

Locals Only!: Understanding Localism in San Luis Obispo Surfing

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By

Matthew Alan Khachadorian

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Dr. John Patrick

Project Advisor

Signature

Date

Dr. Bernard Duffy

Department Chair

Signature

Date

Introduction

“Locals only!” This phrase is uttered at beaches around the world as a warning that outsiders are not welcome. People surfing near their home are considered “local”, and at many beaches locals see themselves as protectors of that beach, doing anything they can to keep what they feel as their property free of invaders. Any person not from the immediate area is considered an outsider. As many surf journalists have written and even more surfers have experienced, surf culture has spread the globe and divorced itself from a celebration of Polynesian culture. In turn surfing has transformed from an intimate connection with nature into a hyper-aggressive territorial sport with each beach dominated by a different set of locals. Travel to a crowded beach in California and then to a remote tropical island and the difference cements itself as regrettably true.

The process by which locals control waves and the land to where the waves connect is called localism. In its simplest terms localism can be defined as “practices of intimidation and exclusion in order to maintain territorial control of waves” (Scheibel 253). Something that needs to be understood is that crowds are without a doubt the worst part about surfing. Sure, the water can be cold, the wind may be blowing too hard, and the waves might be too big or too small, but nothing is worse in surfing than other people surfing. This is something that if not all, then most surfers can agree.

Surfing grew from about 1,000 people in the United States during the mid 1950s to about 2 million in the early 1960s. Responsible for surfing’s growth in America is the Hollywood movie, “Gidget”, which premiered in 1959, and the commodification of the glorious forever-young lifestyle of surf and beach culture (Brown, Step Into Liquid). It is because of the growth in

number of surfers since the 1950's that localism has become more prevalent. Dean Scheibel backs up this growth claim in his article on the rhetoric of localism. He states, "The symbolic implications of hordes of incompetent, wave-stealing, beach-littering, water-polluting [outsiders] serves to legitimate the casting of 'locals' as *protectors* and casting even the most extreme forms of 'localism,' including assaults (e.g. stoning), intimidation, and vandalism, as legitimate forms of *cultural preservation*" (257). These acts of localism I will be analyzing, with cultural preservation staying close to mind.

Assuming localism is a communicative cultural act of surfing, I propose a combination of ethnographic and autoethnographic research, in order to identify communication patterns between local and non-local surfers of the San Luis Obispo area and how localism as communication creates hierarchies of power. Using ethnography allows for the interpretation of data stemming from immersion into the local culture. Autoethnography allows for me to use my personal knowledge about surfing to interpret data. Utilizing qualitative research my project will follow James W. Chesebro and Deborah J. Borisoff's analysis that focuses on "the role that natural setting plays in research design, the role of the researcher as both observer and participant, how subjects influence the content of a communication study, [and] the influence of subject intentionality on the research report" (3). Working from this method I will organize semi-structured interviews with local surfers from San Luis Obispo in order to gain insight about what localism looks like and its implications for the surfing community. Semi-structured interviews access information about localism because surfing has a rich history of "talking story" (story telling), which will allow for the interviewee's to expose true feelings. My expert knowledge of surfing and communication studies is well suited for this type of research because with over 20

years experience with surfing and upon completion of obtaining my communication studies degree I possess the knowledge to accurately interpret the subjects I will interview. While the interview style of ethnography will bring me great insight into how the communication of localism works to display power, it is the autoethnographic component of my study that will allow for an accurate insider interpretation of the research.

The main idea behind autoethnographic research is that the researcher deeply immerses himself or herself into the culture of study. The methodology of autoethnographic research “not only acknowledges the speaking, theorizing researcher but also centers him or her in an effort to illuminate how the experiences of that self are representative of (and in some cases constitutive of) larger social systems” (Warren 68). As a surfer deeply entrenched within surf culture it is only fitting that my personal experiences within the surf community be analyzed along side my other research. I have vast experience of being a local and an outsider in surfing. At my home in Southern California, where I was a local, I exhibited acts of localism on others. I have yelled, punched, thrown rocks, and taken waves from outsiders. As a student at Cal Poly, a particular group that San Luis Obispo surfers do not like, I know how it feels to be an outsider and have localism personally affect my well-being. While never physically injured by San Luis Obispo locals, I have been verbally abused as well as threatened with physical violence. It is with these experiences, among others, that justify ethnographic and autoethnographic research in my senior project and it is this dual perspective that will allow me to internalize and interpret the results of this study.

I will assert that localism and its construction of power disenfranchise locals and non-locals, but with locals receiving some kind of benefit that non-locals much more often do not

receive. Similar to other sports I expect to find that in surfing, reinforcements of hegemonic masculinity, with traits such as violence and aggression, have been socially constructed by the surfing community producing inequality among people going to the beach for a day of surfing (Yandall 1). It is through localism that locals perpetuate inequality with the goal of minimizing the number of surfers out in the water. As a result there are less surfers in highly localized areas, but I will argue that the experience of surfing suffers because of it, even for locals. As will be seen, the motives for localism move beyond a yearning for solitude. For many the local surf break is the only part of life they can control, and when outsiders interrupt and corrupt the home, locals feel justified in committing violent acts to protect some of the only things they have. Indeed, the result shows that power is in the hands of the locals and because they construct who is local and who is not, they decide where the power goes. It is now a cultural norm in surfing to foster an environment of hostility resulting in an unequal social status among surfers. If it were up to locals there would be few footprints in the sand, few cars in the parking lot, and definitely few surfers in the water.

This project will aid in understanding the importance of communication and power distribution. I hope to gain insight into the role communication scholarship plays in understanding social inequalities within surf culture. This project will put localism at the forefront of focus and determine how communication within localism determines power and attitudes within the surfing community of San Luis Obispo. To understand the context in which localism arises, it is important to acknowledge the birthplace of surfing, Hawaii.

