We shall Fight on the Seas and the Oceans... We shall
Commodification, Localism and Violence

- Paul Scott
- Respond To This Article

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Liquidate the entire rapacious monstrosity that is the global surf industry. Eradicate the
gloating, insolent, overfed, carrion-feeding surf media altogether. Destroy the overweening,
insidious and growing attraction that surf fashion is for common landlubbers. Dismantle,
annihilate and devastate the whole swelling, putrescent edifice of surfing once and for all.
There are too many people in the water and all I want to do is go surfing with my mates
goddammit (Breuchie 26).

1 Nick Breuchie’s letter to Tracks reflects an individual’s fight against the popularity of surfing, a popularity
that he sees manifested in crowded surf line-ups boosted by the images and rhetoric found in surfing
magazines. Beyond surfing magazines, surfing is currently enjoying an ultra-hip status in the world of
popular culture: Hollywood has recently reinvigorated the surf movie genre that started with Gidget through
putting “chicks on sticks in flicks” in the surfploitation film Blue Crush; surfing scenes open the most recent
James Bond film, Die Another Day. Surf fashion is seemingly ubiquitous among youth and their baby
boomer parents, and the global surf industry is worth “at least $US7.4bn,” most of which is generated
through sales of apparel (Gliddon 20). No longer is surfing for youth; now it is about youth.

2 Most importantly for Breuchie and others like him, surfing saturation in popular culture has resulted in
more than an excess of representation: it has resulted in an excess of participation. For the “original”
members of surfing subcultures, surfing has simply become too crowded, resulting in a frustration that is too
often being expressed in aggressive behaviour and surf rage. From any point of view, it is clear that surfing
has become so popular that it is increasingly difficult to find a non-remote surf break that is not
overcrowded. Carrol claims in The Association of Surfing Professionals Media Guide and Statistics Booklet
that “everybody surfs – mums, dads, sisters, four-year-old groms, 80-year-old great grandparents” (21).
3 As a result of this demand for waves, surf-travel to remote locations is experiencing massive growth and at the same time, as discussed below, intense localism is rampant. Although waves suitable for surfing in many parts of the world may be considered as a public territory where access is usually on a first-come-first-serve basis, local surfers tend to behave more dominantly at their home breaks. These surfers take what might be referred to in sporting terms as the home ground advantage.

4 Increasingly, however, waves of the ocean are not public access spaces: these surf breaks are for exclusive use by guests of resorts that have negotiated deals with governments, traditional owners or other local authorities. Surfers, frustrated by crowds at breaks in the “surf slums” in the more populated areas of the world, are increasingly prepared to pay to play in such exclusive surf resorts as those now found in the Maldives, Indonesia and Fiji. Local enforcers guard the surf breaks of these resorts and, on behalf of the resort owners, ensure that the guests maintain the privilege of the exclusivity they have paid for.

5 For a long time now, surfers at breaks around the world have been punching each other in the head while surfing magazines have been telling the world about the individuality, the brotherhood, the beauty and the spirituality of surfing as an “art,” “lifestyle,” “religion” and “sport.” One way of maintaining the perception of individualism and freedom of the surfing experience is through protecting the local break from newbies via localism: its advocates justify it as a means of keeping hierarchical law and order in a field where game rules do not officially exist.

6 Viewed anthropologically, localism can be viewed as territorialism important to the self-preservation and well-being of the clan; it can also be a unifying force that may bond communities together to invest in, develop and protect common interests. Localism is one of the defining concepts of modern surfing. The mythology of surf localism is that it exists to instill order and respect in the water and provides people with a sense of belonging. Its main function for surfing communities, however, is to exclude surfers who are not from the immediate vicinity of a surfing spot. This version of localism is characterized by a masculinized, xenophobic territorialism and a hostility to outsiders that can both unite and fracture others through threatened or actual violence: it is about policing and protecting “our” waves and is enacted in the water by dominant males who “hassle” surfers who are not part of the local tribe.

7 Surfing magazines and films often encourage the siege-like tribalism and aggressive expression of localism through advocating ‘the rights’ of local surfers: for example, the magazines will often not reveal the source location of surfing photographs “out of respect for the locals.” Blue Crush includes the apparently obligatory fight scene found in many Hollywood surfing films: locals who claim exclusivity to the surf fight the outsider—in this case, the kooky love interest of the film’s female star. The masculine aggressiveness of surfing argot that is extensively used in surfing magazines may be better suited to a misogynistic slasher movie than a sport—surfers ride thrusters, they carve, shred, slash, tear, pull out, perform re-entries, crack and rip filthy, sick pits, and request the male surf god Huey to make mother ocean pump. The language is more reflective of a fight with the waves than an expression of how to ride them for leisure and play.

