7 Surfers and public sphere protest

Protecting surfing environments

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Introduction

The counterculture of surfing developed with the growing popularity of surfing in the 1950s and 1960s and was in part a rejection of the dominant values associated with capitalism and materialism at that time, alongside a collective desire to break away from the cultural norms associated with the beach that had been dominated by the Surf Lifesaving movement in countries such as Australia and the USA (Booth, 2001; Jaggard, 1997; Pearson, 1979). Most surfers of that era would not have expressed it in those terms, more likely preferring to describe their approach as anti-authoritarian and non-conformist. The ironic feature of the counterculture of that time (and this may still be relevant today) was that the material benefits of economic growth (time and money) in the 1950s and 1960s created the very conditions for the counterculture to develop. Since then surfing culture has changed, but despite the mainstreaming of surfing culture and the creation of a surfing industry, the core ‘anti-establishment’ projection of surfing remain and keep alive the spirit of a counterculture. The feeling of freedom on a wave, the connection with elemental forces of nature, the social experience of surfing and physically immersing one’s self in the ocean, is a potent cocktail that creates a strong emotional attachment to the places and people of surfing (Lazarow, 2010; Preston-Whyte, 2002). When these places are threatened, people respond with protest and campaigns to protect surfing environments. In this chapter we argue that surfing protest activities perform an important coalescing function that brings together the often fragmented elements of the broader surfing ‘community’. These protest activities are a form of democratic response towards political and planning decisions that pose direct threats to the resources and values that these communities value – in other words, Surfing Capital (see Lazarow, 2010: 18). Surfing Capital refers to four factors which shape the surfing experience as (1) the physical features of and surfer’s awareness of, the quality of the waves for surfing, (2) the frequency of quality waves, (3) the coastal and marine environment and (4) socio-cultural issues that are associated with coastal places.

This chapter examines the significant protest activities and public sphere campaigns surrounding resistance of surfers to the development perceived by surfers

as inappropriate within the surfing environment and actions to protect these resources. Historically, surfers have resisted development in order to maintain wave breaks as common property, ensure beach access to the coastline and limit the impact of land-based activities that effect the beach and surf break environment. They have also protested against activities that impact on the marine environment. Whilst many of these actions can be considered self-motivated, the public good features of such actions are substantial. This chapter argues that the form of protest used by surfers creates, maintains and symbolises the common property features of surfing environments and through these very actions, surfers create a legitimate platform to participate in decision making.

The chapter is organised into three sections. First, we define the surfing public sphere, protest and the enclosure and externalisation of the commons. Next, we identify types of protest events in which surfers have engaged. This is followed by a case study of public sphere action where we examine an ill-fated cruise ship development proposal on the Gold Coast, Australia). This chapter makes a contribution to sustainability and surfing knowledge through providing evidence that surfer's resistance to development is made possible by the type of public sphere action with surfing environments and thus surfing resistance can be seen as more than self-centred expressions to maintain lifestyles and hedonistic pleasure. It also identifies the growing power of surfing communities in public sphere disputes.

The surfing public sphere, protest

The origins of the term public sphere describe the rise of the bourgeois culture where public debate through the civil society contributed and influenced the decisions of government (Habermas, 1991). The public sphere is not a singular place but rather there are multiple spaces where the public can variously attempt to express matters that they consider important to society and through this, influence both the public perception as well as decision making in the political sphere (Fraser, 1990). The public sphere is often conflated with the media but is not limited to the media only. The surfing public sphere can have a physical location and applied to surfing can be the space of the waves. The joining of surfers for a paddle out in the public space of the waves for the purpose of influencing cultural values and political decisions can be considered a public sphere, especially if there is media coverage of the event.

In recent times, the development of information communication technology has expanded the public sphere. Contemporary media communications facilitate wider community engagement. The far-reaching capacity of Facebook, for example, can be considered part of the public sphere because media (and politicians) monitor social media activity as a way to gauge the sentiment of the public on a particular topic.

From the outset we should mention here the scope of this chapter predominantly examines the public sphere in developed countries because the concept of the surfing common is linked to how local communities (government) enact their

land/sea tenure systems of ‘ownership’ (Rider, 1998). Not all surf breaks are common property. For example, Fiji had a customary land tenure system in which particular people and families own, or are custodians of, certain sea areas (Ponting and O’Brien, 2013).