Hawaiian Origins

The lifestyle of surfing is much more than only riding waves as they come from sea into shore and localism is much more than intimidation to keep waves un-crowded, although it is a part. To really get a grasp of localism in San Luis Obispo it is essential to first speak of the origins of surfing, the Mecca of surfing, and the “Proving Grounds” of surfing, Hawaii.

By the turn of the 20th century Hawaii had lost almost every aspect of its culture to colonialism. However, there was one part of it that not only survived but also thrived the dismantling of Hawaiian culture, surfing (George, Hawaiian: The Legend of Eddie Aikau). In the early 1900s some key players of the occupation of Hawaii joined the Waikiki Surf Club on the south shore of the island of Oahu and banned all natives from joining the club, a parallel to other aspects of the occupation. Banishment from the surf club however, did not stop the Hawaiians from surfing the same way their ancestors had been thousands of year’s prior. In the water the whites went head to head with the Hawaiians, and the Hawaiians held their ground against the whites and prevailed on top.

What unfolded in the water was quite different to what happened on land. “Resisting and conquering colonialism in the surf created unique identities, a sense of autonomy that accompanied them while they were in the waves” (George, Hawaiian: The Legend of Eddie Aikau). Surfing became a place where one could still be Hawaiian, and as Clyde Aikau, a famous big wave Hawaiian surfer recalls, “Surfing made us feel like kings” (George, Hawaiian: The Legend of Eddie Aikau). Holding on to one of Hawaii’s last cultural identities was and still is very important to Hawaiian people. By the time the 1970s had come around there was a threat to Hawaiian surfing, in the form of a few young and ambitious Australians.

It was the dawn of a new era. For the first time in history surfers who were good enough to win the major contests on Oahu's North Shore were able to make a enough money and fame to be considered professional surfers, the worlds first. In the most prestigious contest at the time it was an all-Australian podium in 1975, with the new wave of Aussie's taking first, second, and third place. Ego's inflated to maximum levels and the Aussie's declared to the major surf magazines that they now dominated surfing and that Hawaiians were now inferior in the surf. Big mistake.

Hawaiians saw this disrespect as a new form of colonialism and they would not stand for it. There is video footage of Eddie Aikau, arguably the most respected surfer and waterman of all time saying, "They brag too much, next year there's going to be fights" (George, Hawaiian: The Legend of Eddie Aikau). One of the offensive Australian surfers, named Rabbit, recalls surfing Sunset Beach on the North Shore one day when he saw a large group of Hawaiian surfers all standing on the beach as a wall. They all paddled out into the water together and according to him, "circled me and then beat the shit out of me" (George, Hawaiian: The Legend of Eddie Aikau). After that encounter the Aussie's, who all shared the same house, felt as though they couldn't even go outside. But they had a savior, Eddie Aikau.

Eddie had told the Australians that they have upset some heavy players in the community and that there was a killing contract out for their lives. Eddie then took them to a conference room at the Turtle Bay Resort and when Eddie and the Aussie's walked inside there were a large group of Hawaiians there. Rabbit remembers, "It felt more like a trial than a meeting" (George, Hawaiian: The Legend of Eddie Aikau). The Hawaiians proceeded to explain how their bragging had offended them. The Aussies then got a good lesson on what had happened to Hawaii because

of colonialism and that Hawaii wanted to retain its surfing heritage, one of the last distinguishing features of its ancient culture. The disrespect toward one of Hawaii's most revered assets made them feel as though the new Australian professional surfers were trying to take away the last thing Hawaii had.

The Hawaiians in this instance used tactics of localism to preserve deeply rooted and high esteemed identity. By using localism they created the hierarchy of power with the Hawaiians on top. Had they let the Australians create the narrative of power through pompous declarations to surf magazines the distribution of power could look very different. The power held by the Hawaiians lets them preserve past, and create future identities for themselves. The phenomenon of disrespect in surfing does not limit itself to only Australians in Hawaii but happens all across the world, everyday. Disrespect is what usually triggers locals to become aggressive in the first place. Disrupting the natural and preferred order of a culturally independent area is dishonorable and shameful. Localism is more than just yelling at a tourist for the sake of a few more waves. The power obtained from using it is an effective means at which to keep from losing an identity that defines who one is.

Literature Review

Dean Scheibel uses a rhetorical foundation to interpret localism as a communicative act. His essay is one of the few academic insights into localism in surfing. His research is useful for examining how language shapes power and hierarchy among surfers and their prized surf spots. The main feature of his work connects Kenneth Burke's guilt-purification-redemption cycle with surfing and localism and is summarized:

(1) Through *language*, surfers create the *negative* and numerous *hierarchies*; (2) hierarchies produce covenants designed for the *perfection* of surfing; (3) in failing to create a 'perfect world,' surfers suffer from *guilt*; (4) surfers attempt to remove guilt in seeking *purification*; (5) the principle means of purification is through *mortification* (of self) and *victimage* (of others); (6) through mortification and victimage, surfers experience *catharsis*, and in so doing, achieve *redemption* from guilt (254).

Locals will strive their hardest to attain "perfection", which means keeping the culture pure and unadulterated by outside influence. The cycle shows that language allows locals to write the story for what power looks like and how it is distributed among the population. Because locals write the script, the power structure enforces exclusion of outsiders so that the preferred local culture will remain intact. When locals sense that "perfection" is floundering they try to preserve it by using localism. The feeling of having performed a noble local duty justifies the aggressive acts that have taken place.

