
*Reviewed by Matthew C. LaFevor, Department of Geography and the Environment, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX.*

Donald D. Brand’s *Estudio Costero del Suroccidente de México* (A Study of the Southwest Mexican Coast) is a highly detailed account of the Pacific coast of the state of Michoacán during the 1950s. El Centro de Investigaciones en Geografía Ambiental (CIGA; UNAM Morelia campus) recently published the work in Spanish, some fifty years after Brand and his collaborators compiled it. The Spanish translation is easily readable by those proficient in the language, although dictionaries of geomorphological and historical nautical terms might be helpful.

Posthumous publications often spark the interest of readers for several reasons. For some readers, a new publication of historical material serves to deepen an understanding of a particular topic or to open new lines of inquiry. Posthumous publications might also yield fresh insight into the authors themselves, sparking new rounds of discussion about their work. For many, though, with perhaps less interest in the topical focus, a posthumous publication might instead serve to illuminate the scholarly zeitgeist of a particular era: Why were researchers interested in these topics? How did they go about collecting and analyzing data? How has the spirit of geographical inquiry changed since that time? This volume prompts these questions and more. This book is about the coastal geomorphology of the state of Michoacán, Mexico during the mid-twentieth century. More important, it deepens our understanding of the history of geographical inquiry during that time period.

Gerardo Bocco Verdinelli’s preface and Pedro Urquijo Torres’s introduction provide succinct and informative backgrounds that are key to understanding the historical context of Brand’s work. Both focus on Brand’s role as protégé of Carl Sauer and advocate of the Berkeley traditions of cultural and historical geography in Mexico. Urquijo’s introductory essay places Brand in the larger purview of the Berkeley School, along with Brand’s contemporaries, Dan Stanislawski and Robert West. CIGA recently translated Stanislawski’s *The Anatomy of Eleven Towns in Michoacán* ([1950] 2007) into Spanish, and the College of Michoacán is in the process of translating West’s (1948) *The Cultural Geography of the Modern Tarascan Area*. Appropriately, publication of Brand’s *Estudio Costero* completes the trio of works by these three students of Sauer and the Berkeley tradition. Together, through their detailed descriptions of the human and environmental geography of the time, they are among the most revealing studies of mid-twentieth-century Michoacán.

In the book’s preface, Brand traces his interest in the region to 1939 when a Mexican colleague described to him a little-known terrain along the Michoacán coast. Brand began to scan the literature and look for maps of the region, but was not able to visit it until 1950. Once in the field, he realized that existing maps were “consistently vague, contradictory, and erroneous concerning most of the details (both physical and cultural) of the Michoacán coast” (p. 25). As a result, he organized a research program through the University of Texas at Austin, where he was a professor in (and founder of) the Department of Geography. By the mid-1950s he and senior assistant and doctoral candidate Pablo Guzmán Rivas began
conducting field work along the Michoacán coast, and by 1958 Brand had compiled their findings.

In the first section of Estudio Costero, Brand outlines the social, political, historical, and environmental aspects of the region. This is followed by an explanation of the formation of the beach cusps so prevalent along the shoreline, by Guzmán Rivas. Based on extensive field observations and profile sketches, Brand concludes that the coastal landforms resulted primarily from wave action, but are more a product of nonerosion than of sand deposition. He then transitions into a statistical analysis and discussion of data from some rainfall stations both along the coast and inland, but concludes there were insufficient data to notice any longer term trends. Only data collected from Acapulco enabled the author to infer that coastal precipitation generally had decreased from 1939 until 1954.

The next section is a detailed accounting of the history of maritime exploration and surveying of the Michoacán coast. Brand begins with Balboa and the “discovery” of the Pacific Ocean in 1513, follows through the conquest and the colonial eras, and ends with the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. It is difficult to identify any central question or thread of inquiry among the exhaustive lists of naval explorations and histories of coastal surveys. Brand instead focuses on identifying sources and in compiling reference lists; he does little to explicate or analyze them, individually or as a whole. For historians or historical geographers, the bibliographic lists might facilitate research, and the references will likely prove useful for scholars of naval history. For others, this section of Estudio Costero will read like a catalogue of dates and events far removed from any currently relevant historiography of Mexico.

Perhaps the most enlightening part of the book is the final twenty-nine pages—map sketches, diagrams, and fourteen aerial photographs of the Michoacán coastline (pp. 233–62). The images depict coastal landmarks, rivers and deltas, beaches, lighthouses, and other prominent features of general interest to Brand and his assistants. The black-and-white images in Brand’s original manuscript reveal much about land use and land cover, floodplain cultivation, and river channel and coastal geomorphology. Landscape features are considerably less visible in this volume, however, due in part to the low contrast of the reproductions.

In his excellent introduction to the book, Urquijo Torres mentions that Brand and his collaborators finally opted to publish two documents from their work. Yet for unexplained reasons, the second volume was omitted from this latest Spanish version. The second volume contains more than 550 pages of additional material. Brand named the first volume the Technical Report and this second volume the Final Report, and wished the two reports to be used together as complements to each other (Brand 1958). According to Brand, the first volume contains the historical and bibliographic materials to which the second volume refers and discusses in more detail. Additionally, the second volume contains Guzmán Rivas’s review of known seismic activity in the area, along with a summary of the impacts of the 1932 tsunami and a synthesis of the known cyclonic trajectories of coastal weather systems. Brand also provides a forty-three-page summary of all the project’s findings, based on four seasons of field work and extensive archival research. He summarizes the project’s findings on the geology, hydrography, weather and climate, difficulties and dangers (hazards), as well as issues over communication and accessibility of the region.

Highlights of the second volume include (1) twenty original sketch maps, (2) nine reproductions of historical maps, and (3) 340 excellently reproduced black-and-white photographs of the Michoacán coast. In addition to the coastal landforms and river geomorphology of the first volume, these additional images also depict elements of material culture—traditional building structures, subsistence patterns, biota of the region, and agricultural practices. Informative captions accompany each photograph, revealing fascinating colloquial phrases and vocabularies of the region (Brand 1958). These photographs would serve as excellent visual references for studies of land use and land cover change using repeat photography, such as those based on the photographic archives of Brand’s contemporary, Robert West (see Bass 2004).

Let us hope CIGA also publishes the second volume, to be read with the first, as Brand originally intended (Brand 1958, p. i); together, the two volumes yield a more complete and useful study. This new publication of Brand’s work on the Michoacán coast will form an essential part of the environmental historiography of one of México’s most geographically diverse regions.

References
