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# Australia has more than 10,000 beaches and only one man has seen them all, from the sublime to the dangerous. He shares their secrets with *Mike Safe*.

**A**ustralians have a warm, fuzzy feeling about their beaches, even if they visit very few of them. They know even less about how their water, wind, sand and tides interact to produce such magical locations. Because of this blissful ignorance, some of our coast is in danger of being loved to death while huge expanses of it seldom see a human footprint.

So says the researcher who knows more about Australian beaches than anyone. Professor Andrew Short is head of Sydney University's Coastal Studies Unit. Since 1990, he has coordinated the Australian Beach Safety and Management Program, a mammoth mapping and cataloguing of the nation's foreshores carried out in cooperation with Surf Life Saving Australia.

Short has counted 10,685 beaches along the mainland and Tasmanian coasts, a combined length of nearly 30,000 kilometres. As part of the project, he has seen all of them, visiting by foot, vehicle and boat or flying over those that are inaccessible. And just to complicate the issue, he has catalogued at least another 800 beaches on Australia's 30 inhabited islands, but there are thousands of uninhabited islands and no-one is sure how many more beaches are on them.

For every Bondi and St Kilda there are hundreds of beaches that are rarely visited. "Most of the beaches in Australia still don't have names," says Short. "Many of the headlands aren't named either." Only 25 per cent of beaches have sealed road access, 10 per cent have gravel road access and 20 per cent can only be reached by four-wheel-drive over sand or dirt tracks. This leaves 45 per cent with no vehicle access at all. Many of these are scattered across remote locations such as northern Australia and western Tasmania. As far as Short is concerned, this is good news. "It means those undeveloped beaches are likely to stay that way. Many are in national parks, on Aboriginal land or in such remote areas that they are likely to remain preserved. We realise there's a lot of money to be made out of maintaining this environment. You can sell it over and over in terms of ecotourism."

The status of much of our coast is still to be sorted out. For example, NSW, the most populous state, has preserved as much as it can - more than a third - in national parks, while bigger states with sparsely populated coasts, such as Western and South Australia, still have vast tracts that are unresolved. "Much of this is crown land but it's not yet national park," says Short. "At the same time, the federal and state governments are preparing a whole range of marine parks. But we're at least heading in the right direction." As the sixth-largest land mass in the world and the only one of the top six countries surrounded by water, Australia has a bewildering variety of beaches. They range from strips

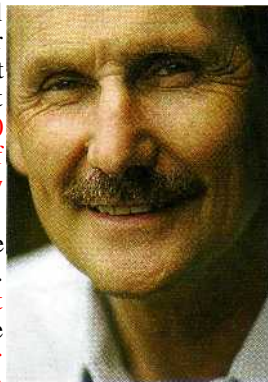
of sand as short as 20 metres that can wash away in a storm to those that go on for hundreds of kilometres, such as along the Coorong in South Australia. There are tropical beaches fringed by rainforest in North Queensland and the sun-baked desert beaches of northern Western Australia. Those in the north can undergo massive tidal shifts - often more than 10m - while the wild western coast of Tasmania is one of the most high-energy wave locations on Earth. Despite our bush mythology, Australians are urbanised coast-dwellers: nine out of ten of us live within 50km of a beach. Short says this pressure will only continue. "While we want to preserve the coast, all the sea-changers and baby boomers want to live and retire there. So it becomes a balancing act - allowing people to live where they want while still preserving the environment."

This drift, especially to regional centres such as Coffs Harbour in NSW, the Gold and Sunshine coasts in Queensland and Bunbury in Western Australia, must be managed - and that means long-term, not just until the next council election. Although Queensland Premier Peter Beattie last month announced a plan to push newcomers west away from the pressurised Gold and Sunshine coasts, Short believes politicians across the country still aren't willing to put time, effort and money into preserving the coast.

"What we've got to realise is how big these places could get and plan for cities of that size," he says. "You don't do it piecemeal and tack a bit more on every year. You've got to have a master plan for a place and region, assuming there will be a population of so many by the year 2050. Part of that planning will be preserving smaller coastal communities and maybe capping them at a certain size, not allowing them to just grow. Maybe that means keeping development to the existing bigger regional centres.

"It's going to be difficult. It's a matter of asking society what it wants and my feeling is people will want a range of development. Not all of it has to be upmarket. They still want caravan parks and camping grounds. We need a one-star to five-star coast whereas developers, or a lot of them, would much prefer it to be all five-star."

Despite hundreds of reports - local, state and federal - coastal development continues to be marred by a litany of mistakes: sewage discharge, stormwater overflow, silting and algal blooms in estuaries, seagrass dying off along beaches, run-off from overbuilt landscapes, and erosion of beaches and dunes due to everything from poorly designed marinas to wrongly sited housing. "There's no reason in this day and age why we can't do it properly," says Short. Not surprisingly, Short has clear views on our beaches. On the following pages he nominates the best family, surf and scenic beaches - and the most treacherous.



Australia's professor of beaches, Andrew Short.