To Scheibel, keeping the local area "perfect" is an impossible myth of surfing culture. He claims that surfers who defend localism with a sense of cultural preservation fall victim to believing this myth of perfection. This is important because this study aims to find out if San Luis Obispo locals find their acts of localism successful in keeping their surf spots "perfect" and the culture unspoiled. Words used to antagonize non-locals, Scheibel emphasizes, "are able to control the language, and therefore assert a rhetoric of cultural dominance and colonial control" (257). I want to find out if locals in San Luis Obispo use this type of rhetoric to preserve identity, and possibly thwart off unwanted influence of dominating society. Scheibel stresses that locals use language and victimization to "legitimate the casting of 'locals' as *protectors* and casting even the most extreme forms of 'localism'" (257). Scheibel examines local rhetoric to explain how the power dynamics work.

The names that locals give, themselves and others, is important in Scheibel's interpretation of localism. He says that locals calling themselves "protectors" functions as justification to control the waves at the surf break because the word "protectors" employs a meaningful identification as "rulers of waves" (258). The locals' feelings of ownership, he claims, aids to rationalize their actions. Calling outsiders "Vals", meaning someone from an inland valley, purposefully diminishes ones character as it represents an outsider identity and because valleys represent "lowly places, both by nature, and often, symbolically as well" (256). Viewing people in a meek manner, as Scheibel indicates, makes it easier for locals to support their actions toward "Vals". For this research it is important to keep his rhetorical analysis close in mind for understanding what being a local means to San Luis Obispo surfers and how that meaning influences behavior.

A sociological perspective of localism puts modernity as the forefront reason for perversion of local surfing culture. Christopher T. Daskalos, a sociologist who focuses on surfing, charges the following; "changes attendant in modernity have transformed the physical and social worlds in a spectrum of manners, making public (and thus available) things, practices, people, and locations previously out of reach to all but a determined and fortunate few" (Daskalos 157).

In his research, Daskalos befriended a group of surfing locals in San Diego who let him observe and ask questions about what modernity has done to their local community of surfers. The group of surfers is quick to note that, "As with the Hawaiians in an earlier century, the surfers on whom this study is built are seeing the activity of surfing being disembedded *in situ* from the traditional social context they established and maintained" (158). These San Diego

locals view modernity and the massive amounts of people that came with it as infringing upon the fashion in which they were used to and preferred living. This group of “old school” surfers, as Daskalos calls them, feels as though new surfers “overloaded an inflexible traditional system that had been based on locality, interpersonal communication, and status recognition” (163). The “old school” surfers also “felt that the newcomers were oblivious to the fact that they were treading on a valued way of life” (163).

Modernity has impacted the locals of this beach, in their view, a negative way. Daskalos adamantly encourages the reader to experience cultural dismantling through the perspective of the “old school”. The surfers all agree that with the new surfers from distant places came “the competitive, individual-centered order dominant in their lives on land. This new order reflected the larger social context of postindustrial America’s wealthier cities, an order earmarked by immediate gratification and a general disregard for the welfare of others” (171). I want to compare these reflections of the “old school” with local surfers of San Luis Obispo to see if they view their identity as being marginalized in a similar way to these San Diego surfers.

As shown, a surfer’s connection to a surf spot is the principle reason why they would exhibit localism. Human Geography expert Jon Anderson offers a unique perspective into how surfers develop strong emotional bonds with local surf breaks. Anderson, a specialist of Human Geography and surfing, proclaims location is “central to surfer identity: their geographical ‘turf’ refers not only to the fluid space of the surf zone, but also the landed cultures that serve, influence and sustain these watery worlds” (Anderson 241). Same as the Hawaiians who prevented the Australian pro surfers from perverting Hawaii’s surfing identity, Anderson recognizes the surrounding culture as a vital factor of local uniqueness. Establishing the

importance of the land's culture to local surfer identity, he says, surfers experience a "co-ingredient identity" (244) that defines their self-characterization. He posits that feelings are so intense that locals can be "physically and emotionally disturbed by the threat posed by the disassembled, mobile surfer" (244). His examples include a surfer's self-reporting.

When I paddle out and see a bunch of guys that I don't recognize at a spot that's taken me years to figure out, I feel ... almost violated. Especially if they're not respectful. ... When some guy you've never seen before – and dammit, it shouldn't matter that it's a stranger, but it does – comes sauntering out into a place that touches close to your heart, it's hard not to feel a little, well, violated (244).

To understand the process to which locals become personally attached to surf spots is essential in understanding how the identification of being a local influences behavior. Organizational psychology lends a helping hand in understanding a local's feeling of ownership toward a surf spot.

Understanding the feelings of ownership residing in employees of organizations is helpful for understanding the feelings of ownership that surfers have for their local surf breaks. Research in an organizational context explains, "The term psychological ownership is frequently used to describe employees' feelings and beliefs that the organisations they work for are in some sense theirs" (Fraser & Kemp 13). Just as employees feel authority over their work, I assert that surfers share the same feelings toward local surf breaks. The type of ownership expressed by employees is not legal. They do not physically own any stock, bond, or asset of the company; quite oppositely, this perceived possession is crafted solely by the employee (Pierce, O'Driscoll, & Coghlan 509). In the same way, local surfers do not legally own the area of ocean in which the wave breaks; however, sometimes they do own the land that the breaking waves crashes into.

An increased level of control over organizational as well as individual decisions was shown to have a strong effect for feelings of ownership for employees (Fraser & Kemp 15). Employee reporting also shows that, “affective, motivational, and behavioural responses are more positive when the work environment is characterised by low levels of structure and where there is the opportunity to exercise personal control” (Fraser & Kemp 14). I inquire as to whether local surfing behavior, mainly acts of localism, can be explained by similar characterizations of control. I will hypothesize that they will, and that when locals feel like they control the surf zone they have more intense feelings of ownership. But, I will also say that surfers, when maintaining control, will exhibit superiority in the form of their interpersonal interactions with other locals and in turn have a less rewarding surfing experience. This is seen through a surfer’s aggressive behavior that is masked as passion for the ocean.

