Cornell, Hennegan, Leavitt, Reynolds, Yankee

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Abstract

In this paper, the concept of the surfing community and personal identity in Bocas del Toro is investigated by exploring what surfing means to the people who live in Bocas del Toro. This study was conducted using open interviews to gain an understanding of (i) community and culture, (ii) identity and history of surfing, and (iii) surf break environment and sustainability. It was found that the main adjective that was used to describe the community was welcoming, while the most important factors that locals mentioned in relation to surf tourism in the community was respect. Additionally, the respondents identified different communities between different breaks, defined a local in many different ways, discussed environmental factors that affect the surf break including, sea level rise, and climate change, and voiced concern for how tourism and the creation of the road has also affected the surf community in both positive and negative ways. The women respondents in this study also shared a feeling of marginalization in the water. The research done here can inform on the surf community in Bocas del Toro, while also providing context for future research.

Introduction

Bocas del Toro, a Panamanian archipelago on the Caribbean coast, has become a globally recognized destination for both domestic and international surfers. Interview data suggests that surf tourism began to accelerate in 2009, following the release of a Red Bull video featuring professional surfers Julian Wilson, Ian Walsh, and Jamie O'Brien surfing and praising several of

the area's reef and beach breaks (Mach, 2019). Since then, the surf scene in Bocas has grown rapidly, accompanied by a rise in tourism, development, and shifting community dynamics.

Globally, surf tourism is estimated to generate approximately US$65 billion per year, representing as much as 17% of all coastal and marine tourism (Mach & Ponting, 2021). While it is unclear exactly what proportion of Panama's tourism industry is surf-related, research suggests that surfing was one of the first tourism sectors to return in Bocas following the COVID-19 pandemic and it has since grown rapidly, leading to stress on local surf resources (Mach, 2021). According to a 2023 Surfonomics study, Bocas del Toro now receives an estimated 22,500 to 67,500 surf tourists annually, contributing between $36.6 million and $109.8 million to the local economy. However, this growth is accompanied by complex social and ecological challenges (Bocas Breeze, 2023).

Tourism growth beyond ecological and social capacity often results in more harm than benefit. Studies show that overcrowded, poorly regulated tourism leads to the over-consumption of natural resources, degradation of service quality, and rising waste and pollution levels. These pressures can cause biodiversity loss, erosion, and a breakdown of both natural and cultural systems (Kostić et al., 2016; Shaheen et al., 2019; Andlib & Salcedo-Castro, 2021). Unmanaged surf tourism can have significant impacts on remote coastal communities. For instance, in Indonesia's Mentawai Islands, the rapid development of tourism infrastructure has resulted in environmental degradation, including beach erosion, reduced water quality, and strain on natural resources (Awaliya, 2024). Socially, surf tourism has contributed to cultural disruption and unequal distribution of economic benefits, particularly when foreign investors profit more than local communities (Awaliya, 2024).

Surf tourism is highly dependent on the quality and consistency of waves, as well as the supporting infrastructure in coastal locations (Awaliya, 2024). As surf towns develop infrastructure to support the increasing demands of surf tourism, surfing ecosystems can be negatively impacted by construction and pollution (McGregor, 2017). As part of wider ecosystems, surf breaks rely on delicate reefs and tide structures, as well as an array of environmental and social factors to attract surf tourists (Manero, 2023). Surf breaks in Bocas are particularly sensitive to environmental pressures due to their dependence on coral reefs, tidal range, and nearshore dynamics (Sadrpour & Reineman, 2023). In Bocas del Toro, road construction and other development projects, especially along the coastline near surf breaks like Paunch and Bluff, pose serious risks, including erosion, sewage runoff, and physical damage to reef structures that form the basis of local surf ecosystems. These impacts threaten their capacity to provide the surfing experience that draws in significant amounts of tourists and revenue.

Despite these risks, Bocas del Toro currently has minimal protections in place for its surf ecosystems. Many development projects are located dangerously close to surf breaks, posing long-term threats to both environmental health and the sustainability of surf tourism in the archipelago.

