

Stephen Leatherman

(“Dr. Beach,” coastal ecologist, professor at Florida International University, Miami; age 70)

My son’s middle name is Beach. And my daughter’s name is Sandy.

Rip currents are the most dangerous things at the beach. Not sharks. Rip currents cause the most deaths, even more than hurricanes on average every year.

Science is discovery. It’s a search for knowledge. There’s a joy in discovering things and a joy of being with nature and trying to figure out how things operate.

I grew up in Charlotte, N.C., which has red clay everywhere. I was always getting really dirty, being an outdoors boy, and my mom was very distressed that my clothes were being ruined by the clay. So, she told my dad to get me a sandbox, and my dad did something really special. He got a whole truckload of sand. He built a frame around it, and I’d tell people I had the largest sandbox in Charlotte. Everybody came to my house to play in the sand. I discovered the joy of adding water to sand. The first time I saw a real beach was a year or so later, and I fell in love immediately.

Luck largely depends on preparing yourself to take advantage of opportunities.

After one of the lists came out, I got a call from Daytona Beach. The caller said: ‘Look, Dr. Leatherman. We see you’re a very knowledgeable scientist, but we don’t see Daytona Beach on your list, the world’s most famous beach! Daytona Beach is not on your top 10? What’s wrong? Have you been to Daytona Beach?’ I said: ‘Sure, I’ve

They call Florida the Sunshine State. I think it ought to be called the Beach State.

been to Daytona Beach, and I’ve even driven on the beach’ — and I told them that’s where the problem is. I take off for that. To me, you shouldn’t be driving on beaches.

Sea-level rise. I call it the dipstick of climate change.

My favorite show as a child was ‘Sea Hunt,’ starring Lloyd Bridges. I would hurry home from school to watch it when it came on at 4 p.m. I just loved that show. It taught me a whole lot about the ocean, the power of the ocean, the power of hurricanes.

This past year, I ranked Siesta Beach in Sarasota as the No. 1 beach. Within the first couple of days, Siesta Beach got almost 600 million media hits.

People say: ‘Oh you can’t be Dr. Beach. You ought to be tanner.’ And I say: ‘Look, if I didn’t use sunscreen, my face and body would look like my name — Leatherman.’ I’d look like baked leather. I use a lot of sunscreen — 40 or 50 SPF. I always have that on me.

I didn’t mind when my students called me Dr. Beach. I’m not a stuffed shirt.

South Florida, particularly Miami, you can hardly get around anymore because of the traffic. I don’t go to a lot of events downtown because the streets are clogged.

In 1989, I got a call from a magazine, saying they heard I was the beach expert, the beach professor, and they wanted to talk to me about the best beaches. I had never thought of it that way, but I

rattled off the best beaches I’d seen and didn’t think much about it. A few months later, I saw this glossy magazine in the mailbox. Within hours, the phone started ringing off the hook. That’s how it started.

I go to a beach incognito. I have a clipboard. I have all my instruments with me. I have a backpack with all my gear. I measure the width of the beach. I measure the clarity of the water. I definitely go swimming, because that’s part of it. I have all this data, and I’ve developed criteria, but what it really comes down to is clean sand and clean water.

If you get into a rip current, swim sideways. Don’t swim against the current. Natural instinct is to swim against the current, but that’ll tire you out, and most people aren’t going to make it.

I like to play tennis — and that’s not related to beaches.

I really have a pet peeve with cigarette butts. Cigarette butts are the No. 1 form of littering on beaches. In terms of volume, it’s certainly plastics, and I have a real problem with plastics, too, but smokers think beaches are like some giant ashtray or something. I’ve been talking to Gov. Rick Scott about trying to pass some sort of law to ban smoking from state beaches. I’ve counted as many as 10 cigarette butts in one square meter of beach. Can you imagine? That’s awful.

We have saltwater in our bodies. I think that’s why we’re attracted to get in the saltwater. It’s a primordial urge. 