

## COASTAL DEVELOPMENT: JUST A LITTLE SHIFT IN AUSTRALIA'S GEOGRAPHY?

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*Bernard Salt's book 'The Big Shift' argues that lifestyle attractions associated with coastal residence are driving a major demographic shift in Australia. This article challenges this thesis on the grounds that the alleged shift is small and only partially driven by lifestyle factors.*

In a recently released book *The Big Shift* Bernard Salt suggests that a new culture is emerging in Australia, replacing and reshaping the established cultures of the 'city' and the 'bush'.<sup>1</sup> This new culture is that of the beach, emerging from new lifestyle interests and choices on the part of Australians. The book proposes that this new culture is in fact part of a 'big shift' in the Australian settlement system and so suggests a new future is unfolding in Australian regional development. This paper addresses these claims by investigating the geography of the shift to the coast, the significance of lifestyle factors, and the overall impact of coastal activity in national economic development. The paper concludes that Salt's analysis is misleading and that at best coastal development represents a little shift in Australia's geography. The paper produces a framework that is relevant to the real world and provide some alternatives to Salt's exaggerated predictions.

### BACKGROUND

Salt begins the case for a new pattern of population change in Australia with some compelling data on population shares in what he calls geo-cultural groups. These are identified along with their respective population shares over the past 100 years in Table 1.

This information shows the almost trebling of the share of national population in coastal municipalities, which are

those that have a frontage to the coastline, in contrast to a doubling in capital cities, and a big decline in rural areas. By breaking up this information for time periods Salt is able to show that the shift in favour of the coast has been a recent one, and that it seems to be gathering momentum. He shows that the rate of population growth in recent years has been high in a number of coastal locations and, in particular, singles out the Gold Coast, the Sunshine Coast, Hervey Bay, Ballina, Coffs Harbour, Port Macquarie and Byron Bay.

He argues that these trends will continue, resting his case on a large projected increase in retired people, many with financial resources and the conviction that the latter part of their lives should be spent in pleasant locations. To that he adds a powerful set of cultural images, led by the success of *Sea Change*, a television program which showed how a

**Table 1: Shares of population in Australian geo-cultural regions, per cent, 1901 and 2001**

	1901	2001
Capital	32	64
Rural	61	17
Coastal	7	19
Total	100	100

Source: B. Salt, *The Big Shift*, Hardie Grant Books, Melbourne, 2001; Figure 1, p. 3, his percentages are shares of national population.

well-paid member of a central city law firm swapped places to be a less-well paid (although permanently employed) magistrate in a coastal location. Taken together he expects these factors will continue to reshape Australia's regional development in favour of coastal locations. However it is possible that Salt's understanding of what has happened in Australia is mistaken or misleading, which would seriously undermine his predictions. The following section explores his research in detail.

**IS COASTAL POPULATION GROWTH REALLY CHANGING AUSTRALIAN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS?**

**Numbers and location of coastal population growth**

The coastal population displayed in Table 1 is in fact assembled from two broad groups of municipalities. The first have coastal frontages, but are within metropolitan areas, while the other has coastal frontages elsewhere around the continent. Information on this aspect is supplied by Salt on page 58, about a quarter of the way through the book, and has been assembled in Table 2. The table shows that the coastal parts of metropolitan areas in Australia have increased in population by three times since 1976 but that non-metropolitan coastal parts recorded a 68.4 per cent increase.

This table also shows that almost twice as many people have been added to coastal municipalities within metropolitan Australia than to coastal regions

elsewhere, and that this has been happening at a very rapid rate since 1976. In effect most of the coastal development recorded in Table 1, the development central to Salt's claims, has repetition reinforced big city dominance and so has not changed the underlying pattern of settlement as much as the label 'big shift' would suggest.

