



# The Surfing Community in Bocas

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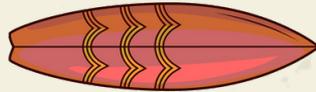
**1**

**Introduction**



**2**

**Literature  
Review**



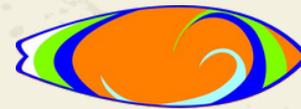
**3**

**Methods**



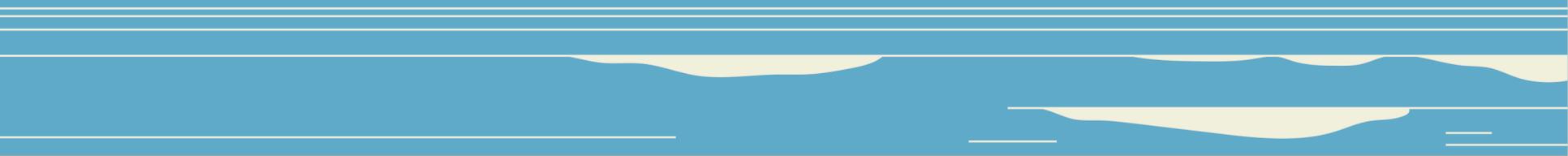
**4**

**Results**



**5**

**Conclusion  
and  
Discussion**



# Introduction



# Bocas del Toro, Panama

- Archipelago on the Caribbeanside of Panamahometoworld class surf breaks
- Local population of 13,000 residents (Bocas del Toro Panama Properties, 2024)
- Popular tourist destination attracting visitors for its beautiful beaches and dynamic party culture
- Tourism is the dominant economy of Bocas del Toro attracting an estimated 225,000 visitors annually (Bourque, 2016, Pleasant & Spalding, 2021)
- Increasing tourist visitation in Bocas Del Toro has resulted in an increase of public infrastructure and development projects



# Surf Tourism in Bocas

- **Estimated number of annual surf tourists:** 22,500- 67,500 (Surfonomics presentation, 2023)
- **Total estimated contribution to Bocas annual economy:** \$36,606,938- \$109,813,725 (Surfonomics presentation, 2023)
- The tourism industry is shaped by surf tourists as one local explains:  
“High season here is because surfing, not anything else.. low season, many many businesses close... So basically here, **everything is moved by surfing.**”
- Surf tourism in Bocas is growing rapidly, which is causing over visitation to surf resources (Mach, 2021).
- Bocas is gaining attention from professional surfers, likely driving a growing influx of surf tourists to the archipelago.

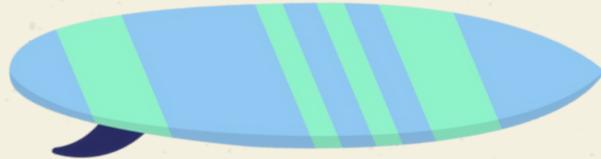


# Surf Break Vulnerability

- Minimal protectionsofBocassurfecosystemsare established
- The proximity of development projects to the surf breaks could cause environmental degradation and potentially threaten the future surf tourism in Bocas.
- Factors of surf breaks that are existentially threatened by climate change: **constrained beaches, low tidal range and reef breaks** (Sadrpour and Reineman, 2023).
- Majority of surf breaks in Bocas exist at (and because of) coral reefs which are uniquely vulnerable to climate change (Sadrpour and Reineman, 2023).



# Literature review



# The relationship between surfers and coastal environments

## Campbell and Orchard (2023)

- Surfers' knowledge is specific to **location**, and is shaped by **personal experiences**, **social influences**, and **environmental factors**.  
Socio-cultural factors such as **localism**, **accessibility**, **gender biases**, and **equipment preferences** influence individual motivations.
- Surfers' local knowledge should be integrated into coastal resource management.
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# Defining the term Localism

Beaumont and Brown (2016)

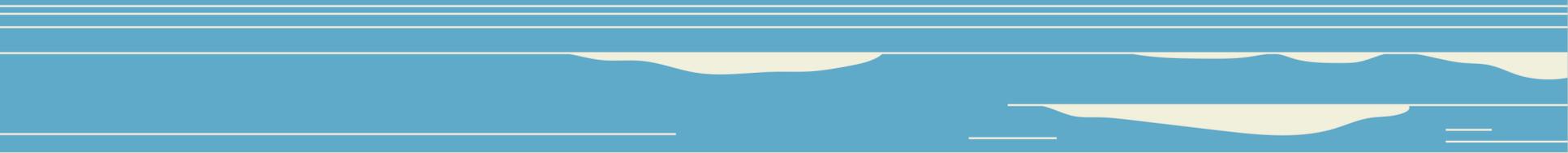


- Surfers had a **strong connection to location**, an attachment to the **local surf break**, along with a strong attachment to **their surfing community**
- Localism **changes based on context**





# Frameworks



# Individual-Community-Place

Goran Erfani (2022)



- **Individual**, the attachment to place
- **Community**, the collective experiences and social interactions in a place
- **Place**, the physical attributes that shape identity.

