NINE

The Surfing Session

When Old King Neptune's raising
Hell and breakers roll sky high,
Let's drink to those who can ride that stuff and to the rest who are
willing to try.
"Doc" John Ball from *California Surf Rider*, Los Angeles,
1946.

Have you ever thought who started this "paddle around the guy
who is sitting on the peak" scene? Now there is a place in any good
surf where the energy lets down at its best — a take off point . . .
You are waiting for your wave, when a person comes up. Why does
he have to paddle next to you to take off? Why can't he sit back a
few feet, like a few board lengths, laying in the water, and catch the
waves you aren't going to get . . . This is a very, very simple code of
good manners.
*Tracks* interview with Robert Connelley, Jan. 1971: 25.

The major objectives of this chapter are to detail the factors affecting social interaction among surfers during surfing sessions (time during which two or more surfers interact during their wave-catching activity), to examine the nature of the resultant social organization, and in so doing to consider some of the most important features of surf board riding that neophyte board riders must learn. Many of the features discussed constitute necessary ingredients to participation in most surf board riding situations and amount to a core of knowledge which is an important part of the surf board riding subculture. This knowledge includes an appreciation of surf conditions (e.g., some ability to "read" waves), mastery of basic techniques for handling the surf, and understanding of the basic norms governing interaction among surfers.

Many aspects of the descriptions of the surfing session, contained in this chapter, are not generally recognized by board riders. Part Three has shown — among other things — that board riders normally see competitive activity as detracting from their sport. The

30., 31. Two famous Australian point surf locations. The Pass at Byron Bay (*above*) and Crescent Head (*below*), both in New South Wales. Note that the land lies at an angle to the direction of wave break.
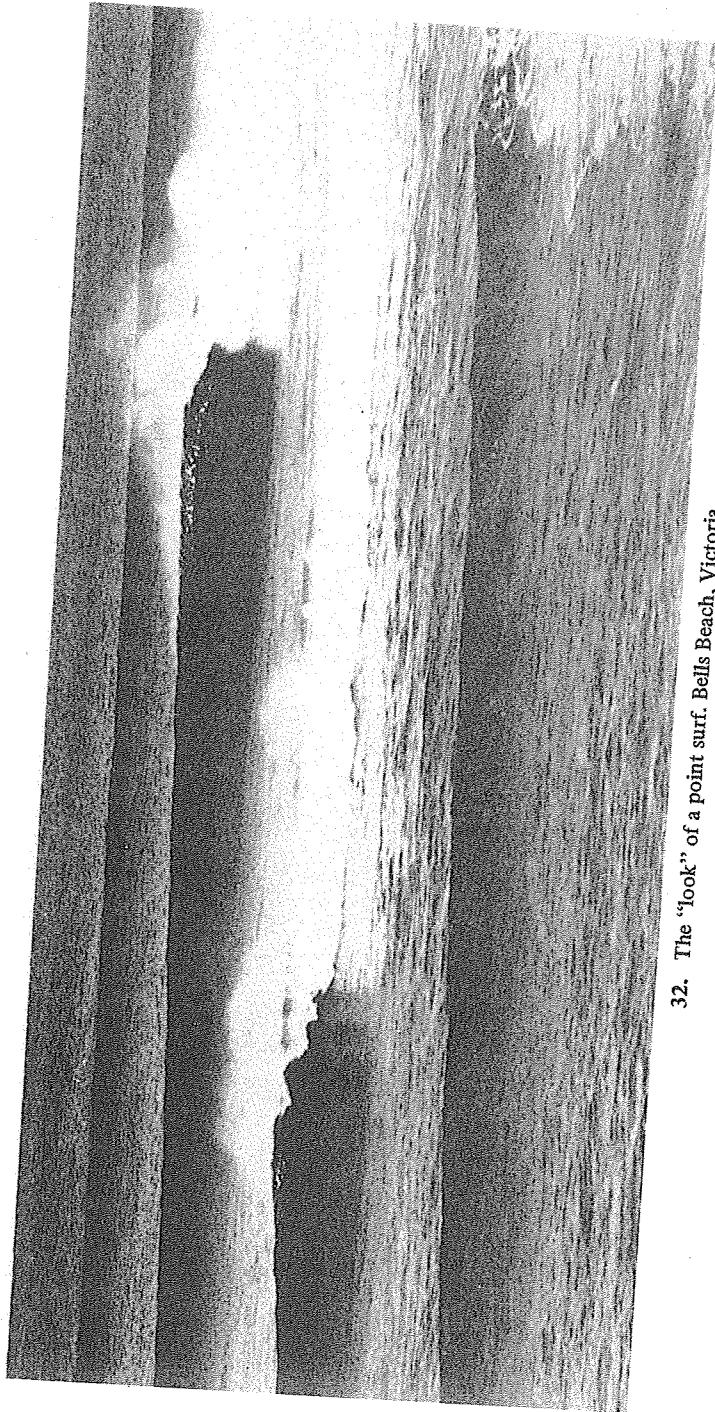
explicitly anticompetitive emphasis apparent in the statements of many board riders is consistent with the popular board riding philosophy depicted in surfing movies and magazines. These often picture a surfer or a few surfers interacting primarily with waves. This ideal assumes a surfing situation with good waves and sufficient numbers of waves for the surfers who are present. These conditions do not occur often, for waves are best (for reasons detailed later) at particular types of location and there are normally insufficient numbers of such locations for the surfers in a given area. While most board riders are aware that much surfing takes place under crowded conditions, and frequently talk in terms of "hassles" occurring in the surf as a result of a crowd, few conceive of a crowded surfing situation as a competitive one. Yet crowded surfing involves competition for wave resources. Paradoxically, the low level of formal organization existing among board riders at a surfing location is important in the development of a more, rather than a less, intensely competitive situation; for the conflicting interests of individuals are poorly shielded from each other by formal regulation of activity, when compared with the explicitly competitive, and highly regulated, activity of the surf life saver.