Protest also needs to be defined for the purpose of the chapter. Protest is defined as a direct action undertaken by surfers to resist development that degrades Surfing Capital and is an action within a campaign advocating for the maintenance of Surfing Capital. Protest events where media is involved that promote the cause of surfers or public campaigns elevate the protest into the realm of a public sphere. Similarly, a large mass protest of surfers at a rally is also the public sphere irrespective of whether media is present or not.

Enclosure of the commons and protest

Increasingly, there is recognition of the negative impacts of continued economic development which encloses or limits access to public space (commons) in the pursuit of continued economic growth (Jeffrey *et al.*, 2012; Springer, 2011). One of the drivers of economic growth is the process of including previously unallocated public land/sea (commons) within capitalist production systems (Monbiot, 1994). This process is called enclosure and the feature that enables this process is the purposeful public sphere manipulation of the value of that space by proponents so that there is little or no value of that space to society for any other purpose except for the particular outcomes of economic development (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015).

This is relevant to surfing because the process of enclosure used by the proponents of coastal developments routinely devalues surfing so as to position economic development as the only valued outcome for that coastal environment. This process has been increasingly challenged by surfers. Surfers, through their actions of surfing on the waves, have increasingly commodified the surfing common and thus, its value to society and the economy has also increased. Thus surfing through using the common, albeit in a commodified way, maintain the surfing environment in a sustainable way as opposed to coastal development which severely alters the natural environment. It should also be noted here we are not arguing that surfers who protest to maintain the common property features of coastal environments (and the quality of those environments) are in some way morally superior to others. In fact, Lazarow and Olive in this volume report that many surfers believe other types of outdoor recreation user groups have a lighter environmental footprint than surfers. The moral terrain of environmentalism is complex. Surfing complicates this further through our oft-colonial approach to communities and resources in less-developed regions of the planet; and this is reflected at an individual (i.e. the recreational surfer) level and also through the lens of the surf industry (Ponting, 2001; Ponting *et al.*, 2005).

From a resistance to enclosure perspective, surfer’s resistance to development not only is seen as a reaction to preserve nature and or maintain surfing environments but also positions surfers as performatively creating and maintaining

public interest values of coastal environments through protest in that space. By protesting in the public space of beaches and waves, the very act of protesting reaffirms public interest values of the place and common pool resources. Surfers who protest implicitly know this so it is no coincidence that one of the most common places of protest for surfers is the waves and beaches of surfing. Protest paddle outs and rallies on beaches performatively create and claim the space of the waves and beaches as a common and through media coverage of such events creates the space of the public sphere as the waves also. This is a powerful combination in terms of political advocacy for surfing as it disrupts the devaluing process or proponents who attempt to enclose the commons.

Not all protests that occur in the surfing public sphere are about protecting the commons from enclosure (protecting waves, access and marine environments). The other issue that surfers are concerned about is that the surfing common suffers from the externalities of industrial development. That is, the surfing environment used as either an overt or inadvertent dumping ground for communities linked to the coast. Protest events outlined below highlight the types of surfing protest.

Types of surfing protest and organisations

The types of protest that surfers engage with can be categorised in four ways and reflect the location and issues at hand. The four ways identified in this chapter are:

- 1 protesting against developments that impact on waves;
- 2 protesting against developments near beaches including water quality impacts;
- 3 protesting against the loss of access to surfing beaches; and
- 4 surfer protests linked to other environmental and social issues.

These four ways of protest link with the four primary elements of Surfing Capital identified by Lazarow *et al.* (2007), which are: wave quality, wave frequency, environmental matters and socio-cultural issues. When surfers identify elements of Surfing Capital are significantly threatened then protest (and advocacy) is the likely result. Three tables are presented to show three types of protest: protest over development impacts on waves, protest over developments near beaches including impacts on water quality and protest over issues of access to waves. Surfer protests linked to other environmental and social issues will be discussed following this. The tables are simply indicative of where surfing communities have engaged in direct protests as part of a broader advocacy campaign.¹ An indicative list of examples of where direct action protests have been used as part of more substantial public advocacy campaigns is provided in Table 7.1. The documentation of these protests below in such an abbreviated way underrepresent the years of effort many people have invested in the campaigns associated with the protests documented here.