Showing strong concern for ones organization leads to an increased feeling of ownership (Pierce, O’Driscoll, & Coghlan 510). In the same way as employees, surfing and “Psychological ownership reflects a relationship between the individual and the target of ownership in which the object is experienced as having a close connection with the self, being a part of the *extended self*” (Pierce, O’Driscoll, & Coghlan 509). Surfers have a strong bond with the water in the ocean and the energy of the waves. It becomes the basis from which to compare all feelings of happiness. This I can say with authority because of my personal experience with surfing and surf culture. Most surfers, as well as myself, feel as though the ocean is an extension of ourselves, giving us a feeling of inclusivity into the wonders in which the sea offers. If employees working

at their job feel as though work is an extension of their self to the degree that they feel so connected as to psychologically own the company, there is no denying that surfers feel the same way about surfing.

Feelings of ownership in employees have been shown to “strongly affect an individual’s tendency to promote and resist change efforts” (Pierce, O’Driscoll, & Coghlan 508). In a similar way, surfers using localism do so as a means to resist change. Often changes that come about for an employee are neither his or her idea nor seen as positive, much is the same in surfing. A new face in the surf, polluting the local scene by taking waves and interrupting ways of life, can be in the same vain as the implementation of a new vacation policy which cuts vacation time in half, thus limiting personal autonomy in an establishment with which one identifies. Research “suggested that unless employees are permitted to be involved in decision making that addresses job content and job context matters, high levels of empowerment are unlikely to be realized” (Pierce, O’Driscoll, & Coghlan 515). To keep the feelings of ownership, the employees’ resist change unless they were the ones acting as initiator. Surfers will most likely resist newcomers unless they are the ones to bring them. Just as well it can be seen that there are not high levels of empowerment at un-localized surf breaks. Comparing the feelings of ownership between employees and surfers provides an essential connection for an understanding of localism, by outlining how the feelings are manifested and maintained.

Considering the literature that has been written as well as my own personal inquiries, I have proposed the following research questions.

RQ 1. What are the characteristics of a local surfer in San Luis Obispo?

RQ 2. How does one come to identify as local?

RQ 3. What characterizes someone else as local?

RQ 4. What behaviors/privileges arise from being a local?

Method

As a surfer relocated from the concrete metropolis of California's Orange County to the rugged and raw coastline of San Luis Obispo on California's Central Coast I have become fascinated with the differences in surf culture. As best as I possibly could, I have immersed myself into the local scene trying to find the best possible surf on any given day, riding the biggest and best-shaped waves I can find, and talking with local surfers. However, one does not become welcomed into the local tribe just by riding the waves and waving hello, it takes dedication to specific breaks, showing not only talent but also respect to the locals by following the rules of surf etiquette. What I have found thus far as a surfer in San Luis Obispo is that localism as a form of aggression and community bonding is much more significant than it is in Orange County as well as other places I have traveled. My method of inquiry for research delves deeper than just passively speaking to random people who say they surf. I have constructed an outline for conversations that I believe will unveil what it means to be a local and how that identity influences behavior.

The methodological approach of ethnography and autoethnography allow me to answer my research questions based from my own experiences as a surfer as well as interpreting what locals have to say about their own culture. It is my knowledge of surfing and communication studies that allows me to interpret the communicative implications of localism in San Luis Obispo. I am penetrating a culture in which I am an active participant and in that sense, "autoethnography is more than a telling of one's experience; it is a critical looking outward at

power relations in a cultural space that contains the meaning available for understanding the writer's (i.e., one's own) life and text" (Banks & Banks 235). The approach to my research requires that a natural environment and setting be utilized for deep understanding. James Chesebro and Deborah Borisoff have outlined several characteristics of ethnography that I will incorporate to obtain valid answers for my questions. "First, the researcher seeks to make the research experience as much a part of the subjects' everyday environment as possible" (5). As places of natural cultural expression, beaches and surf shops will be the primary location of my observations. These locations also integrate another point under the first characteristic that, "The environment is not and was never intended for the investigation and data collection" (9). "Second, research is viewed as more 'naturalistic' if the behavior studied is restricted as little as possible by the researcher or by the design of the research project" (5). Semi-structured interviews are my primary source of information gathering. These interviews establish minimal focus, allowing for the subject to direct the topics being communicated. My understanding of the nuances of surf culture aid in understanding the topics discussed by local surfers I interview. Third, "The researcher seeks to capture and preserve the communication and symbol-using of subjects as the subjects understand and intend them" (9). I am to remain objective in the interpretations of my research insofar as not skewing the self-identification of locals in San Luis Obispo. I seek to capture local feelings the way they see them, not a far-fetched interpretation of an unknowledgeable outsider.

Semi-structured interviews form the foundation of my data collection. Performing my role as researcher under the autoethnographic model requires me to be seen as less of a researcher and more a member of the community under study. Following the guidelines of

Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey I have come up with broad open-ended interview questions that serve as a base for exploring the world of localism in San Luis Obispo surf culture. By using established guidelines set forth by Fontana and Frey, I acknowledge, “Each interview context is one of interaction and relation, and the result is as much a product of this social dynamic as it is the product of accurate accounts and replies” (699). Once again my membership in the surfing community allows me to deeply interact with local surfers from San Luis Obispo. “The use of language, particularly that of specific terms, is important to create a ‘sharedness of meanings’ in which both interviewer and the respondent understand the contextual nature of specific referents” (713). My understanding of “surf talk” gives me great advantage to create interview questions and study other surfers. Also my questions “attempt to understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry” (706). In this sense I create an environment where an open dialogue is encouraged so that answers being delivered by subjects is not restricted. As eloquently put by C. Warren, “In the social interaction of the qualitative interview, the perspectives of the interviewer and the respondent dance together for the moment but also extend outward in social space and backward and forward in time” (98).