In order to generalize about the factors important to the typical surfing session, it is necessary to describe some physical features of surfing environments basic to interaction among surfers. Later sections are specifically concerned with the dynamics of point-surf surfing, and with picturing and describing the dynamic nature of the surfing session.

FEATURES OF SURFING LOCATIONS

For surf board riding, what is required in a wave is that it steepens, leaving a slope of unbroken water where the rider can slide down. The higher and steeper the slope (controlling for the speed of the wave), the more exhilarating the ride. It is of the nature of waves, however, that they are dynamic. Unlike a ski slope, they do not present a comparatively constant face; rather, they present a slope moving as a whole, and changing from one second to another. A general goal of surfing is to extend the ride on the unbroken water while at the same time riding a steep slope. This desire arises from the resultant accentuation of the physical forces with which the surfer is involved in his surfing activity. In many ways these desires may be seen as incompatible in that waves are steepest just before they break; once they break, generally speaking, there is no longer

32. The "look" of a point surf. Bells Beach, Victoria.

the wall of unbroken water, though in some types of breaking water waves may break from the top and roll down the face as the wave continually reforms below the breaking wave, thus, leaving a slope at the bottom.

Steep rides are longer, however, under a variety of conditions as in larger surf (higher wave slopes than in small surf). They are also longer in surfs where the wave does not uniformly steepen and break along its whole length; this is the situation in which the wave breaks from one side to another, and it is the basic requirement of the ideal wave-riding wave. Several factors account for this wave action; wind, tide and other currents of moving water all affect the way a wave breaks. Most important of all, however, is the shape of the bottom and the matter constituting the bottom over which the wave passes. Where the water depth constantly decreases along the wave from one end to the other as it moves forward, the wave will break from one tide to the other. The ideal riding surf tends to occur as a "point" surf, or as a result of an underwater reef appropriately situated so that the bottom depth is reduced across the normal direction in which the wave is travelling. The material on the bottom is important in relation to the permanency and predictability of wave shapes under varying conditions. Sandy bottom beach breaks can vary tremendously from one tide to another and even from one set of waves to another, while rock bottoms may remain more or less constant for decades. Sociologically, these geographical features are important because of the way they influence the type of social interaction taking place at such locations. It can be stated simply at this stage that different social interactive patterns tend to develop in particular settings according to the conditions at the time. The basic geographical contours portrayed to this point may be illustrated by two rather extreme examples (see figures 7 and 8); an ideal-typical point surf, and a shifting beach break.

For ease of expression in the following account, a number of common surfing terms will be used:

Close-out the breaking of a wave along its whole length and normally across a bay or safe channel. Close-out waves are unridable.

Closed gate a shoulder of water leading from one end of a breaking wave into another breaking section of the same wave. An *open gate* is the shoulder of water leading from one end of a breaking wave on to an unbroken section of the same wave.

Critical (take-off) a take-off on a very steep and difficult-to-ride section of wave. Normally a take-off is most critical just before or as a wave is breaking.

