

## “Warning: Ocean is Wet”

by

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There’s a sign fronting one spots that’s quite epic in its paranoia. Perhaps you’ve seen it. It seems to catalogue every possible hazard on the coast: sharks, cold water, rip currents, undertow, sudden large waves, high winds, and bluff erosion.

When you suit up and walk by the sign with your board, you might be tempted to think: *Man, I’m really charging it. Look at all those hazards!* But the spot is no more dangerous or sharky than anywhere else in the region. The warnings about rip currents (or “currens”, as the sign says), undertow, and sudden large waves seem prudent (though I’ve never seen a “sudden” large wave there).

But cold water? If the region’s chilly reputation or the sight of surfers in full wetsuits, booties, and occasional hoods doesn’t tip you off to the water temp, then it should become apparent when you dip your feet, and appropriate action can be taken (it’s not like you’re jumping in a mile offshore and forced to swim in). If that still doesn’t clue you in, then your problems may extend beyond what a sign can fix.



The “high winds” warning is strange. Other than getting sand in your eye, I’m not sure what the hazard is. The typical winds here are standard California onshores that build up slowly and max out at twenty or twenty-five knots. This isn’t tornado or hurricane country. It doesn’t go from dead glass to howling in an instant (unlike, say, the “sudden” large waves). The bluff erosion warning is interesting, since there are no bluffs within a quarter-mile of that sign.

Maybe I’m nitpicking. Educating people to dangers is important, and these signs are intended for tourists who may be unfamiliar with the ocean. People drown in all manner of conditions, and it’s important to know the hazards and take precautions.

But the sign seems more a product of our litigious culture, which gives us all those helpful reminders (*Warning: coffee is hot, knives are sharp, urinal not for drinking*). Are warnings about cold water, wind, and distant bluff erosion really necessary? If so, why stop there? What about sunburn? Hot sand? Errant seagulls? Meteorites?

Reasonable warnings are good, but so is common sense and personal responsibility. Most surfers and other outdoor types rightly take pride in self-reliance. You have to know the conditions and your own abilities. The ocean reveals character; surfacing from a liquid beat-down will teach you more than any sign ever will.

Society at large would benefit from the surfing ethos. People can’t be warned about every potential hazard on earth, and the overload of trivial warnings might cause people to tune out altogether. Perhaps there should be a simple, universal warning that should pretty much cover everything: *The world is*

*dangerous. Pull your head out of your ass and pay attention.*

Oh, and by the way, do not eat this essay, it contains no nutritional value, and if it catches on fire, do not douse with gasoline.