Table 7.1 Protest against developments impacting on waves

Year	Location	Direct action protest details
2015	La Pampilla beach, Peru	Surfers and police clash over road expansion project which will impact on the quality of a point break
2014–2015	Montauk, NY, USA	Proposed geotextile seawall at Montauk Beach halted. Direct action includes civil disobedience and paddle outs
2014	Kirra, Gold Coast, Australia	Proposal for cruise ship terminal development. The project was scrapped as a result of a public protest rally and (planned) paddle out. (Surf conditions stopped planned paddle out)
2004–2013	Mallacoota, Victoria, Australia	Proposed harbour development across surf-break. Numerous protests during the campaign
2011	Aramoana, Dunedin, New Zealand	Paddle out as protest action over dredge spoil impacting waves and beach quality
2007	Asturia, Spain	Surfers hold protest rally over Rodiles dredging project
2006	São Miguel in the Azores, Portugal	A series of protests over a number of port developments in this region
2005	Dana Point, CA, USA	Protest against seawall proposal in 2005 and success for surfers in 2012 (there was also access issues and protest in 2009)
2004	La Herradura, Peru	Developers agreed to scrap a marina proposal
2001	Lugar de baixo, Madeira, Portugal	Public rally as part of campaign to halt jetty construction that had adverse impact waves

Across cultures and countries, the use of direct action protest has been a common tactic deployed by surfing communities and activists to draw attention to their issues. The spectacle of paddle outs and the use of surfboards and wetsuits as props have been particularly effective in gaining media attention, especially away from the beach (e.g. in city centres or outside parliamentary buildings). Increasingly activists understand the linkage between political opportunities of staged contentious performance and media uptake of the logic of their protesters' campaign (Cammaerts, 2012).

Successful protesting needs the effective organisation of people. A number of surfing non-governmental organisations (NGO)/community groups found their genesis in the continued interest from surfers in the wake of early advocacy campaigns and protests, for example, Surfrider Foundation and Save the Waves Coalition. These organisations have developed in response to localised protest events and campaigns and now mobilise behind local surfing communities in campaigns to promote the effective management of wave resources as part of a broader ecologically sustainable development charter. The World Surfing Reserve campaign is a reaction to proactively circumvent inappropriate development of the surfing environment.

The UK-based Surfers Against Sewerage is another successful surfing NGO that campaigns against coastal development impacting on waves. However, the

original protests which kick-started the organisation targeted the water quality impacts of nearshore sewerage outfall near the coastal towns of St Agnes and Porthtowan in Cornwall, England. Table 7.2 provides an indicative set of examples of where surfing communities have protested against developments near beaches including water quality impacts.

The key theme running through this type of protest is that surfers experience first-hand the impacts of industrial development on their bodies. As a the first protest by surfers against sewerage in Cornwall, England attests, snorkelling gear may be needed to protect one's self when surfing in those places. To go surfing in the sea where there is direct sewerage outfall should necessitate protective clothing and demonstrating this through a protest event makes for a 'potent' media spectacle.

Protests against developments impacting on water quality are not only about maintaining surfing amenity but also have a greater purpose for protecting the nature of the surfing environment as part of the common pool of resources. Similar to the protests by surfers who opposed developments impacting directly on waves, protesting using paddle outs clearly symbolises that the public sphere of surfing is actually the waves themselves. The third type of protest that we examine relates to accessing the surfing common (see Table 7.3).

Access to the common property of waves is another issue that prompts surfers to protest to maintain their access rights. Access is critical to common property. Many countries have a system of land tenure where beaches can be private property and as such this can create access problems for surfers. Where beaches are common property and owned by the state there can still be access issues in that road and pathways access can be limited by private property adjoining the beach, for example, The Ranch in California.

The fourth protest type identified was that surfers link their protest with other environmental and social issues. Issues such as climate change, dolphin and whale harvesting, plastic pollution are issues that resonate strongly with surfing interests groups. Although this is difficult to evidence, in our opinion the level of protest by surfers is somewhat less than the other three types but in terms of campaigns these issues are receiving growing attention from surfing organisations in recent years.