LAND

WAVES

Direction of wave break

Wave direction

Stone or other solid bottom sloping gently.
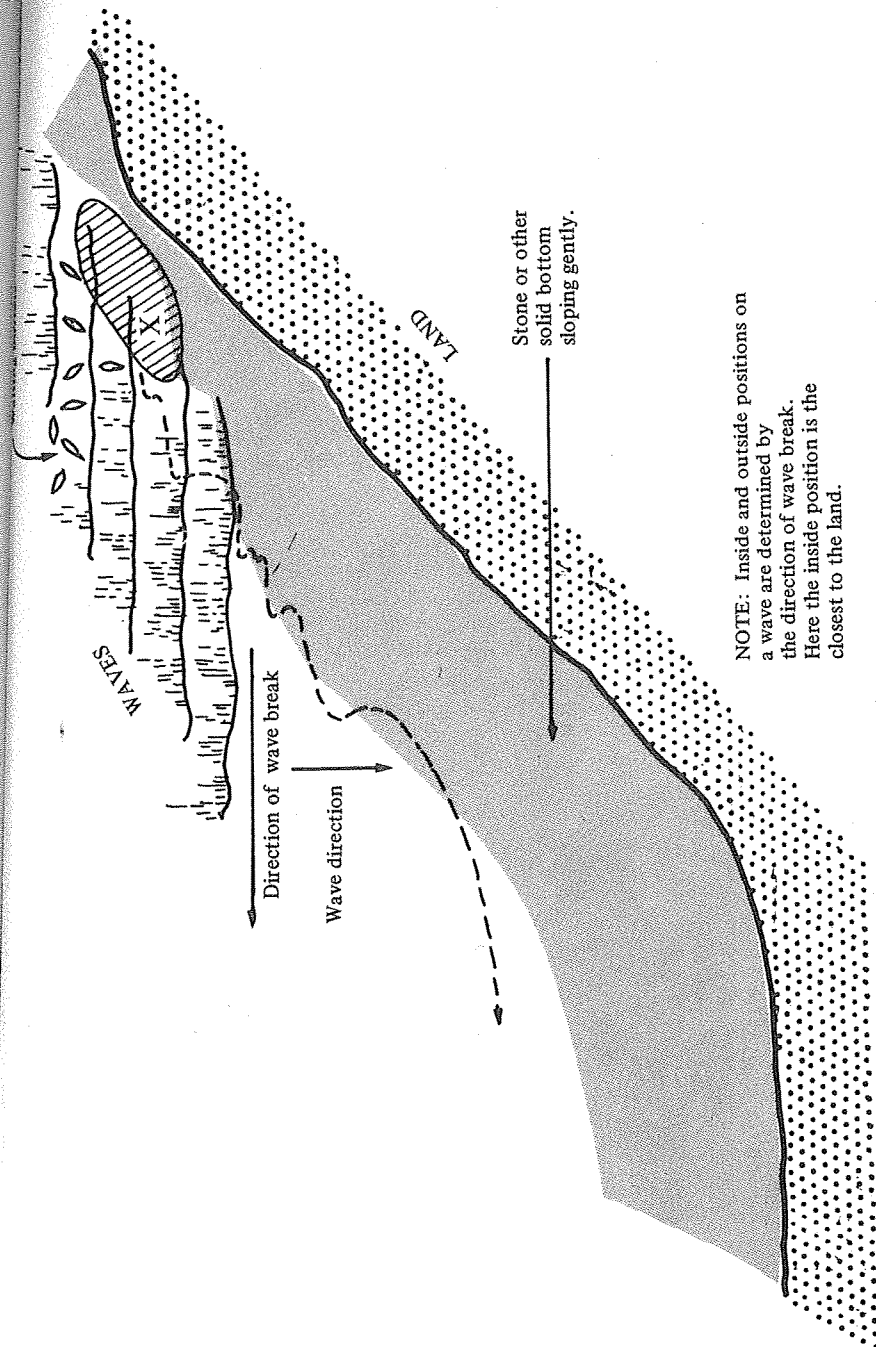
NOTE: Inside and outside positions on a wave are determined by the direction of wave break. Here the inside position is the closest to the land.
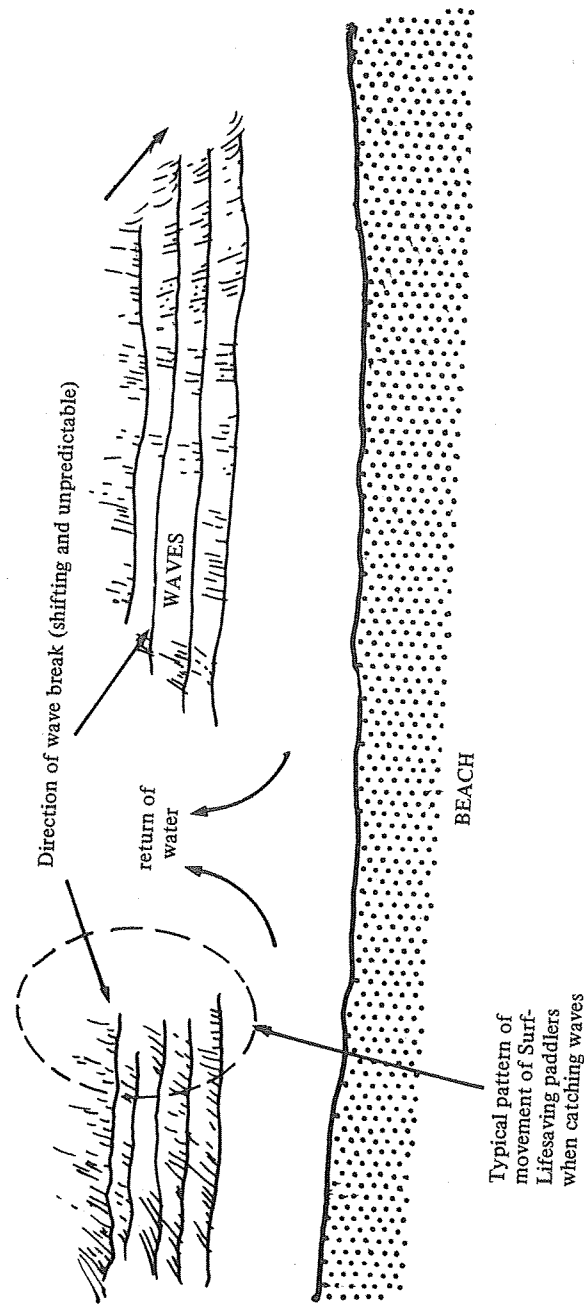
Fig. 7. Typical point surf location

Direction of wave break (shifting and unpredictable)

WAVES

return of water

Typical pattern of movement of Surf-Lifesaving paddlers when catching waves

BEACH

Fig. 8. Typical beach break

Drive the attempt to trim a craft for maximum possible speed.
Drop the slide down the face of a wave immediately after it is caught.
Drop-in dropping onto a wave outside another surfer on the same wave.
Kick-out flipping the board over or through the back of a wave to end the ride.
Locked-in a surfer in a position where it is impossible to kick-out yet the wave is still ridable. The rider is locked-in to the curl of the wave.
Outside (a) position(s) on a wave — breaking from one side to another — occupied by surfers who are further along the unbroken face than the surfer who is closest to the break; (b) any point seaward of a breaking wave. The *inside* position on wave is the one occupied by the surfer who is closest to the break.
Take-off the launch onto a wave; to begin a ride.
Wipe-out the forceful (and often spectacular) termination of a ride by a rider losing control of his craft. A wipe-out is usually caused by a breaking wave but may also result from an accident such as a collision with another surfer.