**Impact on community development**

It is important to establish whether the shift to the coast will reshape the character of regional and community development. Salt has two views which appear to contradict one another:

The three million plus people living on the beach have begun to impact on our national culture... more than three million Australians have cultural allegiance to neither city nor bush. This is sufficient critical mass and geographic isolation from other large cultural enclaves to establish a quite separate identity.<sup>2</sup>

Here Salt assumes that the coastal community is in fact a homogeneous one, ignoring the data in Table 2. More seriously though he goes on to produce a puzzling contradiction:

The third Australian culture (beach culture) is different. The full 3.6 million coastal dwellers are thinly strung out along an extensive seaboard. This geographic strip makes it difficult for this community to aggregate and to form a single and solid culture in the same way that the bigger closer suburbia did.<sup>3</sup>

Hence although Salt continues to stress the numbers and the trends in

**Table 2: Total population in metropolitan and non-metropolitan coastal locations 1976 and 2000**

Location	Population (million)		Change in population 1976-2000	
	1976	2000	million	per cent
Metropolitan coastal	1.000	3.100	2.100	210.0
Non-metropolitan coastal	2.076	3.498	1.422	68.4

Source: Derived from B. Salt, *The Big Shift*, p. 58

favour of the coast, at the back of his mind he seems to be concerned that the impact will not be as great as was first thought. He confirms that doubt in an observation that:

...the main game that determines Australia's cultural affiliations..... lie[s] ..... in places like Sydney's Hornsby, Melbourne's Mulgrave and Brisbane's Chermside.<sup>4</sup>

Coincidentally, that recognition of the 'suburbs as mainstream' is consistent with the data he finally displays on population growth in municipalities over the period 1976-2000.<sup>5</sup> Of the top ten places ranked in terms of population growth over this period, eight are in the suburbs of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth. Hence if demography reflects culture it is again hard to see much evidence of a *big shift* in Australian culture.

**Public and private investment in new buildings in coastal locations**

If the non-metropolitan coastal parts of the nation have already exerted the influence on Australian regional development that Salt suggests, or if they will do so in the future, the coast will need to have the commercial and community infrastructure that facilitates regional development. The degree to which they have built this up so far can be measured by identifying the extent to which the national business and government community has invested in the coast compared to other parts of the nation. Data displayed in Table 3 represent the aggregate provision of new buildings by government, private-sector firms and community organisations that could be used for production

and community services. The data include offices, factories, hotels, hospitals and schools. They have been sorted into three broad categories of municipalities and subdivided again into coastal and non-coastal location.

Close study of the geography of the total value of public and private buildings constructed between 1989 and 1998 shows coastal locations outside the metropolitan areas have attracted only small shares of this investment. In fact, over the decade there was slightly more money spent in rural and remote inland Australia than in rural and remote coastal locations. This outcome emphatically defies the idea of a *big shift* in the character of Australian regional development.

It is clear however that the coastal parts of the metropolitan areas have attracted investment. However, some of the locations in this category (like the City of Sydney) are at the heart of the nation's business life, while many others are suburbs of the metropolitan areas, so that the 30 per cent of national investment in these areas is not really part of a *big shift* in the nation's geography, but rather a re-inforcement of the dispersal of population within the big metropolitan regions.

**Table 3: Non-residential construction in Australia, by type of settlement and coastal/non-coastal location, 1989 to 1998**

Location of Municipality	Share of the total value of non-residential construction work 1989 to 1998, per cent		
	Coastal	Non-coastal	Total
Metropolitan areas	30.8	40.5	71.3
Other cities*	8.7	3.9	12.6
Rural and remote	7.7	8.4	16.0
Total	47.2	52.8	100.0

\* This group includes the municipalities in cities such as Geelong, Newcastle, Wollongong, Ballarat and Bendigo. Source: Australian Bureau Statistics (ABS), *Building Activity Survey*, Municipalities Aggregated into groups by the Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University

Analysis of the raw data used to construct Table 3 showed that the only municipalities outside the metropolitan areas that were prominent in non-residential construction were the Gold Coast and Cairns, Lake Macquarie, Coffs Harbour, and Hervey Bay. (The last three only appear in this analysis for one or two years over the decade.)