As Bocas del Toro continues to grow in popularity, it becomes increasingly important to explore how local identities, livelihoods, and communities are shaped by and through surfing. It is also essential to consider how the growing attraction of the area may potentially contribute to foreign dominance of surf spaces, environmental degradation, and the marginalization of local voices.

This project centers local perspectives, voices often left out of dominant narratives surrounding surf culture and studies. It explores how concepts of locality and belonging are defined and

expressed within Bocas' surf community. Drawing on interviews with 15 surfers across Isla Colón and Isla Carenero, this research seeks to understand how surfing connects to personal identity and community formation. As Beaumont and Brown (2014) argue, established insider surfers often see their local breaks as more than just geographic locations—they are spaces of *communitas*, where shared experience and identity form the backbone of a surf-centered way of life. Bennett (2004) similarly notes that being a "local surfer" implies both an emotional and physical attachment to a specific coastline, often grounded in birthplace or long-term residence. Localism, understood this way, is grounded not only in territoriality, but in emotional attachment, shared history, and cultural continuity.

Based in community-based frameworks, this research investigates what surfing means to the people who live in Bocas del Toro. It seeks to understand how local surfers define themselves, build and understand community, and respond to the growing pressures of tourism, environmental change, and infrastructure expansion. We interviewed 15 local members of the Bocas community. In doing so, it reveals the social dynamics and transformations that occur at the intersection of global surf culture and localized lived experience.

Understanding how Bocas residents engage with the surf scene is crucial to analyzing broader patterns of cultural change, gentrification, and resilience in communities impacted by lifestyle migration and tourism. By centering these local narratives, this research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of surf culture and community.

Literature Review

Previous studies have looked into segments of this paper's research question. These include relationships between surfers and coastal environments, and the definition of localism.

A study conducted by Cambell and Orchard aimed to address the relationship between surfers and coastal environments, and how this can be valuable for coastal resource management (Campbell, 2023). Through conducting interviews, in-depth oral history narratives were collected. It was found that surfers' knowledge is specific to location, in addition to being shaped by personal experiences, social influences, and environmental factors. Additionally, socio-cultural factors such as localism, accessibility, gender biases, and equipment preferences influence individual motivations. These findings helped create the argument that surfers' local knowledge should be integrated into coastal resource management.

A second study conducted by Beaumont and Brown (2016) looks to define the term localism in its relation to surfing through deconstructing and analyzing localism. By using a mix methodology of participant observation, field notes and interviews, this study found that surfers had a strong connection to location, an attachment to the local surf break, along with a strong attachment to their surfing community. These findings additionally showed that localism changes based on context and the break is both physically and symbolically connected to the communities around it.

Together, these two studies can help create a better understanding of surfing communities and what they have to offer. The following two frameworks encompass aspects of community to allow a better understanding. These can be applied to the surfing community and help create a better approach to methodology.

The individual-community-place interrelationships framework, as put forth by Goran Erfani (2022), can be used when addressing the topic of surf community. This framework addresses the interconnectedness of (i) individual, the attachment to place, (ii) community, the collective experiences and social interactions in a place, and (iii) place, the physical attributes

that shape identity. This can be applied to this study by the understanding that the individual is the surfer, the community is the surfing community, and the place is the surf break, values of which can be seen across the interview questions.

The sense of community framework, as proposed by McMilan and Chavis (1986), uses four elements: membership, influence, reinforcement, and shared emotional connection to define and theorize community. The first element, membership, can be described by the sense of connection and shared personal affiliation. Following this, the second element, influence, describes a sense of purpose. The third element, reinforcement, describes the needs of individuals being met by their membership. The final element is having a shared emotional connection. This can be further understood as a shared commitment and belief between members in addition to the sharing of history, places, and experiences. This can be applied to surfing and this study through the understanding that membership can be applied to the individual and group of surfers, influence is in line with individual emotions and relationships with others, reinforcement can be applied to surf break needs, and shared commitment can be understood as the emotional connections between community members.

Methods

Bocas delToro is a Caribbean archipelago on the northern coast of Panama, home to a populationof approximately 13,000 residents (Bocas del Toro Panama Properties, 2024). The region is known internationally for its world-class reef and beach surf breaks and draws significant numbers of visitors each year. Tourism is the dominant economic driver in Bocas del Toro, attracting an estimated 225,000 annual visitors (Bourque, 2016; Pleasant & Spalding, 2021), many of whom are drawn by the area's beautiful beaches and vibrant nightlife.