Under beach break conditions (see figure 8), it is much more difficult to be appropriately located to catch waves, as predictability of wave performance is low. Shifts in the break occur according to very specific situational factors, such as slight directional variation in wave movement, backwash or runouts from previous waves in a set, etc. Under many beach break conditions, general prediction of wave behavior is almost impossible. One break may be a close-out, another may present a good face and a clean break from one end to the other. The timing of waves and the prediction of the take-off area, moreover, are frequently all but impossible to foresee. The consequence of this for the spatial arrangements among surfers is that there is a much greater emphasis on chance factors (being in the right place at the right time) and on the factor of mobility which enhances the surfer's chances of being appropriately located for a particular wave after recognizing what may be quite subtle cues from approaching sets of waves.

The situation is very different in figure 7, where there is a clear advantage from the point of view of optimal utilization of the wave by being placed within striking distance of *x*. This point represents the first at which the wave may be caught and so gives the longest possible ride, should this be desired. It gives the rider, already on the wave, a prior claim to it when account is taken of surfers who may elect, for whatever reason, to take the wave at other possible take-off sites closer to the termination of the wave's journey. Not all

riders catching a wave at point *x* will ride the wave as far as possible. There are many reasons influencing a rider's decision to kick-off a wave while there is still "mileage" in its unbroken face. These reasons include the perception of the wave's goodness, relative to previous rides during the session, and the anticipation of more rides, the length of the return paddle, and the perception that the *x* spot take-off, drop in and drive through the first breaking section is the best. These and other social reasons such as "giving the guys inshore a go", are all of varying degrees of importance at different times. When the waves are breaking once and reforming before breaking again (in effect giving an outer and an inner break), it is especially common for spot *x* riders to terminate their ride before riders waiting further inshore. On some occasions when such a situation exists, a social norm develops and riders waiting inshore may become quite indignant when a participant continues his ride over the reforming section. Such transgressions, however, do not normally call for reactions classifiable as negative sanctions from the surfers inshore because of the general understanding of the "drop in rule", which gives right of the wave to the rider who is closest to its break. The "drop in rule" may be seen as the number one traffic law for surfers.

NORMS OF THE SURFING SESSION

Rules

There are few explicit rules in surf board riding. The following three are generally recognized (and discussed as such) by surf board riders: the "drop in" rule; the "prior claim" rule; and the "rider gives way to the paddler(s)" rule.

The "drop in" rule is of major importance in regulating and guiding the behavior of board riders in most surfing situations. The "prior claim" rule gives the wave to the person who first catches it. This rule, however, does not have the force of the "drop in" rule, and if in practice another rider is able to take off "inside" the rider already on the wave, that rider (e.g., on the inside) has right of way. Thus the first rider to catch the wave can best assert his prior claim to the wave by positioning himself in such a way that the "drop in" rule cannot easily be invoked against him.

The "rider gives way to paddler(s)" rule is an acknowledgement that riders mobile on the wave are more able to avoid the slower-moving, less-mobile person(s) paddling boards out through the surf.

The "drop in" rule is clearly related to the nature of good surf riding waves, in which there is an obvious direction of break (across the wave). Riders on the inside (closest to the break and, in the ultimate, behind the break) are in the greatest danger of being "wiped out" by the collapsing or breaking wave as the break chases the rider and he "drives" and runs away from the break. The tighter the rider's position relative to the breaking wave (the closer he is to the forces of the breaking wave terminating his control over his directional drive parallel to the wave) the less the degree of freedom the rider has in which to manoeuvre. The "drop in" rule, giving right of the wave to the rider on the inside, functions therefore to give the greatest chance to the rider in the most critical position. The rule is also functional to other riders on the same wave, as the person on the steepest or in the most hollow "critical" section of the wave is normally travelling at greatest speed. The "drop in" rule, where several people are on the same wave, directs outside riders to consider and if necessary give way to those on the inside. On a fast-breaking wave the rider on the inside is often in a highly critical position, as the option of kicking out over the back of the wave once the lip has reached a certain point (especially in a large surf) is likely to have been forfeited. With the breaking wave menacing the rider from behind, the only course of action is to drive hard towards the open end of the wave, in the hope that the "gate" remains open. On many fast-breaking waves the only action left open to the rider is to trim the board for maximum speed and drive hard or take a wipe-out.

The "drop in" rule appears to be a cross-cultural universal among surfers and there is evidence to indicate that it tends to emerge spontaneously among different groups of surfers under many different conditions. Edwards and Ottum (1967) are among several authors who have shown that before the development of the modern short board, the tendency was for board riders to ride directly with the wave (e.g., in the same direction as the wave). This was the case in Hawaii and the United States during the wooden long board era as it was in Australia and New Zealand where surfing was largely the domain of surf life savers for a much longer period of time. Surf life saving craft have never been specifically designed for manoeuverability on waves and this has tended to militate against doing anything other than riding them "straight" to the beach.

Through a long period of board riding history, up until the 1950s, in both Australia and the United States, cutting across the face of the wave was considered unusual. With the design of more manoeuverable craft, however, it became obvious that it was

possible to cut across the face and turn the board to travel in the same direction as the wave before it broke. Riders capable of this could demonstrate control — important at the time because the dominant "straight with the wave style" emphasized control — while at the same time lengthening the ride.