The participants for this study were chosen based on criteria that give them credibility as strong surfers from San Luis Obispo. My plan was to handpick the best surfers that I could. In doing this I chose to first look at the frequency of how many times they surf in an average week. Each one of the participants usually surfs at least three times or more during the week (not an easy task). I also chose participants that ride a particular type of surfboard, called the shortboard, because that type of surf-craft lends itself to the most high performance surfing. Surfers who

master riding the shortboard clearly show dominance, as it is the hardest type of board to ride on. The speed, power, and flow of an outstanding shortboarder is clearly the most dominant and well respected form of surfing in the surfing community. As an expert surfer I clearly understand what great surfing looks like. Before approaching the participants and asking them if they would be in my study I made sure that I had seen them surf first and that each one matched the type of fast and extreme style of surfing that is held in the highest regard by most other surfers.

Sensitivity surrounding the topic of localism has encouraged me to take a few considerations in reporting the data out of respect for the locals of San Luis Obispo. The first of which is that each one the participants will remain anonymous. Some but not all participants reported feeling apprehensive toward having their personal identity revealed in the study. I was informed that some locals, in fact most locals, would not appreciate the type of exposure that San Luis Obispo would get from being talked about in the study and some of the participants do not want to be personally associated with the divulging of information about San Luis Obispo surfing because of what it would do to their image as locals in the community. If some locals found out about some of the things participants told me, it would not bode well for them. The consensus is that if there is a way to avoid an influx of any outsiders, those measures should be taken. Following suit with keeping participants anonymous I have also chosen to not specifically reveal the names or exact location of any surf break. Out of respect for the local surfers of San Luis Obispo I have taken these two considerations into account so that this study does not negatively impact their lives. After approaching the selected targets of study and being denied to report on some, I have five participants that provide the qualitative data for the reporting of

localism. They will simply be referred to as participant A, B, C, D, and E. The questions I will ask in my interviews are as follows.

1. Do you consider yourself local?
2. How do you know someone is local?
3. What do behaviors of locals look like?
4. When do you think a person can identify as local, and how do you think they can know they are able to do so?
5. Are there certain rules established by locals?
6. How is localism enforced?
7. What feelings do you have toward being local?

Findings

Several themes emerged from the participant's responses. These themes were determined by either repetition among participant's or intensity of one or more participant's and included the following: separation of North and South County, North County has stricter localism than South County, surfers as assholes, sub-groups of born and raised locals and moved in and never left locals, how to become/be local, losing local identity, and feelings of ownership. The following section presents the themes and the data that informs them.

Theme 1: Separation of North and South County

When asked where the participant's felt like they were local three of them indicated that they identify as local in either North or South County San Luis Obispo. Participant D, a South County surfer responded with such answers as, "I don't surf there that much so I don't feel as comfortable", "I don't consider myself recognized when I surf up north", and "If I go up north

and there's people I don't know, then I feel a little out of place". Participant C specifically stated that he feels like a local in "South County". Participant A, a North County Surfer, said, "It's the geography, if you live north that's where you surf". With the separation of North and South County, participants also revealed the two areas are not equal when it comes to the intensity and frequency of aggressive localism.

Theme 2: North County Has Stricter Localism

The participants emphasized that North County has a stricter localism policy than South County. This happened in a variety of ways, mainly South County surfers feel as though North County Surfers are "not welcoming" and that "they bully people, in what they say and how they sit in the water", as participant C put it. He isn't wrong, participant E, a North County surfer, plainly stated, "Surfers from South County just aren't as good". Even participant A said, "When you see those kids [from South County] you're all like, oh man they are such kooks [bad surfers], because they never surf up north". Stricter localism is not at every spot though, only a select few. As a North County surfer, participant B stated, "There are a few waves speaking up over. At those places I see it", meaning he accepts and even encourages acts of localism. For the most part the participant's agreed that hyper-aggressive behavior is not the solution to enhance the surfing experience in San Luis Obispo.

Theme 3: Surfers As Assholes

In contrast to their own actions some participant's identified the majority of surfers as "assholes". Participant B said things like, "I always laugh because bottom line, I think that all surfers are selfish assholes, for the most part", "If you sit back and look at it, surfing is a pretty selfish sport all in all", "There's always the asshole in the water yelling at people", and "Most

surfers are fucking dicks, and at times I can be that guy”. Other responses came from participant C who said, “Everybody is kind of dicky to a sense” and “Their vibe in the water is negative and it permeates”. Participant D said, “Some people are just loud and obnoxious”. Also on this topic, participant E claimed, “It’s the guys who moved here from Southern California who are the biggest assholes out there”. Acknowledging that there are different types of locals besides only North and South County, participant reporting confirmed that being born and raised in the area is not a requirement to be local.

Theme 4: Sub-groups: Born and Raised/Moved In and Never Left

It was presented that there is a chance for an outsider to become local. This process takes time and effort but local status for an outsider may be obtained. This was brought to attention when participant B was speaking about how a surfer knows they are local. He said,

There’s kind of two ways. And I definitely see both sides of it. There’s the born and raised person who knows everybody in the community whether they surf or not, it’s kind of just being at the beach every day and growing up around it. And then there are the guys that moved here to go to school and never left, they surf the same spot and over time they just kind have become locals.

Participant D also said that an outsider has the possibility to become local. He said that could be accomplished “If you have been here for a while and you know the spot really well”. After determining the local sub-groups, there were many comments about the attributes that let someone attain or maintain local status.