# Sense of Community

## McMillan and Chavis (1986)

- **Membership**, the sense of connection and shared personal affiliation
- **Reinforcement**, the needs of individuals being met by their membership
- **Influence**, the sense of purpose
- **Shared emotional connection**, the shared commitment and belief between members in addition to the sharing of history, places, and experiences



# Methods



# Sample Location

BocasdelToro, Panamá

- ~13,000 residents
- Sampling was completed at five breaks around the island:

- Paunch
- Tiger Tails
- La Punta
- Black Rock
- Wizzard



# Sample Methods

- Open interviews with individuals that live in the Bocas del Toro archipelago, specifically who were born here.
- Three subsections within the interviews;



- Opening general community/culture (Erfani, G., 2022)
- Identity and history ((McMillan and Chavis, 1986)
- Surf break environment and sustainability. (McMillan and Chavis, 1986), (Erfani, G., 2022)



# Results

Quotes have been edited for clarity when presenting the results in the next slides. We worked hard to ensure their ideas were conserved.



# Demographics

Length time surfing

	WorkinSurfindustry (y/n)	Gender	Born in Bocas	Favorite Break
20	Y	Male	N	Carenero
3	N	Male	Y	Paunch
3	N	Male	N	Paunch
9	N	Male	N	Black Rock
18	Y	Male	Y	Carenaro
18	N	Female	N	Paunch
12	Y	Male	Y	Dumpers
22	N	Male	N	Paunch
4	N	Male	N	La Punta
34	Y	Male	N	La Punta
4	N	Male	N	Paunch
25	Y	Male	N	La Punta
5	Y	Female	N	Black Rock
25	Y	Male	N	Paunch
3	N	Female	N	Paunch

# Common Word Use

Respect: 11/15 Interviewees

Community: 15/15

Welcoming: 6/15

Money: 6/15

Climate change: 4/15

**RESPECT**

56 times

**Community**

64 times

**Climate  
change**

4 times

**Money**

17 times

**Welcoming**

7 times



# General Community and Culture

# General Description of Community

“I think it is generally a community, but at the same time there's different types of surfers and groups of surfers, and I think that's got a lot to do with where you come from, how old you are, how experienced you are and which breaks you surf. Yeah. So at the end of the day, a surfer will always be friends with a surfer in Bocas, but how close you are actually probably depends on all those factors that I listed.”

“A nice, happy surf community, not to say tightly knit, but everybody respects each other, and it depends on where you surf the most. Smaller local surf community at Carenero, bigger surf community over at Paunch”



# A Tale of Two Breaks

There is a different “vibe” and community between the breaks on Bocas, particularly Paunch and Carenero. When asked about the surf community in Bocas, one interviewee mentioned the difference.

“I hear many stories about **people fighting over waves at Paunch**. It's not like that here in Carenero. The **people here are nice.**”

This could have to do with the larger number of tourists and gringos surfing at Paunch due to easier access by quad or bike, leading to a higher need to compete for a wave. Paunch also offers restaurants and relaxing places to be between surfs, offering a more comfortable trip.

Many local surfers also seemed to belong to breaks that were located closer to them, especially if they live on Carenero vs Bocas Town.



# History and Identity

# Locality and What Defines a Local Surfer

In Bocas del Toro, the concept of a "local surfer" is not fixed or universally agreed upon. As one community member put it:

"I don't think there's **one definitive line** of what a local is."

Locality can be earned through time on the islands, consistency, community involvement, and most importantly **respect**.

"This is a real, complex question, and I would like to put it this way. Of course, **the local person is a person who was born here**. And there's the **foreigners that settle here**... some get involved and live here **through the dry and rainy seasons**. And obviously these people are **just like us**, they're from here."