This influx of visitors has led to a dramatic rise in tourism infrastructure and development. In particular, road construction and coastal development projects threaten Bocas' surf breaks. As the archipelago becomes increasingly popular among surf tourists and even professional surfers, concerns over overcrowding and environmental degradation have intensified. Despite these changes, there is limited academic research focusing on how local surf communities in Bocas experience, respond to, and adapt to these transformations, especially through the lens of localism, identity, and sustainability.

Given the reliance of surf tourism on healthy coastal ecosystems, and to surf culture and community identity, this study aims to explore how local surfers in Bocas del Toro define their sense of belonging, engage with surf tourism, and perceive threats to their surf environments.

Data collection and analysis

For data collection, open interviews were utilized within the islands of Isla Colon and Isla Caranero, using questions that target the pillars of two frameworks; the sense of belonging framework (McMillan and Chavis, 1986) and the individual-community-place framework (Erfani, G., 2022). The questions were split into three subsections within the interviews; opening general community/culture, identity and history, and surf break environment and sustainability. The opening questions follow the individual-community-place framework, as the responses strive to give an idea of how the interviewee has built their life around surfing, and where they surf, as well as the culture and community in Bocas. They are as follows:

- How long have you lived in Bocas?
- What is your favorite break to surf and where do you surf the most?
- Why is it your favorite?
- Are there shared experiences or stories you associate with this break?
- How would you describe the surf community in Bocas?

- What makes the surfing community/culture in Bocas unique?
- Do you feel that there are distinct communities or cultures between different breaks or more one connected surf community? For example do you think Pauch and Carenero have different surf communities or are they all connected?

The next topic is identity and history. This ties in tightly with the community pillar of the individual-community-place framework, as the goal of these questions are to learn more about the local surfing community and how it relates to individuals' sense of self. The key elements from the sense of community framework that is relevant here is the shared emotional connection and membership. The observations that will be gained by seeing how much surfing plays a role in the locals' childhoods and current life is central to seeing the perspectives of the role that surfing plays in history and identity. The membership questions will be helpful in determining how the Bocas surf community defines a "local surfer". The inquiries are:

- Can you share your history with surfing in Bocas?
- Does surfing (in bocas?) hold a strong place in your identity?
- Do you consider yourself a local surfer in Bocas?
- How do you define a local surfer in Bocas? How many do you think there are?
- How would you describe the relationship between surfers who were born here and those who moved here?
- Does surfing offer you a sense of belonging to a community you may not otherwise have in Bocas?
- Do you feel supported and valued by the surfing community in Bocas?
- Do you feel like you can influence the vibe, rules or behavior at your local break? Is there a sense of shared etiquette?
- Do you find that gender plays a role in acceptance in the surfing community?

The final section of questions will be about the surf break environment. These questions follow the community pillar of the individual-community-place framework, as we will be inquiring about willingness to participate in groups that will protect the surf breaks. The sense of community within the local surfers would most likely be a driving factor in connecting them to action. In addition, the influence and reinforcement sections of the sense of community

framework are relevant when mentioning how the diminishment of the surf breaks would impact the surf community, and how the individuals can feel a sense of importance in protecting the breaks to provide for themselves and their community. The questions are detailed below:

- Is the surf community of Bocas impacted by surf tourism? In what ways?
- Do you think surf tourism is at a sustainable level in bocas now? In other words, are there too many surf tourists visiting now?
- Is there anything you would like to change about how surf tourism is occurring here now?
- Can you tell me about any environmental changes to the surf breaks that you have seen over the years here in Bocas? How have these impacted you? How has this/will this impact the local surfing community?
- Have you/would you participate in groups protecting the surf breaks?
- Do you have any ideas for how to preserve the surf breaks in Bocas?
- How do you feel about the road construction extending past Skully's?
- How do you feel it would impact the surf?
- How would you feel if the project ruined the surf breaks? What would you do in response?
- Is there anything else you would like to add about surfing in Bocas?

