyes of a visitor. You may be surprised by what you see.

The South Coast has great natural beauty and a unique architectural heritage. Let's treat our area with the respect that it deserves and not detract from its appeal with a carelessly tossed coffee cup. Better yet – show your pride by properly disposing of someone else's litter. Maybe they'll get the point.

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