



The Need for Standardized Coastal-Process Terminology

A few years ago, when US east and Gulf coast researchers began to refer to *transgressive* and *regressive* barrier islands, they and their co-workers knew that they meant *rising* (on-lap) and *falling* (off-lap) sea level and the accompanying erosion-deposition processes, respectively. However, English-speaking coastal specialists in other parts of the world thought, for a while, that a transgressive barrier island was prograding seaward and that a regressive one was eroding. With continual use and wider dissemination of publications, the original stratigraphic meaning is now properly understood and accepted.

For multiplicity of terms, take the case of along-shore transport of sediment, in both the swash-backwash zone and the surf zone, under the influence of wave refraction the interested reader can find books by various authors referring to this one single process as "drift" and "longshore movement" (DAVIES, 1973), "littoral drift" (INGLE, 1966; STRAHLER and STRAHLER, 1973), "longshore drift" and "longshore transport" (KING, 1972), and "shore drift" (SCHWARTZ, 1982). Which of these terms, or variations thereupon, have you been using?

Probably the greatest inconsistency of all occurs in what people mean, in the context of coastal-processes, by the terms *bluff* and *cliff*. During discussions, in English, with coastal specialists from all over the world, I have found four different criteria by which the two are distinguished. First of all, there is *composition*: bluffs being composed of unconsolidated material and cliffs being formed in solid rock. Then there is *slope*: with bluffs having a moderate to low inclination and cliffs being almost vertical. Still another criteria is height or *relief*: bluffs are relatively low, cliffs are high (the number of meters defining the boundary between the two is vague). Finally, there is *process*: if fronted and well protected by a fully-developed beach and/or back-shore, the feature is a bluff; if actively eroding through wave action, the feature is a (sea) cliff.

The obvious difficulty with these criteria are the interrelationships which may occur; *process* can affect *slope*, *relief* and *slope* may depend on *composition*, *composition* may be mixed, and so on. Yet, what is the reader to assume when the terms *bluff* and *cliff* appear in a book or journal article?

Beyond the examples set forth here, every coastal worker can probably think of a dozen other terms that are used ambiguously. As far as I know, there is no dictionary of coastal terminology. Coastal glossaries reflect the usage of the compiler; and encyclopedia entries, those of the individual contributors. Confusion still exists in a field of intellectual endeavor that is supposed to be an exact science.

In this editorial, I offer no grand panacea for the problems that have been raised. Rather, consider the matter to be one of consciousness raising; for, in being aware of the inconsistencies in our usage of terms, we all may strive, in our future writings, for greater clarity and uniformity. This, in and of itself, could provide a slight movement toward a more standardized coastal-process terminology.

Maurice L. Schwartz
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