Overall, the intersectionality of both of these frameworks will allow us to ask thought provoking and important questions. These will give a deeper understanding of the local perspectives of surf culture in Bocas related to the sense of community and sustainability. Our schedule for interviews will be based on the surf forecast, and the local surfers will be compensated with a raffle ticket for a $100 gift card to a surf shop, as well as a bar of wax. The tentative schedule for interviewing is listed below:

Wednesday 4/16: Paunch
Thursday 4/17: Caranero
Friday 4/18: Tiger Tail
Sunday 4/20: Paunch
Monday 4/21: Bluff
Tuesday 4/22: Wizard Beach
Wednesday 4/23: In town interviews
Thursday 4/24: In town interviews

Results

When interviewed, most surfers used the words "community", "respect", "money", "welcoming", and "climate change" throughout their interview. These words help portray the themes found in the interviewees answers to the question in the three sections.

When local surfers were asked questions in relation to general community and culture multiple overarching themes were identified. Almost all of the interviewees reported that there was a surf community in Bocas del Toro, however, there was no exact answer to describe the community. One surf shop employee shared:

> "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."

Additionally, many of the interviewees discussed how there were different communities between different breaks in the archipelago. Specifically between the break called Paunch and the breaks located off of Isla Carenero. A Carenero resident and business owner said:

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

When asked questions in relation to history and identity, four main themes were extracted. The first theme relates to how a local is defined. It was determined that there is not one exact way to define a local surfer in Bocas del Toro. Some of the interviewees who were born in Bocas define a local as someone who was born here, while others shared that a local could earn their place. Of those who moved here, some found they would consider themselves a local after only living in

the destination for five years, while others, who lived here for twenty years did not consider themselves a local. One Bocas del Toro born surfer shared,

> "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, you know, their family, they're from here."

While a resident who has lived in the area for eight years shared,

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

The second theme in relation to the history and identity questions was that there are different relationships between the local surfing hierarchy of Bocatoreños, lifestyle migrant surfers, and tourists. A Bocas born surfer shared,

> "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'

A surf shop worker who has been in Bocas for around a year and does not identify as a local shared,

> "I would never tell a local what to do or try to give them advice, but I also think many of the tourists that come and rent boards from me at the shop so they'll recognize me in the water and they'll feel like they should listen to me."

The third was that conflicts in the water arise from different experience levels. Many of the interviewees shared that inexperienced surf tourists and surf lessons place not only an annoyance on locals, but also a risk. A surfer shared,

> "Every time I crash, it's…somebody running over someone's cord getting stitches or whatever. 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 (Black Rock)…which is a lot easier."

The final theme found in this section of questions was that there was a general consensus from the women surfers interviewed that although they are accepted into the community, they are not particularly respected. Of all the women interviewed, they all shared that it is commonly assumed that women are not good at surfing. One woman said,

"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."

It was also found that, recently a local surf group has recently been including local girls, a change that is benefitting the women and girls in the Bocas surf community. A community member that works with these kids shared,

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

After asking the questions about environment and sustainability themes of climate change leading to decrease in wave availability, a decrease in the surf could lead to less tourism, how tourism has already affected the surf breaks, and if there are too many surf tourists were identified. In relation to climate change, changes in the wind, as well as sea level rise, were brought up to have a negative impact on surf breaks as some waves are reliant on certain winds for formation. One surfer shared,

"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."

While another surfer said,

> "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, it was mentioned that 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. A surf shop worker shared,

> "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."

Secondly, the theme of the negative impacts on the community if surfers stop visiting Bocas was shared. A surf instructor sai,

> "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."

Next, the topic of ways in which increased surf tourism is not sustainable were discussed in the interview. Many surfers discussed how the increased tourism is leading to an increase in infrastructure which is affecting the waves. One of these infrastructures is the creation of a road along the coast. One surfer shared his concerns by sharing a story of a break that has already diminished. He said,

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

Additionally, it was discussed that tourism can lead to the destruction of reefs due to boats dropping their anchor on it. As tourism increases, the amount of boats using anchors could increase. One resident shared the idea,

> "I know they need boat moorings in Carenero to avoid all the anchor damage being thrown over there."