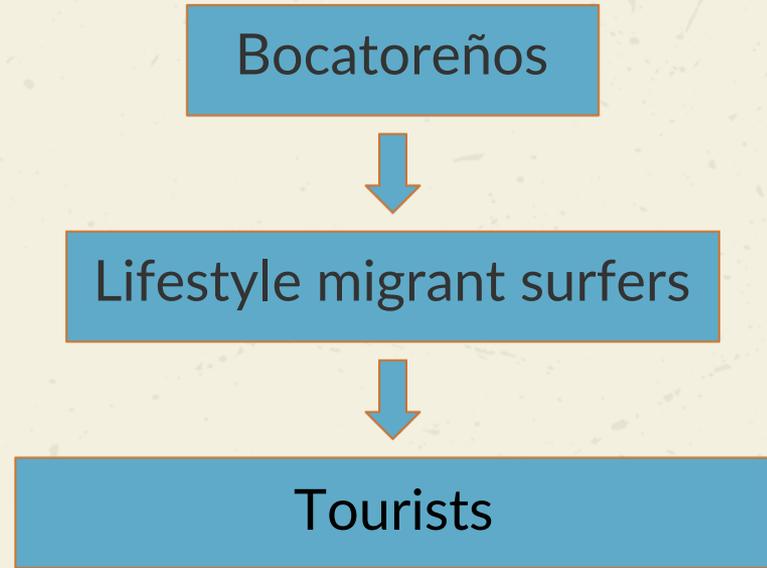


# Relationships within the Surfing Hierarchy

Localsurfers, long-time expats, young travelers, and beginners.

- Children of expats and local kids have a good relationship.
- “...the kids have a very nice relationship, it’s excellent”

“You are a gringo or whatever. You don't kind of come and like, ‘Eh, this is my wave. I have ten years surfing here’. Shut the fuck up,”



# Experience Level Conflicts at Breaks

Surf tourists and surf lessons place not only an annoyance on locals, but also a risk.

“Every time I crash, it's...somebody running over someone's cord getting stitches or whatever, and it's like, bro, come on. Once again, you're putting yourself there. And I know that you want to challenge yourself ...But there's a whole other break to go to...which is a lot easier.”

This, in addition to crowded waves, has a large impact on the local surfers experience in Bocas.



# Marginalization of Women in the Water

The general consensus from the women surfers we interviewed is that although they are accepted into the community, they are not particularly respected.

“I think it's more like an **inherent assumption** that the women can't surf that well.”

“As a woman, you're just **assumed to not be that good** at surfing.”

A local surf group has recently been including local girls, a change that is benefitting the amount of women and girls in the Bocas surf community.

“...like to surf bigger waves and I **feel like I always have to kind of prove myself right off the bat** that I'm actually gonna go and that I belong there, and I think that's something women surfers feel a lot.”

“Our group is growing with the local girls now...there is a lot of religion things here. And in the beginning it wasn't easy to put the local girls into the group because in this religion, **they wear like long skirts and long shirts, so to put a bikini on this girl was not acceptable.**”



# Environment and Sustainability



# Climate Change = Less Surf

Changes in the wind, as well as sea level rise, can have a negative impact on surf breaks as some waves are reliant on certain winds for formation.

“The wind changes. Yeah. **They've messed up with the waves...** We should have had way more dry sunny days, way more clean glassy waves than we did.”

“I definitely noticed things like the sea level rising. I mean, **there's beaches that were here when I moved here that are not here anymore.**”

Additionally, surfing offers a free community activity in an area that is rapidly becoming more expensive due to tourism and gentrification. Without it, local surfers may fall into the party culture of Bocas.

“If you have like two weeks of flat days, you can't surf, then that drives people into **unhealthy lifestyles**, because surfers, when they can't surf, they go drink. And so it's kind of bad for physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, and financial wellbeing.”



# Less Surf = Less Tourism



Surf tourism plays a central role in the economy and culture of Bocas del Toro, and if climate change lessens the swell, a large economic contributor will be lost.

“This surf community—Bocas—is impacted by surf tourism... **It feeds the community:** the surf shop, the instructors, a lot of the surfers are also surf tour guides. So, it's really important that we've got surfers in here. Tourism in general, but surfers for sure.”



# Unsustainability of Increased Tourism

Tourism has some severe negative environmental impacts which can impact the surf breaks.

“I know they need **boat moorings** in Carenero to avoid all the anchor damage being thrown over there.”

In addition, the increase in infrastructure, particularly the road construction extending past Skullys, can have negative impacts. Erosion, sewage runoff, and destruction of the breaks could occur to Paunch or Bluff, just like they did at Tuna. This break was deteriorated through the road construction. One local surfer expresses fear at this possibility;

“The wave next to tuna was my favorite wave as a kid. Me and my best friend used to have, a group before and called ourselves the tuna crew. This place had the main changes, I would say because the ongoing tides or sea level. Plus **mainly, they built something with rocks for the street not to fall apart**”



# What If?

Many surfers reported that the current number of surf tourists was acceptable, but multiple stated their main fear for the future of surfing in Bocas was it becoming too much. This could increase tensions between locals and tourists, driving a wedge within the surf community in Bocas.