### **Socio-economic outcomes in coastal communities**

The information displayed in Table 3 shows that the increases in coastal population that Salt believes are taking place are occurring without the support of the commercial and community infrastructure that is common in other parts of Australia. That circumstance has some particular implications for local economic development and job opportunities. The outcome can be seen in data on income levels and unemployment rates in the fastest growing coastal towns identified by Salt. These three aspects are displayed in Table 4.

Notwithstanding problems of spatial units outlined under the table, there is a telling insight into the impact of coastal demographic change on regional economic development over the past 24 years in the information in this table. Of the twenty places that Salt identifies as the most important in terms of growth, eight are on his list of the lowest paid communities and/or the list of communities with the highest unemployment in Australia. Looking at the make up of columns two and three, thirteen of the nation's lowest paid and highest unemployment 'towns' are on the coast; two more (Lismore and Bundaberg, are very close to the coast. These outcomes are consistent with the economic and social circumstances of a larger group of coastal communities in a national overview of

non-metropolitan locations.<sup>6</sup> The data in the Table 4 suggests in fact that inland Australia is actually doing a lot better than coastal Australia in providing local populations with income and jobs. It seems that fast population growth in coastal municipalities is not an insurance against low income and high unemployment for the towns within them.

The range of measures reviewed in this section of the paper shows that non-metropolitan coastal population development is smaller than Salt has suggested, that it is not backed by commercial and community investment, and in many cases that it is associated with socio-economic difficulties rather than expansion and growth. The population growth that Salt detects seems to have had very little impact upon the real economy of the nation. It is also possible that, if a third culture is emerging on the coast, it is very different from the bright future that he portrays as 'suburbia by the sea'.<sup>7</sup>

### **IS LIFESTYLE REALLY SUCH A STRONG INFLUENCE ON COASTAL DEVELOPMENT?**

At the heart of Salt's research on coastal development is the fact that Australians now make (and in the future will make) residential location decisions in terms of lifestyle and that the coast offers some special lifestyle features. That fact is underpinned by reference to cultural and other value shifts, seen in media images and social commentary, especially those surrounding the ideas of a 'seachange' in the way people live. This thinking is best illustrated in Salt's interpretation of the growth of the Gold Coast: where the main reason for the growth of this area '... was because the Australian people value the lifestyle that it has to offer'.<sup>8</sup>

However, detailed analysis of the reasons that people give for moving to the

**Table 4: Municipalities with Fast Coastal Population growth, towns with low income and high unemployment levels**

Population growth 1976 to 2000	Income levels 1996	Unemployment 2000
The twenty fastest growing coastal municipalities *	The bottom twenty towns in terms of per capita income, ranked from lowest to highest **	The twenty towns with the highest unemployment, ranked from highest to lowest ***
Alexandrina	Nambucca Heads (c)	Byron Bay (c)
Augusta-Margaret River	Kempsey (c)	Nambucca Heads (c)
Broome	Hervey Bay (c)	Sunshine Coast (c)
Bussellton	Lithgow	Latrobe Valley
Cairns	Byron Bay (c)	Eurobodalla (c)
Caloundra	Taree (Greater) (c)	Whyalla (c)
Coffs Harbour	Eurobodalla (c)	Hervey Bay (c)
Eurobodalla	Shoalhaven (c)	Kempsey (c)
Gold Coast	Bega Valley (c)	Coffs Harbour (c)
Greenough	Hastings (NSW) (c)	Burnie-Devonport (c)
Hastings (NSW)	Grafton	Lismore
Hervey Bay	Coffs Harbour (c)	Bundaberg
Livingstone	Bundaberg	Livingstone (c)
Noosa	Mildura	Shoalhaven (c)
Port Douglas	Lismore	Bega Valley (c)
Port Stephens	Albany (c)	Mandurah (c)
Shoalhaven	Burnie-Devonport (c)	Geelong (c)
Thuringowa	Bendigo	Mackay (c)
West Coast (Tas.)	Mandurah (c)	Geraldton-Greenough (c)
Whitsunday	Livingstone (c)	Taree (c)

Source: \* B. Salt, p. 60; \*\* B. Salt, p. 70; \*\*\* B. Salt, p. 101.