The final theme that was found was that 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. A surfer said when asked if there were too many tourists,

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

In addition, there are construction projects, such as the Paunch Village Surfer House, that are going to bring in even more tourists that may take the number past sustainability, crowding the waves and changing the hierarchy.

Discussion

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. Locality in Bocas no longer just means that you were born here; it has expanded. Regardless, the sense of belonging that comes with being a part of the Bocas surf community has not changed. Bennett (2004) similarly notes that being a "local surfer" implies both an emotional and physical attachment to a specific coastline, often grounded in birthplace or long-term residence. The surfers who live on these waves value them as part of daily life, a supportive community that could offer support in difficult times, and a way to remain affordably connected to themselves and entertained amidst all the tourism and gentrification in

Bocas. It was a general theme that surf tourism was almost at its limit. Going above surf tourism capacity can have extremely negative effects (Kostić et al., 2016; Shaheen et al., 2019; Andlib & Salcedo-Castro, 2021). Surf tourists may not come to Bocas knowing exactly where to go for their skill level, which breaks local, specialized etiquette, and other unspoken rules that are placed for respect and safety. Local surfers expressed frustration at the injuries and waves they have lost due to tourists who do not understand the etiquette at the breaks.

With this in mind, because surf tourism provides jobs, it would be beneficial to have locals trained in giving lessons. This would allow surf tourism to prosper in Bocas, without taking away opportunities and jobs from the locals. In addition to lessons, locals can provide information for where tourists should and should not go. This will help to reduce the possibility of high tensions, as tourists must stay out of the local only surfing spots and go to breaks that match their skill level. Being educated on local etiquette and respect culture for the local surfers is central to ensuring that the Bocas surf community remains peaceful. 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, where the local surfers are able to lead the surf tourism community instead of external influencers.

Environmental changes are prevalent at all the breaks in Bocas, and specific breaks face specific threats. For example, Carenero is facing a large problem with exploitation, erosion, marine life loss, and pollution. Interviewees mentioned that some surf instructors simply just boat in, drop off their clients, and leave, never even stepping foot on the island to evaluate the environmental impact they may be causing. Anchors are being thrown over the side of boats and crashing into coral, destroying not only a central part of the ecosystem but also hurting what allows the break to exist at all. Paunch break encounters many more tourists due to its proximity

to Bocas town, and this affects the greed for infrastructure that will ultimately lead to the destruction of the break. The road construction extending past Skullys is posing a dangerous threat to Tiger Tails, Paunch, and Bluff. The break Tuna was already destroyed due to the road construction; one interviewee recommended heeding this as a cautionary tale. Regardless if the two breaks are not considered one central community, every single local surfer from both claimed that they would participate in groups protecting the surf. Coming together as a community would allow this to prosper, and action to be taken. Research was done in Cape Hatteras National Seashore, where it was shown that the connection to place attachment motivates surfers to naturally be more of environmental protectors, and presents them as "environmental stewards" (Larson et. al., 2017) . 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 in Bocas.

There seemed to be a general consensus that gender played a role in respect in the community, and that 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. 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). Comley mentions how women have to fight for their rights in the water, similar to other male-dominated sports, and they are oftentimes overlooked and not respected. Similarly, in a study done in Lobitos, Peru, similar programs focused on including more women surfers into the surf tourism community there. Breaking down a bit of the division between gender roles through surfing can empower women in more ways than just

physical. "Even those who did not become entrepreneurs or continue surfing, said that they enjoyed the surf program and felt that it enhanced their ability to find jobs in restaurants and hotels for surfers and to sell handicrafts". Women having a place in the water goes deeper than just surfing; it affects their place in the world. Taking this idea to Bocas would empower local women and change the sexist surf culture for the better.

Conclusion

Although the definition of locality in Bocas is complex and changing, all 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. A community, gender neutral, local led change is necessary to ensure that the Bocas surf scene does not begin to fade away as our ocean struggles to survive. Without action being taken, the respect for both locality and the ocean is at threat, and could result in huge economic and environmental degradation for Bocas del Toro.

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