Once cutting across the face had become an acceptable style, it quickly became obvious that the "spoilers" of the longer, faster, across-the-face rides were those surfers on the "outside" going straight with the waves. Numerous accidents, very similar in type, occurred during the establishment of the across-the-face style of wave riding. The accidents involved riders taking off and "dropping in" late, straight down the front of a wave (e.g., in the direction of travel of the wave) after other riders had already "locked in" and were cutting across the face of the wave, thereby causing collisions at 90° angles. A similar type of accident occurred when an outside rider lost his board or control. Once the "drop in' rule became general, outside riders who caused accidents were clearly culpable.

While the "drop in" rule obviously functioned to assist surfers in avoiding collisions (thereby reducing chances of pesonal injury and damage to craft), it also fulfilled a latent function of assisting the clarification of some surf board riding objectives. As face cutting became accepted, catching a good wave became very important because it greatly increased the length of ride. As the "drop in" rule gave right of way to the person closest to the break, this position became increasingly important in gaining good rides during surfing sessions. In order to have the full run of the wave, one needed to be on the inside. This social norm, together with the additional challenges associated with riding "close to the break", helped to influence the very definition of good surfing. The aim of good board riding was, and continues to be to a large extent, to operate as close to the point of imminent "wipe out" as possible and in so doing increase the risk or challenge by demonstrating one's mastery of the situation. This has been talked about increasingly in surfing circles as "surfing far back". The ultimate of this is to surf completely immersed in the tunnel of a large hollow breaking wave. Tube or tunnel riding is now an important objective among surfers. Any person interfering with or inhibiting someone further back has come to be seen as sabotaging this key objective. Such persons are regarded as "spoil sports", denying or detracting from the possibilities of "far back" surfing. In this light, the emergence of the "drop in' rule can be viewed as a means of regulating behavior in the surf, to make possible that which is valued by the surfers themselves. In practice, there are several circumstances involving two

riders jockeying for the inside running, making the interpretation of the "drop in" rule somewhat unclear. For example, two riders may catch a large wave simultaneously, one above the other. With one behind the other, one surfer paddles for an arriving wave and climbs high up the face of the wave before the speed of the board matches that of the wave. The wave meanwhile may have steepened and permitted another surfer to catch it lower down.

Craft Type and Surfer Interaction

Most surf boards today are shaped to give speed and manoeuvrability when planing speed is reached on a wave. They are designed primarily for wave riding not for moving through or over water under the rider's power. Generally speaking, the requirements for moving fast through the water are incompatible with the requirements for maximum manoeuvrability when riding a wave. In the case of small watercraft, paddling speed tends to be increased by more buoyancy and greater length in the water. Manoeuvrability is enhanced by reducing the size of the craft overall and therefore the degree of buoyancy. Because they have a relatively slow paddling speed and only moderate buoyancy when not planing, small manoeuvrable wave-riding craft, in the case of most surf boards, necessitate steeper wave slopes for effective take-off. In general, the slower the craft or surfing body, the more critical the take-off situation from the point of view of steepness of wave. Unassisted body surfers must have very steep slopes down which to slide; they generally catch waves just before or as a wave is breaking. Surf board riders, with a faster top speed than swimmers, are more mobile and have more flexibility for take-off position; e.g., they can catch waves more easily from more positions than can body surfers. However, modern short boards permit little latitude. Wave slopes must be steep and the wave large enough to enable the board to match the speed of the wave before slipping over the back. Take-offs are often critical (e.g., seconds before, or as the wave begins, its break) and position is very important before the wave's arrival. This strategy in predicting the wave's performance beforehand is a great advantage. (This helps to explain the preference for point breaks as opposed to beach breaks.) Frequently, split-second timing is involved, as well as very precise location of the board and rider before critical take-off. The very fine latitude required to take-off on modern surf boards is a key factor influencing the nature of interaction which occurs at point surf locations. The faster the paddling

speed of the craft, the greater the latitude in terms of location to catch a wave and the ease with which the wave itself may be caught.

In contrast to a surf riding board is the surf life saving double racing ski — the fastest form of standard man-powered craft used in the surf. This craft (while not manoeuvrable — its length, in excess of seven metres, severely limits manoeuvrability) is so fast that on occasions several hundred metres may be travelled from the time a wave is sighted until the time it is caught. On other occasions the craft may be paddled so fast that it is possible to catch a wave from behind. In general, as the ability of the paddler to propel his craft at a speed approaching that of the wave increases, the easier a wave may be caught, and the gentler the slope of the wave may be ridden. It is possible, for example, for very gentle wave slopes to be ridden on a single racing ski because even a slight lift from behind allows the paddler to increase the speed of the craft very quickly to approach that of the wave. Each type of craft influences in some way the pattern of movement occurring at surf locations, and in turn, affects the pattern of interaction among surfers.

It is typical for racing surf ski paddlers, for example, to travel quickly through the surf, often a 100 metres or more beyond it and then turn their craft sometime before the arrival of a set of waves. When catching a wave, the same general direction as the wave is maintained while the rider paddles on to it. Waves are caught easily on quite shallow slopes. Given reasonable levels of competence, many ski riders may ride the same wave close together but with little risk of collision, as the riders' direction is parallel and with the wave. Often, an additional incentive to control the craft at all stages of the ride is provided by another craft on the same wave, and adds to the challenges involved.