Table 7.2 Protest against developments near beaches including water quality impact

<i>Year</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Direct action protest details</i>
2011	Pavones, Costa Rica	Tuna fish farm pollution protest
2009	Long Beach, CA, USA	Surfers protest against liquefied natural gas plant near long beach
2007	Hawai'i, USA	Surfing demonstrators protest Hawai'i ferry
2008–2010	Jeffrey's Bay, South Africa	Nuclear power plant construction proposed – protest with other groups
1990	England	Surfers against sewerage protest

Table 7.3 Protest against loss of access to surfing beaches

Year	Location	Direct action protest details
2013	Thanburudhoo, Maldives	Privatisation threat to surf breaks on islands instigates protests from locals and expatriates. Only people staying on the islands would be able to surf.
2012	Martin's Beach, CA, USA	Surfrider Foundation organises protests over access to beach
2009	Broadbench, England	350 surfers engage in paddle out to protest closure of beach access
2006	Trestles, CA, USA	Toll road proposed, which would restrict beach access and impact sediment and substrate supply to the nearshore, and subsequent protest organised
2006	Playa Encuentro, Dominican Republic	Public campaign to stop privatisation of beach and access problems
1997–2005	Asbury Park, NJ, USA	The campaign to permit surfing at beaches and remove beach entry fee was successful. Significant advocacy but no direct action protests

Gold Coast surfing protests

A number of changes in the world of surfing and the societies in which surfing occurs have produced a defined surfing public sphere in various countries, particularly in places that are deemed surfing hotspots. These changes contribute to the growing force of surfing and give weight to protest actions that were once considered protest actions of people on the fringe of societies. A case of surfers protesting against a cruise ship terminal on the Gold Coast, Queensland is explored below to examine the features that now make surfing more powerful in the public sphere.

The Gold Coast is home to a number of world-class point break waves within its 40km of urbanised open beaches, all of which produce surfable waves. It is conservatively estimated that of the 12–14 per cent of Gold Coast residents (i.e. approximately 65,000) participate in surfing. Additionally, it is estimated that around 30 per cent of surfing effort on the Gold Coast can be attributed to non-residents (Lazarow, 2010). Surfing is one of the iconic tourism images promoted by the local tourism industry destination management body: Tourism Gold Coast. Surfing is not only important for local residents who surf but the local tourism industry, which relies on positive images of the Gold Coast as a surfing destination.

Local residents have been actively campaigning to protect surfing breaks and the surfing environment since the early 1970s. Table 7.4 describes the most significant campaigns to protect Surfing Capital on the Gold Coast.

The one issue that dominates the protest public sphere on the Gold Coast is cruise ship port development. Over the past 30 years, there have been repeated attempts to build cruise ship ports at various headlands and river entrances on

Table 7.4 List of issues where surfers have protested against development impacting on surfing environments

Year	List of surfing protests on the Gold Coast, Australia
1972	Original Kirra Groyne was protested by Bill Stafford the head of Surfing Queensland at the Coolangatta Chamber of Commerce Meeting
1973	Protests by Surfing Queensland against the Currumbin Creek rock walls
1980s	Casino and cruise ship terminal for Currumbin Creek
1980s	Marina proposal at Kirra Point
2004–2005	Palm Beach Protection Strategy, inclusive of artificial reefs
2005–2006	The cruise ship terminal at The Spit in 2005
2014	Kirra cruise ship terminal
2015	Cruise ship terminal, The Spit

the Gold Coast, most recently in 2014 and 2015. If approved both proposals were perceived to negatively impact on surfing conditions in those areas, amongst an array of more and less significant impacts. Of course, there is always the likelihood that new or augmented surfing conditions might be a by-product of the proposed developments. But at what price the risk? The purpose of the following analysis is to highlight which features of the public sphere actions were important in the emerging legitimacy of surfers protest actions.

The first feature that was important was the organising capacity of surfing groups and related groups to mobilise large numbers of people to protest. Through surfers' online networks the groups managed to organise over 2,500 people to protest on 19 January 2014 in opposition to the proposal at Kirra. The Save Our Southern Beaches Alliance used Facebook pages to link with other groups and individuals to publicise the event. Given the history of similar proposals and the ongoing 'Bring Back Kirra' campaign, there was already a network of people who could organise and mobilise the protest.