Theme 5: How to Become/Be Local

Becoming local boiled down to primarily two things, knowing the local people and having knowledge and skills in the waves. Participant A had a lot to say about the subject. His route to becoming and maintaining a position in the local scene included things such as, “Respect

the people in the line-up. Talk to the people out there”, “There is a certain look, not too flashy, no stickers on the board, and they ride boards from local shapers”, “Know who’s out there, who’s getting waves, and where it is okay to sit”, “Put in time”, “When you walk down with confidence and know some people”, “Know conditions really well, like swell direction, wind, and tide”, “Being involved and working in the community” and “Its good to see people outside of surfing”. Similar comments came from participant C who said, “You’ve seen them before and they are talking to people”, “It all goes back to creating relationships with people”, “If you’re committed to staying, that has a lot to do with it”, “More bigger picture community, not only in the water. Especially here because it is such a small community”, and “You can be a local at a spot, or you can be a Central Coast local”. Participant D kept consistent with the theme when he said, “You know how the wave is and you know the people” and “When people start recognizing you”. Knowing the other locals and maintaining friendships are the keys to being local in San Luis Obispo. However, the data shows that just becoming a local is not enough to be considered one for life. It can be a temporary title if consistency is not met.

Theme 6: Losing Local Identity

It became clear that identifying as local is not always permanent when participant’s questioned their own local standing and the local standing of others. Participant D, a college student who lives away from the area during the school years commented, “After going to college I’ve lost a little bit of my localness. I’m curious to see how it goes when I get back out there”. Participant B had a story about a friend of his, which explained the process.

I know most of the guys that are born and raised here and they will come to me and be like, ‘fuck, that guy is such a dick-head’. Then I have to say yeah well you have to understand the guy has been surfing here for ten years, he is actually more of a local than you are. You went law school in Orange County for the last four years and you haven’t

surfing here so you're kind of not a local. I mean yeah you were born and raised here and surfed here in high school, but you moved away and this guy has been here for the last ten years.

A lot of surfers feel like this will never happen to them, but it does. On the flip side of losing identity as local, many locals feel as though they own the waves, the beach, and the land that connects them all.

Theme 7: Feelings of Ownership

Local surfers that participants have labeled as “entitled” relate to employees who feel a psychological ownership over the company that they work for. In this context, the surfers are not employees, they are more like volunteers, and their feelings of ownership do not stem from their bosses handing them power, it is all self-constructed. Surfers who have strong feelings of ownership are the most likely to become violent. Participant B reported things like, “It’s not the sixties or the seventies, if you punch someone, you are going to talk to a cop and you are not going to get away with it. This is the United States of America, you can go wherever you want”, “I know guys that have never left here, they have never traveled, they have surfed the one wave and they are fucking dicks. If you went somewhere and had that happen to you, you would respect more”, and “There’s still the dickhead who’s going to yell at you even when you are doing everything right”. He even talked about his own feelings of ownership when he said, “Yeah, I’ve yelled at guys”. Participant C is strongly opposed to such feelings. He said that some surfers act like they have “more ego”, are “less sure of self”, that they are “Trying to hold onto something that’s not even theirs” and that “Every single spot has its own little vibe”. He compares that vibe to Southern California when he said, “Down south is so different because there are so many people”. He also believes that “It’s a learned behavior that has been passed

down”. Categorizing a certain group participant D said, “The old guys who have been out here since the dawn of time will be the first ones to talk to you. I won’t really talk to you, I will just take your wave”. He also said that he and his friends “kind of block other people from getting waves”. Even non-violent surfers have feelings of ownership, an intrinsic feeling that tells them they have more authority at their local spot than someone who does not go there often or has never surfed there before.

Discussion

While I had picked a certain group of people that I wanted to interview for the study not everyone shared my enthusiasm for the ideas I was exploring. I had gone as far as setting up meeting times and upon hearing my questions being told, “Oh, well I can talk to you a little bit about these things, but I don’t want to be in the report.” I was beginning to realize that choosing to study localism in San Luis Obispo is a sensitive subject to a lot of people. And even though some surfers did not want me to report their feelings about localism, I assert that because they refused to be in the report shows how important keeping the ideology of being a San Luis Obispo surfer as free from outsider influence as possible is to the locals that live in the area. I wasn’t denied to report their information because San Luis Obispo surfers are jerks, they take great effort to keep the surf scene as un-documented as possible. To report the kind of information I was asking for goes against the un-written code of localism. The rejection from these surfers was for reasons of keeping San Luis Obispo surf spots free from exposure to outsiders and so other locals would not recognize their identity in my report as going against the un-written code. These surfers’ concern that their position in the local pecking order would be compromised due to

reporting information about their local surfing culture assured me that the questions I was probing are significant in understanding the communication of localism.

An important theme that emerged as a result of the interviews is the separation of two areas in San Luis Obispo surfing. The two areas are referred to as North County and South County. I have noticed in the past that most surfers from South County do not surf as frequently in North County and vice versa. What I did not anticipate is that the participants clearly identify as a local from one of these two areas, and did not feel like a “full on” local in the adjacent area. Participants A and C specifically noted that they consider themselves local in North County and South County, respectively, and although the others did not explicitly state that information it is implied through the discourse of the interview. I learned that the unofficial border is the Diablo Nuclear Power Plant, an area with restricted access that acts a geographical barrier between the two areas. On the south side of the power plant resides the locals of South County and to the north lies North County. Participants from South County, which are C and D, have less area of coast to consider “theirs” than do members of North County. The separation between North and South County serves as a boundary hosting two different ideologies of what localism looks like.

The data shows that North County has stricter enforcement of localism than South County. Participants from both North and South County validated this. There are a couple of breaks in particular in North County that are notorious for aggressive acts of localism. The acts are aggressive because more likely than not someone will verbally intimidate others by threatening violence or exclusion from the area. Participants C and D, the South County surfers, reported they have been targets of localism at those breaks, and the hostility keeps them from frequenting the area. While talking about these specific surf breaks participant C gave the idea of localism an

interesting spin, one I had not thought of. He told me about a friend of his at one of these particularly localized breaks. While out in the water he was approached by a local who asked him who he knew out there and why he had come to surf there. The friend of participant C knew that the act of localism had begun and gave an interesting point for the local to consider. The friend told the North County local that it was the local who was creating a problem, not him. The friend told the local, "It is you who knows all the people out here, as part of the same local crew you guys can paddle out together and none of you will even bat an eye. You haven't even thought about the fact that you guys are the ones making it crowded. But me, I came by myself, I didn't tell anyone where I came, and when I am done I will not say where I went. If anyone is keeping this place on the hush hush it is me, while you will probably go tell your friends about the surf session and have it even more crowded than it already is." From the friends perspective it was the locals creating the environment that they were trying to prevent.