Many racing ski riders may be present at a surf location without the development of any obvious conflict of interests. Their general pattern is to be in with the wave and straight out again. The greater speed of the craft and its awkwardness in manoeuvring are factors that dictate the challenges provided and the way the craft is used. Much greater distances are travelled in much shorter times than on surf riding boards. Normally more waves may be caught per unit time and quite exhilarating rides may be achieved by chasing un-formed swells and even wind chop. There appear to be relatively few binding norms among racing surf ski riders, probably because problems of traffic regulation are not the same and the obvious conflict of interests in relation to wave resources differ from those existing among board riders.

The in-out movement of such craft at beach breaks, and a similar

pattern at point surf locations as illustrated in figure 8 do not normally develop a competitive situation in relation to wave resources. There are usually enough waves for everyone and the principles of traffic management are basically simple such as, riders coming in should avoid riders paddling out, and those travelling out should take cognizance of any evasive action by riders coming in and reciprocate to avoid collisions.

A very different state of affairs can develop among board riders at point surf locations, however. Where there are only one or two good take-off areas, traffic flow can become a major social problem to board riders. Normally each wishes to ride waves and avoid collisions with others. But they all need to be located nearby the take-off point in order to have a chance of catching the waves. Consequently, very congested situations can occur; waves become a particularly scarce resource, and a highly competitive situation can develop between surfers. Such situations now develop frequently at many of the better-known point surf locations when a good swell is running. They are clearly a function of the numbers of riders but, as will be shown, there are many other factors affecting the nature of the social interaction taking place.

DYNAMICS OF POINT SURF SURFING

The remainder of the chapter brings particular foci to bear on the nature of interaction among surfers during surfing sessions. The approaches taken are aimed both at describing the nature and influences of some features of surfing situations affecting the inter-action among surfers, and at isolating factors which influence the quality of interaction during surfing sessions.

General Patterns of Movement

There are typical patterns of movement among surfers at point surf locations, though several factors contribute to the specific patterns evolving from them.

Upon entering the water at a point surf location, surfers normally locate themselves near the take-off area. This is done usually by paddling to where other surfers are grouped or where waves appear to be breaking suitably. An important factor affecting movement patterns is the method used to reach the take-off area. A surfer at many point surf locations can enter the water close to the take-off area and approach it from the side. This involves paddling across the

direction of incoming waves and can be awkward under some circumstances: (e.g., when the waves are sufficiently large to wash the surfer back on to the area he has left; normally rocks. The second way of travelling to the take-off spot is to enter at the beach where the waves finally finish, and once through the beach, break to paddle on the outside of the incoming waves. Paddling out often involves the use of currents or rips returning incoming water. As waves do not usually occur where water is going out, a general circular pattern of movement among surfers evolves: in with the waves, and out without the waves. Such a circular pattern of movement is apparent also at a beach break where there is a sand bar or other feature making for a consistent and predictable wave break. A general illustration of the movements of surfers under typical beach break conditions is given in figure 8.

The general pattern of movement, including the distances travelled and frequency, is important in influencing the nature of interaction. Under conditions in which there are few surfers and adequate waves for everyone, "traffic regulation" is no problem and a situation of mutuality is fostered. The contrasting extreme is a situation in which there are a large number of surfers, short rides, easy return paddle to a small take-off area, and infrequent, inconsistent waves. The latter situation causes intense competition to develop. Where the general take-off location is clear, considerable jockeying for positions may take place during waiting periods. Such positioning may be exacerbated by surfers returning from previous rides and immediately paddling right into the middle of the take-off area, rather than waiting for an opening to present itself among those already there. Under such circumstances, the definition of the optimum take-off point may come to depend as much on social factors as on those physical factors which govern the "best" place to catch a wave in order to maximise the ride. Because, according to the "drop in" rule, the inside rider has right of way, riders anticipating the arrival of waves are frequently guided by strategic considerations of how they can best get the inside running.

Prowess dimensions become very important under such competitive conditions and the more skilful riders normally dominate the take-off area. Under such conditions, ridiculous extremes can emerge, where the desire to be on the inside leads surfers to attempt almost impossibly late take-offs. There are also other factors affecting the patterns of interaction. The example of significant individuals, such as well-known and respected surfers, can obviously affect the tenor of a particular surfing session, and the

cultural background of participants is another probable influence.*

There are two additional issues of importance to the nature of interaction among surfers. The first is concerned with the nature and types of craft used at surfing locations, and the second emphasizes the dynamic nature of surfing and the man-wave relationship. Some detail was sketched earlier in comparing surf life saving skis and short riding boards. Under point surf conditions, craft such as paddling boards and racing skis can be a part of the action without affecting in any way the interaction of board riders taking place in the take-off area. The behavior manifested at the take-off location, by and large, only affects those surfers needing to be located at the take-off point in order to catch waves (e.g., those on boards, belly boards, mats, or wave skis). Racing ski and paddling board riders who, because of the nature of their craft catch waves at a more shallow, often earlier, stage of their development than board riders, frequently operate parallel to and without interfering with surfers on craft located near the take-off point. Where one of these riders comes into contact with a surfer on the same wave, the "drop in" rule is expected to apply. Thus, a ski rider who takes a wave behind and on the outside of the take-off point from which the board riders are operating, is expected to keep out of the way of riders "locked in" on the inside of the wave. It is also assumed that the converse applies, for example, such board riders will stay closer to the more critical sections of the wave and not drive out along the wave some distance from the break if there is another surfer there. (See ski riders' movements relative to board riders in figure 9.)