Note: The data in this table are for a confused set of spatial units. Column one is derived from a map showing 'parts of coastal non metropolitan Australia'; all but Port Douglas are municipalities. Columns 2 and 3 refer to 'towns' which is not an official statistical unit in Australia (See *Statistical Geography, Volume 1, Australian Standard Geographical Classification*, ABS, Canberra, 1996); Salt has mixed shires (like Eurobodalla) and urban centres (like Byron Bay). The same approach has been applied in column three where statistical subdivisions (eg. Sunshine Coast and Burnie-Devenport), shires (eg. Shoalhaven, Hervey Bay) and a location of his own creation (Geraldton-Greenough) are used. This clumsy set of spatial units means that the table can only be analysed in the most general terms.

Gold Coast shows that employment has figured more prominently than Salt seems to understand. Table 5 presents information assembled in a survey of movers to the Gold Coast.

These survey-based results suggest that very broadly defined lifestyle factors provide less than half of the reasons for moving to the Gold Coast. Significantly, when the researchers explored the reasons given for people moving in different time periods, they found that

employment became the single most important reason for moves after 1991.<sup>9</sup>

Salt's use of the lifestyle factor seems to be mistaken in Australia's premier coastal region. Though he acknowledges that the 'rise of cheap air travel assisted the growth of the Gold Coast',<sup>10</sup> he places no importance on the jobs created in the tourist industry as a factor in the growth of this region (he does however for the Sunshine Coast). Salt even estimates retail turnover as a function of local

**Table 5: Reasons for moving to the Gold Coast**

Reasons given for move:		Share of responses
Related to lifestyle	Like area	8.7
	Climate	18.7
	Lifestyle and recreation	14.7
	<b>Total lifestyle related</b>	<b>42.1</b>
Other reasons	Family/friends	24.1
	Employment	23.4
	Other	10.4
	<b>Total other reasons</b>	<b>57.9</b>
Total		100.0

Source: R. Stimson, J. Minnery, A. Kakamba, and B. Moon, *Sunbelt Migration Decisions. A Study of the Gold Coast*, Bureau of Immigration Multicultural and Population Research, Melbourne, 1996, Table 5.11, p. 57

population change, with no reference to tourist spending. He also suggests ‘... the development of transport technology and infrastructure enable[d] intercity commuting’,<sup>11</sup> a comment that is not consistent with the actual journey-to-work movement in the region in 1996. Stimson and his co-authors<sup>12</sup> found 86 per cent of the workers who live in the region also work in the region, reinforcing the role that labour market opportunities play in residential site selection for a substantial part of the region’s population.

Hence the lifestyle factor that Salt relies on is much less significant than he suggests. If that is so in the case of the Gold Coast, its impact elsewhere will probably be much less as well. There is no doubt that numbers of people move to the coast because the lifestyle it offers (in terms of weather, house prices, recreational opportunity and other dimensions of daily life) is different or superior to the lifestyle associated with their current location. However the issue is whether the people who make a decision for these reasons are more numerous than those who move for reasons associated with labour-market opportunities. The difference is nicely illustrated in data for

very recent change in population in Australia’s cities and towns. Heading Salt’s list, with a percentage change in the last year of 5.7 per cent is Busselton, where the population grew by 1223 people. In the same period Sydney recorded a lowly ranked 1.3 per cent increase in population. Coincidentally that involved the addition of 53,634 people over the year. Comparing those numbers shows that Salt’s coastal lifestyle factors are in fact associated with a very little shift in Australia’s geography.

### **RETHINKING COASTAL REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Rather than rely on an ill-defined and apparently not very influential idea like lifestyle, understanding coastal development calls for more detailed thinking on the forces shaping the movement of people and businesses to the coast. Such thinking is necessary if we are to understand the evolution of urban and regional change in Australia. A more rigorous approach is also needed as coastal development can create problems as outlined in broad environmental terms by Mercer<sup>13</sup> and illustrated at the local scale in a case study by Green on the Club Med proposal at Byron Bay.<sup>14</sup> To understand both the broad change and some of the special local concerns, we need a framework that can provide ideas on the scale of potential coastal growth in the context of national development generally. That will need to extend well beyond ‘lifestyle’.