8 In the “age of rage” (Agbayani) localism in surfing at its most extreme is manifested through surf rage. Cralle defines a local as “anyone who’s been there a day longer than you” while localism is “territorial defiance in defence of a surf spot.” Agbayani argues that “the activity was born in 1779 when angry Hawaiians killed Captain James Cook at Kealakekua Bay.” The current CEO and President of the Association of Surfing Professionals and former world champion surfer, Wayne Bartholomew, somewhat confusingly writes that a beating he received from locals in the winter of 1976-1977 on the North Shore of Oahu in Hawaii reminded him of Captain Cook. “I don’t know what happened to Captain Cook but the scene that confronted me on the beach always reminds me of Captain Cook” (151). Bartholomew claims his selfish behaviour in the water so affronted the Hawaiians that “I was held under water, pounded round the back of the head, then pulled up and pounded in the face. They knocked all my teeth out and just flattened my nose, I had cuts all over my eyes and lips” (151).

9 Discussing a fight with an American opponent during the 1966 world championships at San Diego, Nat Young wrote in his newspaper column: “I am afraid I lost my temper and did what most other Australians would have done—I hit him—and knocked him flat” (980). Young had his own face knocked flat after a fight with another surfer at Angourie in March 2000. Coming in from the surf, he was attacked on the beach by Michael Hutchinson, a rival longboarder, who hospitalized Young with two broken eye sockets, shattered cheekbones and destroyed sinuses. Both Young and Hutchison were locals. The incident was sparked by Young, who admitted to slapping Hutchinson’s son for “bad behaviour” while out in the surf. (In a cathartic moment, Young subsequently published a book entitled Surf Rage that told stories of the pointlessness of fighting for waves).
Beyond (but not unconnected to) localism, the increase in confrontations, aggression and fighting in the surf may also be partly attributable to the impact of technology upon surfing. Technology is having a significant influence on when and where people can go surfing. Readily available surf craft such as bodyboards and the (rediscovered) Malibu surfboard are allowing learners quick results in developing the ability to ride waves; warmer, more comfortable wetsuits are allowing year round surfing in cold water; and the leg rope allows people to fall off surfboards without having to swim to shore to retrieve rock-damaged foam and fibreglass. In addition to these technological developments, “surfcams” show surf conditions, and non-locals can look at real time conditions all over the world (see, for example http://www.coastalwatch.com, http://www.surf-news.com or http://www.baliwaves.com). These cameras are regularly vandalised to thwart the dissemination of this information to non-local surfers. Meanwhile, surf-forecasting services notify customers via mobile phone, pager or email when the conditions for surfing are good, so there is little chance of lonely surfs.

The increasing number of surfboard riders, bodyboarders, windsurfers, surf ski riders, personal watercraft and kite surfers are straining a natural resource that is open to those who can grab a surf craft and get to the beach. The use of personal watercraft in crowded breaks to provide surfers with a technological advantage is also causing uneasiness and resentment in the water, as Chronicles (2003) notes:

… I was out at Currumbin Alley the other arvo, sitting among a pack of around 50 guys and girls on shortboards, longboards and the occasional wave ski and bodyboard, when I noticed a group that wasn’t equal. With one guy driving a jet ski, four surfers were getting lifts back into the line up after every wave, doing away with the sometimes horrendous paddle-back at The Alley, which can take as long as ten or 15 minutes to get back to the line-up. After a wave, the surfer was dragged back to the top of the point by the ski. He was then dropped off a few metres from the line-up and rejoined the pack. Guys were, quite rightly, getting pissed off that they were jockeying for position on the next wave with a kid who had caught a wave not even five minutes ago. And all because one surfer could afford $12,000 or whatever it costs for a Yamaha three-seater Waverunner these days.

Factors other than technology have also increased the number of surfers in the water. Baby boomers have not retired from the sport, and specialist surfing magazines such as Australian Longboarder and The Surfers Journal cater for those surfers older than thirty-five. News articles and surfing magazines are claiming that more girls and women are taking up surfing for pleasure and personal fitness, although to what degree this has occurred is contestable. Such claims seem to originate largely from the public relations departments of surfing companies, whose worldwide sales of female board shorts have grown significantly in the past three years: it would be interesting to determine whether such sales reflect growth in female participation in the sport or female consumption of its symbolic commodities.

No longer viewed as a deviant subculture, surfing is marketed by surfing magazines as a global lifestyle that can be achieved through the consumption of global commodities. While the peak industry and surfing competition bodies continually espouse the need for the sport to grow, the remaining cottage industries creating commodities for use by surfers are being squeezed out by global corporations. Pop-out surfboards are being mass-produced in a Thailand factory to be sold in chain stores throughout the world. Non-paying surfers are excluded from “private” surf breaks, while wave pools and artificial reefs are being created to provide simulations of the “natural” surfing experience.

The frustration expressed by Breuchie in relation to the (over)popularization of surfing is being felt in oceans around the world. Additionally, individual surfers fear that the accompanying violence and fighting may result in regulation, discipline and authoritarianism. Such regulation may manifest itself via licenses, liability insurance and other restrictions, and would regulate one of the few “free” activities that remain little affected by law. But continued fighting and surf rage may provide governments with few alternatives.

Works Cited


**Links**

- [http://www.coastalwatch.com](http://www.coastalwatch.com)
- [http://www.baliwaves.com](http://www.baliwaves.com)
- [http://www.surf-news.com](http://www.surf-news.com)

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