“No, **not yet**. I do think we're getting close to too many but there's room.”

In addition, construction projects, such as the **Paunch Village & Surfer House**, are going to bring in even more tourists that may take the number past a sustainable level.



# Surfonomics



# Surfonomics: Daily Direct Expenditures

Expense per day	Amount	Percent
Nightly Accommodation	\$83.20	48.5%
Transport	\$29.63	17.3%
Food and Alcohol	\$42.00	24.5%
Surf Expenses	\$4.00	2.3%
Misc.	\$12.67	7.4%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$171.50</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

N= 14

# Annual Economic Contribution

# of Annual Tourists	# of Surf Tourists	Average Length of Stay (Median)	Average Daily Expenditures	Annual Contribution to Bocas Economy
225,000	Low 22,500 (10%)	11.77 Days	\$171.50	<b>\$45,417,488.00</b>
225,000	High 67,500 (30%)	11.77 Days	\$171.50	<b>\$136,252,663.00</b>

# Results Comparison

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## Spring2024

- Average Length of Stay = 10.5 Days
- Average Expenditure Per Day = \$154.54

**Total Annual Contribution (Optimistic)**

**\$109,813,725**

## Spring2025

- Average Length of Stay = 11.77 Days
- Average Expenditure Per Day = \$171.50

**Total Annual Contribution (Optimistic)**

**\$136,252,633**

# Discussion/Conclusion



# Making Space for Female Surfers

- There seemed to be a general consensus that gender plays a role in respect in the community, and there is a lack of women in the Bocas surf community. Organizing more options for surf groups for women in Bocas, specifically with young girls, seems like it would benefit the community.
  - “...surf-breaks indoctrinate particular form of expression and often exclude women and other minorities” (Mach, 2019).
- This idea of creating space for female surfers has been studied in Southern California, where the author focused on coping mechanisms and strategies to combat this marginalization.
  - “Creating separate spaces is a source of empowerment for women in masculinized spaces”, (Comley, 2016).



# Locals as Environmental Stewards

It was a general theme that surf tourism was almost at its limit and that tourists do not always follow the proper etiquette. With this in mind,

- Because surf tourism provides jobs, it would be beneficial to have locals trained in giving lessons, in addition to providing information for where tourists should go
- Additionally, it would be beneficial to have an organization of local surfers at the different breaks that control growth and protect the wave and its environment.

These concepts can be found in a framework developed by O'Brien and Pointing (2013) that shares the idea of community-based surf tourism governance

“Everyone wants to go to the main peak, but in the end it just becomes a mess. And **I just wish everyone would be realistically aware of their skill.**”



# Shared Concerns Between Breaks ...Threats but

## PAUNCH

Expresses difficulties for the  
**Concern of unequal benefits:** Surf tourists and foreign-owned businesses profit from the breaks without supporting the local communities.

## CARENERO

Growing concern among locals about **exploitative** use of the break:

“If you use this break for your business or for your people, do something as well for the for the community”

community to regulate development:

“when there is money behind, there's nothing we can do”

**Concern of environmental degradation** of the fragile coastal ecosystems and threatening the long-term sustainability of the surf breaks.

Lack of **boat moorings** contribute to reef damage.

- Too many boats = overcrowding in the break.

“The reef is suffering right now...I think bringing so many boats into the lineup is not good”

**Ongoing infrastructure** development, especially road construction tied to resort expansion

“it's the worst idea for the for the animals, for the for **the nature** , is gonna be the worst...**they are going to suffer**”



# The Future: What Will Come Next?

- The Bocas surf community is changing; the definition of a local surfer is becoming more and more complex with the addition of lifestyle migrants, long-term residents, and even children of expats who were born on the island. Surfers are expressing concern with the possibility
- of waves becoming too crowded, etiquette being lost, and the respect for the local surfers fading if tourism surpasses its limits. Climate change, construction, and human exploitation are all impacting the surf breaks in Bocas, particularly at Carenero. A community, local led change is necessary to ensure that the Bocas surf scene does not begin to fade away as our ocean struggles to survive.



“Do it now. Because tomorrow, it may be too late. And that's not a nice feeling to live by, you know. I like doing things for tomorrow, to make sure things are gonna be better. We don't know what happens tomorrow.

So namaste, motherfucker. I'll end the project like that.”

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