Participant B is local at the heavily localized North County surf spots. He is at the top of the pecking order as far as a hierarchy of power is concerned. That means he gets to go to whatever break he wants, whenever he wants, and he will not get hassled by any other locals. I first encountered him while I was surfing one of the localized breaks. Upon my immediate arrival into the water he greeted me with, "You either surf over there away from all of us, or you stay way inside far away from the main takeoff spot. If you get in anybody's way you are fucking done." That type of interaction is normal protocol and any outsider going there should expect similar treatment. After he said that to me he went right outside and caught one of the best waves of the whole day, dropping down the face of the wave with style that clearly communicates that he is a certified expert surfer. His knees were bent in the perfect way; he

crunched into a ball and fit perfectly inside the tube. Driving through the tube in the deepest part of the wave, he was completely surrounded by water while at the same time remaining dry. After being spit out, the wave doubled its size; he extended his legs and kept his arms relaxed with his eye on the next section of the wave where he would do what is known as a giant “man-carve”. Personally watching his wave I knew this guy was something special, truly an outstanding surfer. I knew I had to speak with him about my project and what he told me about how locals communicate with each other really surprised me. He said that all the local guys out there hate each other and that the aggression that localism fosters not only marginalizes outsiders from enjoying the beauty of that amazing wave but also the overall vibe of hyper-aggression ruins the surfing experience for the locals too. Surfing is a selfish sport, everyone only worried about him or herself, he told me.

His idea that surfers are “selfish assholes” coincides perfectly with what philosopher and avid surfer Aaron James has explored in his book, “Assholes, a Theory”. And while I do not always agree that surfers that use localism are inherently assholes, the description of what participant B and C (participant C being a South County surfer) reported correspond with James’ definition of what makes an asshole. James’ philosophy of the asshole has distinct characteristics that help for a good description of how some, as participants B and C described, entitled locals feel. James’ put forth and then answered the question,

What is it to be an asshole?

1. Allows himself to enjoy special advantages and does so systematically;
2. Does this out of an entrenched sense of entitlement;
3. Is immunized by his sense of entitlement against the complaints of other people.
4. The asshole acts out of a firm sense that he is special, that the normal rules of conduct do not apply to him.
5. He will often feel indignant when questions about his conduct are raised (5-6).

From my own experiences surfing and from what the participants shared with me, the above quote accurately represents the way a lot of locals feel they have a right to act while they are surfing at their local break. Special advantages include taking more than ones fair share of waves. The rules of surfing etiquette dictate that surfers should take turns catching waves, however, the “asshole” locals frequently position themselves in a way that gives them a good opportunity for a good waves while at the same time knocking others, who have been waiting for their turn, out of the good takeoff zone. As participant C explicitly stated when I asked, “What do behaviors of locals look like?” he simply said, “Entitled.” The entitlement comes from identifying as a local, and the norms of surf culture say that is normal and even accepted that locals should feel entitled to take advantage of knowledge and power to dominate the surf zone while at the same time making sure others feel unwelcome. As James’ theory goes down the list, even when locals have their power challenged they will resist the change, not taking into account how others may be feeling toward the aggressive acts of entitlement in a public place. The identification as local makes some feel as though their rights supersede others, again they do this with verbal, physical, and non-verbal communication displays such as positioning out in the line-up (where the takeoff zone is located). Lastly the “asshole” surfer feels vexed when non-locals challenge their authority, a time when destructive abuse is common. The entitled locals, participant C told me, are not acting out of superiority but he thinks they act like that because

they “lack self-confidence”. He says they try to boost their ego because they are “less sure of self”. Not all locals fall under the category of the asshole, in fact most do not. But, it feels like there is a majority of assholes when surfing because the negative feelings asshole locals transmit is bad enough to where the general feeling is one of an unwelcoming manner.

Besides the separation between North and South County surfers, locals have another subgroup. It was reported that one either becomes a local by being born and raised in the area, or one moves to the area and stays around long enough to be considered local. Participant C said, “Where my home is, is where I am local.” A pattern unveiled in the interviews opened up the idea that there are these two groups that end up co-existing together. I also learned that just because a person was born in the same town as one of the surf breaks it does not necessarily mean that person is a local in a surfing context, to become a local surfer takes time and commitment.

After establishing the categories of locals in the San Luis Obispo (North County, South County, born and raised, and/or moved and stayed), the question of how one becomes local arises. In the simplest terms it comes down to relationships with other locals. It might make sense that someone becomes local based on his or her surfing ability, but that is not the case. In their own way each participant said, to be local means you know and are friendly with the other locals. If you can go to the break and know people in the water it means you are local. If those people know you, then you are definitely local. The process in which one comes to know and create relationships with the locals is dedication to surfing a particular break often enough to where you know more people than you don't and they also know you. Sometimes that process can take years, sometimes it only takes a couple of weeks. There is no finite timeline that a surfer

can follow which lets them know they are local. In San Luis Obispo, working in the community outside of surfing is very important for ones local standing. In an area with lots of small businesses, working with the community is a must to become a true local. A surfer can go to the same place for years, and if they have not created relationships with the locals, by committing to surfing he local breaks and working in the community, then it is much harder become one.