The second issue is the essentially dynamic aspect of the surf. Surf patterns can change very quickly. The pattern of the sea can immediately effect a change in the interaction patterns and social emotional climate itself; even under the most aggressively competitive conditions the sea imposes its own rhythms and patterns on surfers to inhibit the incidence of open conflict. Waves come in sets and there is some waiting between sets; riders start taking waves, thereby reducing numbers in the take-off area and modifying the interactional pattern at that place; slight shifts and changes in the direction of waves add a chance element to the exact take-off point — these are all aspects of the dynamic nature of the sea affecting, to some extent, the social atmosphere in a surfing

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*   There is some reason for believing that Australian surfers are more characteristically aggressive than others, such as U.S. surfers. Several *Tracks* articles and interviews provide ground for such an hypothesis. See for example *Tracks* interview with Robert Connelley, Jan. 1971: 25.
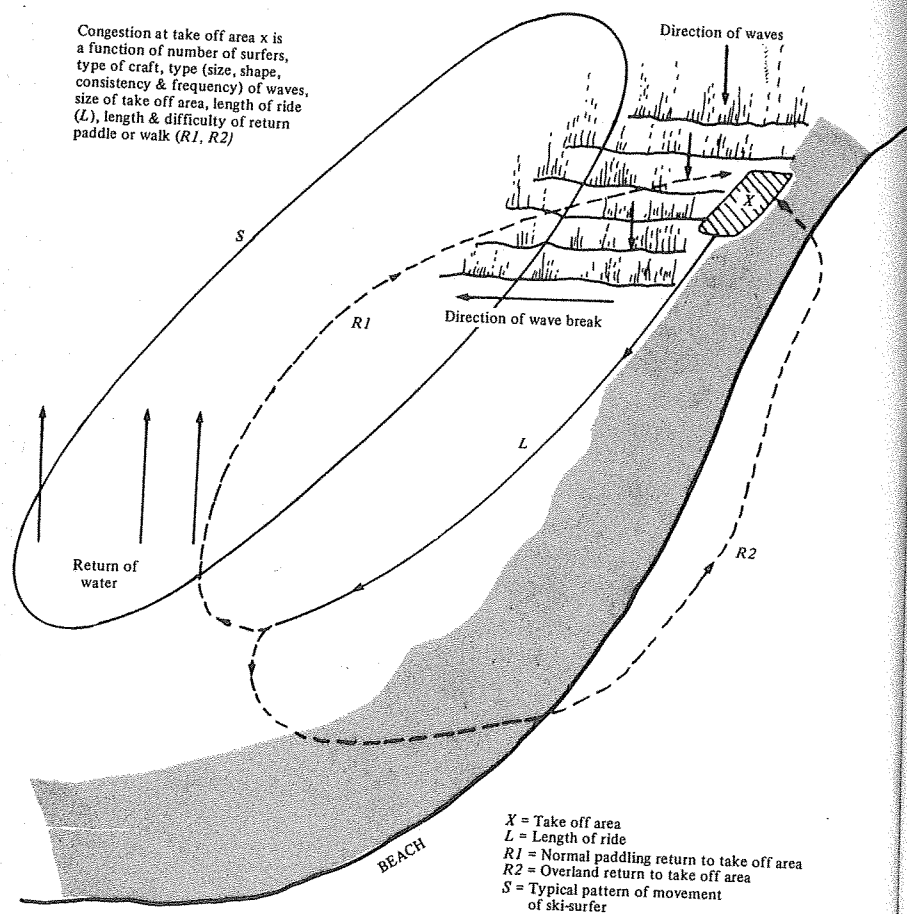
Congestion at take off area x is
a function of number of surfers,
type of craft, type (size, shape,
consistency & frequency) of waves,
size of take off area, length of ride
(L), length & difficulty of return
paddle or walk (R1, R2)

Direction of waves

Direction of wave break

S

R1

L

R2

Return of
water

BEACH

X = Take off area
L = Length of ride
R1 = Normal paddling return to take off area
R2 = Overland return to take off area
S = Typical pattern of movement
of ski-surfer

Fig. 9. Typical movement pattern among surfers during a "point surf" surfing session.

group. There are clearly, then, numerous factors contributing to the nature of movements among surfers at a surfing location, the amount of interaction taking place between them and the social climate in which the interaction takes place. It may tentatively be suggested that the nature and number of waves a surfer has are key factors in determining the quality of interaction measured by the degree of mutually exclusive behavior manifesting itself. More specifically, interaction is affected by the frequency, shape and size of the waves, the length of the ride, the time taken for the return paddle, the size of the take-off area, the number of surfers and the type of craft. Interaction patterns are also likely to reflect the broader

cultural environment in which surfers live and the specific constitution of the set of surfers at a particular location.

TWO WAYS OF PICTURING THE SURFING SESSION

The discussion so far has indicated some of the factors affecting the nature of interaction among surfers at a surfing location and has shown that particular combinations of these factors can contribute to hostility among surfers. This hostility generally appears to derive from competition for scarce wave resources.

Two different analytic approaches will now be taken. Both approaches picture the dynamics of surfing sessions in ways which permit a useful consideration of certain aspects of the relationships among surfers. The first may be termed a configurational approach, while the second focuses on the nature of the interests of surfers interacting in a "situated activity system".