The second feature identified was the growing economic importance of surfing, and the economic values of waves have meant that surfing had gained standing in government and bureaucratic decision-making processes. A number of reports had identified the economic value of surfing on the Gold Coast (AECgroup, 2009; Lazarow, 2009; Lazarow *et al.*, 2008b). There were also a growing number of surf economic studies examining total economic value (see Costanza *et al.*, 1997 for a description of TEV; Lazarow *et al.*, 2013) and putting a price on surfing (Bicudo and Horta, 2009; Chapman and Hanemann, 2001; Durham and Driscoll, 2010; Lazarow, 2010; Lazarow *et al.*, 2007, 2008a; Nelsen *et al.*, 2007; Raybould and Lazarow, 2009). A central facet of many of the surf economic studies has been a view that monetising the surfing experience provides the surfing community with an important weapon alongside the cultural and physical values, to combat the proponents of inappropriate development. The use of economic arguments, one might argue, has somewhat entrenched the commodification of wave resources, but in reality, this has simply drawn out what many have known for some time – that is, that surfing resources underpin

the economic development of many towns, cities and regions, and, of course, the global surfing industry. The growing research in this area gives weight to the economic argument.

The third feature that led to the effective public sphere action is concerned with the relationship between surfing culture and protest. Surfing culture has media appeal and, therefore, surfing protest issues can be readily taken up by media outlets because the protesters have been legitimised in the mainstream culture in Australia. Notable professional surfers who have had media attention because of their success in the World Surfing League added their voice to the protests. For example, Mick Fanning made a series of strong statements against the Kirra proposal and also did not shy away from defending himself against the remarks of the mayor of the Gold Coast over Mick's involvement in the campaign. Also not always apparent in the public eye is that people who are surfers are now also part of the political establishment and also part of the administrative sphere of government. Thus, there are sympathetic allies involved in public policy decision-making processes.

The last important feature we have identified concerns government elections and surfing. As a result of the growing popularity of surfing, surfers represent an important interest group from an electioneering perspective of political candidates. At the time of the 2014 Kirra protest, there was a looming state election (there are three levels of government in Australia – local, state and federal) and the political parties attempted to align themselves with surfers and their interests in order to secure surfers' votes. This theme has repeated itself over the past few state elections, even to the point where Conservative Party supporters donned 'Save Kirra' T-shirts at the manned election stations to hand out how-to-vote cards in the 2009 elections. The electoral seat where the cruise ship was proposed was a safe seat held by a member of the ruling Conservative Party prior to the 2014 election. The decision not to proceed with the terminal at Kirra was decided by the state government and the decision could be seen as a way of ensuring the safe seat would be secured for the incumbent Conservative Party during the next election. Interestingly, a decision by the then Labor government in 2006 to overturn their own earlier proposal for a cruise ship terminal in the Gold Coast Seaway did not bring them much closer to winning the seat.

Concluding comments

This chapter has outlined the ways in which surfers protest, and argued that the form of protest (and advocacy) used by surfers creates, maintains and symbolises the common property features of surfing environments and through these very actions, surfers create a legitimate platform to participate in decision making. Most surfing protest and public campaigns can be viewed as resistance to the enclosure of the commons by inappropriate development. This feature of protest in the public sphere was highlighted in a short case study of protest against a cruise ship terminal on the Gold Coast. Surfing protests also centred on externalities of industrial development and conservation of the marine

environment. The concept of Surfing Capital helped explain why surfers would protest against a certain issue.

Our analysis from examining the case study and the types of recent advocacy and protest events outlined above is that the success of public sphere action is due to a number of factors. First, the organising capacity of surfing groups facilitated through surfers' online networks has increased in sophistication. Second, the growing economic importance of surfing and the values of waves have meant that surfing has gained standing in bureaucratic decision-making processes. Third, surfing culture has media appeal and, therefore, surfing protest issues are taken up by media outlets because the protests are from a group that have been legitimised in the mainstream culture. Last, the growing popularity of surfing means that surfers count in local democratic elections and thus surfing issues are on the political agenda. These issues resonate strongly with earlier work by Lazarow (2010)

The features of surfing protest highlight the growing power and influence of surfing activism in the public policy decisions affecting our coasts. The development of coasts throughout the world will most likely continue but from a surfing activism perspective, the likelihood of successful campaigns to preserve surfing and coastal environmental assets and values is higher given the rise of surfing advocacy.

Notes

- 1 For a geographical overview of recent protests and threatened waves please refer to organisations such as Surfrider Foundation and Save the Waves for information about the location and details of campaigns.
- 2 For an overview the history of the dispute please see the relevant websites of the interest groups: Save Our Sothern Beaches and Save Our Spit.

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