A framework (in Table 6) has been developed by acknowledging two key forces in the coastal development process. The first is the location of the coastal region which takes into account the fact that much coastal development in

**Table 6: A framework to understand coastal development**

Type of demand	Metropolitan fringe	Location of coastal region	
		Between metropolitan areas	Remote
Global tourism	Gold Coast	na	Cairns
National tourism	Gold Coast Sunshine Coast	Northern and Southern NSW	Broome, Cairns
Summer holiday season	Mornington, Bellarine Peninsulas, Southern Adelaide	Northern and Southern NSW, Victorian Coast	Southern WA, SA Peninsulas
Day trip visitors		na	na
Commuting		na	na
Retirement: warm winter destinations	Some outer suburban areas in Sydney and Brisbane	NSW north of Newcastle	Queensland north of Sunshine Coast
Retirement: cold winter destinations	Some outer suburban areas in Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth	Southern NSW and Victoria	SA, WA

Australia is within or between adjoining metropolitan areas. The second is the origin of demand for the residential and commercial opportunities on the coast. The latter can take a number of forms: tourists, home-owners, or second home buyers, and the mix of these will vary with the climate of the coast. An attempt has been made to incorporate these dimensions into the framework presented in Table 6.

The main insight in this framework is that some coastal locations, like the Gold Coast, receive regional development pressures from several sources (global, national, day trips). These pressures provide the incentive for large scale investment in hotels, motels, shopping centres and entertainment facilities that provide a variety of work, and so stimulate population growth. That outcome is limited to very few places and, of course, creates the potential for greatest conflict between development and the physical environmental of coastal regions. Other locations rely on demand from seasonal holiday makers and retirees; there is less need in

these places for new investment or for service provision, so fewer jobs are created. This means that local unemployment rates might be high if the population growth includes members of the workforce. Outcomes among these smaller coastal regions are uneven. Where demand is spread across winter and summer, and winter temperatures are moderate, such as in the northern NSW coast for example, much more development will occur than in places with a summer-only trade, and cold winters, such as much of the Victorian coast. Where longer distances create remoteness, the level of development falls even further, as in much of the western South Australian coast and the southern West Australian coast.

Hence rather than being just a lifestyle or culturally driven phenomenon, as claimed by Salt, coastal population change really depends on demand and location. Only by understanding these factors can accurate predictions of future coastal patterns be made. It is very unlikely that these predictions will add up to a *big shift* in Australia's geography.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> B. Salt, *The Big Shift: Welcome to the Third Australian Culture, The Bernard Salt Report*, Hardie Grant Books, Melbourne, 2001

- <sup>2</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 61
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 52
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 126
- <sup>6</sup> R. Stimson, S. Baum and K. O'Connor, *The Social and economic Performance of Australia's Large Regional Cities and Towns: Implications for Rural and Regional Policy*, 2001, Submitted for Publication
- <sup>7</sup> Salt, *op. cit.*, p. 2
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 127-129
- <sup>9</sup> R. Stimson, J. Minnery, A. Kakamba, and B. Moon, *Sunbelt Migration Decisions: A Study of the Gold Coast*, Bureau of Immigration Multicultural and Population Research, Melbourne, 1996, p. 57
- <sup>10</sup> Salt, *op. cit.*, p. 127
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 127
- <sup>12</sup> R. Stimson, F. Shuab, O. Jenkins and M. Lindfield, *Monitoring Brisbane and the South East Queensland Region*, University of Queensland Press for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.
- <sup>13</sup> D. Mercer, 'Tourism and the Coastal Zone management: the uneasy partnership', in K.J. Walker, and K. Crowley, (eds) *Australian Environmental Policy 2: Studies in Decline and Devolution*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1999
- <sup>14</sup> R. Green, 'Notions of town character: a coastal community responds to change', *Australian Planner*, vol. 37, 2000, pp. 76-82