The personal relationship with locals and the surf break tell the story of a surfers standing in the local hierarchy. Participant A reported that a local goes to the beach knows the others, and when looking at the waves does so in a manner that does not let off too much excitement. One must remain calm when looking at the waves, no hooting and hollering like one might think from watching Hollywood movies about surfing. When becoming a local it is important when arriving to the beach to watch for a while to get a feel of what is happening out in the surf. It is important to recognize which people are out and understand their general attitude towards you. This pre-surf examination lets a surfer know where it is okay to paddle out, if it is ok at all. In San Luis Obispo in particular, it is important for locals to ride locally made surfboards, not mass-produced ones that anyone can buy in a surf shop. If the goal is to become local, one must ride the local craft. In most parts of the world having a brand-new glowing white surfboard with stickers all over it tells people that you are a good surfer. In San Luis Obispo it is the opposite. I was told on multiple accounts that being flashy with new equipment and lots of stickers is very uncool. Having a faded and yellow looking board tells locals that you have been surfing a long time and that you are committed to your surfboard, a unique characteristic not found in many surfing communities. Becoming a genuine local takes a long time, and once attained it is not permanent.

Loosing the identity of local is very possible and happens quite frequently. It usually happens when a surfer who is part of the born and raised group of locals goes away to college. Participant B's example of his friend who lost is local standing is key in understanding how the process works. As a surfer from the born and raised group returns to the San Luis Obispo area after college they are usually eager to resume their role as local surfer. However, in the time that the person has been away at college some things have changed, mostly the people who frequently surf the local breaks. What happens is a distinct pattern. The surfer comes back and will exert an attitude of superiority over some of the new local surfers. The old locals who are familiar with the returning surfer will inform them that this new person has been here and put in the necessary time to become local. At the same time that the new person has become local, the old local has lost power because they have not been around consistently enough to prove their dedication to the community in a way that lets them wield local power. When the old local creates friction with the new one, the locals will defend the position of the new local in their role in the hierarchy. The particular instance of participant B's friend is not isolated, it happens all the time. It even happened to me when I moved from my home to San Luis Obispo. Now, when I return to my hometown I do not hold the same power that I used to, just as the surfer from participant B's story.

Usually showing strong concern for the well being of the surf spot makes some local surfers feel like they legally own the waves. This presents itself in the form of verbal or non-verbal contact. Participants noted that some times they will abrasively talk to outsiders to make them uncomfortable, or sometimes they will just take more than their fair share of waves, making it hard for the outsider to even surf. Being on the receiving end of a message that

communicates you are not welcome is not fun for any person. It seems as though general human courtesy is disregarded when situations like these arise out in the water. These surfers would never act like this toward people on land or even just hanging out at the beach. Once it comes down to the surf zone many surfers get the feeling that they must protect the spot. What the surfers who have feelings of ownership see as protection is manifested in the form of localism, creating a negative aura in the water that takes away a lot of the fun in surfing. However, a lot of time the feelings of ownership that foster acts of localism works to keep outsiders away. So in that sense surfing has the potential to be more fun for the locals. Deciding which is more fun; acting superior and keeping up aggressive attitudes and having less people in the water, or just having fun and not worrying about the crowds is a topic that is still up for debate, and it probably will be for a long time.

Conclusion

Localism plays a large role in San Luis Obispo surfing. It is so prevalent in the surf culture that it affects the fun factor of the surfing experience. It is safe to say, for the most part, that localism does more bad than it does good. The participants in this study revealed that localism is a prominent feature in their surfing community and it leaves a poor sense of comradery, a part of surfing that makes it fun in the first place. Instead, people must go surf alone, not tell friends about surf sessions, worry about their localness credibility, and many other things that limit the potential fun-ness that surfing is supposed to create. It must not be left out though that localism as a function of power does work to keep crowds lower than they would be if everyone were welcome. For the select few who get to enjoy the benefits of sitting atop the

hierarchy it might be worth their while to continue their behavior, but as participants noted, there is even animosity within the local group itself that stems from acting superior toward others.

While it does not seem that localism will be any less prevalent in the near future, things change. In the past it was easier to get away with being hyper-aggressive and even violent. In the world that San Luis Obispo surfers live in now, it has become harder to keep and protect secrets the old fashion way, using fear. Locals should not worry about extreme over-crowding to the degree of Southern California beaches though, the intense and dangerous conditions that this part of California's Central Coast consistently offers does its own job of deterring most surfers. Participants fear the day that San Luis Obispo becomes the next Los Angeles, but that is still a long way away. Localism is alive and well in San Luis Obispo, and it does not look like that is going to change anytime soon.

Limitations

Many local surfers in San Luis Obispo do not want to talk about surfing in San Luis Obispo, especially about localism. Most of the local surfers know that they are notorious for being aggressive and that it helps to keep tourists away. This unwelcoming atmosphere restricted the reporting because some of the information reported, was denied permission to print. Some of the stories were crucial for understanding localism were forbidden to enter the report. Had that information been allowed for reporting in the study, it would have deepened the data leading to a more complete analysis of localism. The second limitation was sample size. It would have been preferable to interview more than five local surfers, once again so that the data be more robust. It

would have helped to have more local contacts because so many denied to be interviewed. However, some interesting ideas were presented that would be a good direction for future researchers to explore.

Future Research

Several participants implicitly talked about one particular theme that should be considered for future research. The emotional intensity in which they communicated demonstrated that there are possible issues relating to localism worth researching. The idea is about the sub-groups of born and raised and moved in and never left. A couple of times participants talked about a feeling they have which makes them think that the locals who moved in and never left try to “claim” local harder than the ones who were born and raised in the area. It seems as though this animosity is mostly directed at locals who moved to San Luis Obispo from Southern California. Although this was never explicitly relayed, there seemed to have been similar feelings amongst several of the participants interviewed for this study. Do moved in and never left locals have the potential to achieve the same high standing local status as locals who were born and raised in San Luis Obispo? Are they ever fully accepted? From the findings in this research it seems as though the answer to both questions is no, but those should be looked into for future research about localism.

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