A CONFIGURATIONAL APPROACH TO SURFING SESSIONS*

Looking at a set of surfers at a point location from some distance, it is possible to be struck by the shape of the mass as a whole and the way the shape of the mass changes in response to the waves. At one stage, a tightly packed pattern of surfers appears to form a jelly-like mass carried by the water, and may be moving as a whole, in or out, relative to land fixtures. On another occasion this mass will react to an incoming set of waves (e.g., one considerably larger than the average size of waves for the day) and as riders paddle out to sea to get over the waves before they break, the mass will move away from the main take-off area. From time to time, while the mass lifts over each successive swell, parts "break-off" as the more daring or better positioned surfers catch various waves. On other occasions, the mass may be grouped in a roughly circular shape around the main take-off area as ridable swells approach. Frequently, with a good set of five, six or seven waves, the mass may appear to disintegrate completely as the parts move away with the waves, leaving pieces apparently strung out in their wake. After such a set of waves has passed, the bits, typically float back to rejoin into a unified mass around the take-off area. The size of the mass may be increased or decreased as riders join or leave. There is a continually changing pattern as riders respond to the waves and to each other.*

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* Some ideas behind this approach derive from an article by Elias and Dunning (1966), who analyze football games from a similar viewpoint.

When a set of surfers is viewed in this way, attention is focused on the way the overall pattern changes over time. The changes are not random, but follow identifiable phases closely geared to the behavior of the sea. There are three distinct phases: regrouping, contraction and an explosive phase. The regrouping phase occurs between sets of waves. At this time, surfers are usually situated in a loose arrangement around the take-off area or are returning to that area after riding a wave. The contraction phase begins with the approach of a set of waves. As the waves draw close to the take-off area, the surfers bunch more closely together into a more tightly knit pattern. The explosive phase occurs when surfers catch waves and move away from the immediate vicinity of the take-off area.

This approach is useful in drawing attention to important aspects of the surfing session. The factors affecting interaction among surfers were discussed earlier and operate on a group of surfers as a whole. Furthermore, their operation occurs in phases and this is basic to understanding the surfing session because there are recurrent cycles experienced by individual surfers during the surfing session and they change in accord with the phase of the overall configuration. In order to understand the individual cycles of experience in detail, it is necessary to turn to some of the social psychological factors which operate during each phase.

The regrouping phase corresponds to a relaxation period for individuals. It is a time when surfers return to the proximity of the take-off area and recuperate from the emotional and physical exertion of their previous activity. The contraction phase corresponds to a time of increasing tension from the viewpoint of the individual surfer. Looking in detail at what happens at such times, it is possible to observe a general rise in the excitation level of individuals as waves approach. This is mixed with interpersonal tensions as riders paddle and jockey with each other to locate themselves appropriately for take off. The contraction phase is a time period during which social interaction is at its most intense. It is at this stage that the inter-rider tension arising from competition for wave resources — usually dormant during the relaxation phase — is manifested. As waves approach, the latent competition between riders tends to become blatant, and in many cases riders act on the basis of their own individualized drives, their own self-interests, at the expense of others. The mass as a whole can become extremely compact or "taut" shortly before the explosive phase, which occurs as riders commit themselves to take off on particular waves. The explosive phase is the period of greatest excitement for the successful riders taking off on appropriate waves; it is the time when

a switch from the intense social interaction of the pre-take-off period to the virtual exclusion of the social, as the rider turns his focus to his relationship with the wave. To the rider who has a wave to himself, everything else may be pushed aside. Here, suddenly, the source of tension is switched to the interaction of the individual and the wave.

In many ways this is the end point of the tensions deriving from competitive interaction in the pre-take-off phase. The ride itself is a high point and permits a playing out of the tensions of anticipation and generalized excitement. At the end of a ride relaxation follows as things begin to slow down. From intense excitement, in which the surfer has been striving to stay in tune with the wave, begins a return to a more "normal" state. Surfers at such time may report still being in a stage of heightened awareness, still excited or "stoked" as a result of the exhilaration of the ride, but this is intermixed with a sense of relief, a release from the immediate tensions and the exciting and vertiginous experiences of the ride itself. These are the moments the surfer seeks out. The presence of others is not necessary for this experience. Surfers are brought together on the basis of similar interests unlike football players who come together for the purpose of co-operating to the extent that the game of football may take place. Surfers interact together in a surfing session for the ostensible purpose of achieving individual goals, and although they may interact intensely, their quest is essentially individualistic.

In summary, where a set of surfers is viewed in terms of a configuration — a mass — there is a continual fluctuation in its shape. It can be seen to expand and to contract, to move and flow in a variety of ways. It may grow in size (number of constituent parts), reduce in size, disintegrate as parts break off and string out, and reform as they come together again. The pattern of grouping and regrouping follows in phases geared closely to the way the sea behaves. The spreading out of the mass around the take-off area during the regrouping phase is also a period of recuperation as riders, having taken waves in earlier sets, recover from their return paddle and, together with others already in the take-off area, relax in anticipation of the arrival of another set. The contraction of the mass corresponds to a period of tension for individuals as a set of waves approach. The explosive phase occurs as riders, in a state of relatively high excitement, take off on waves.

THE SURFING SESSION AS A SITUATED ACTIVITY SYSTEM

The surfing session itself may be viewed as a "situated activity system" (Goffman, 1967, 1969 & 1972). It is a gathering of surfers interacting with each other on the basis of similar interests. According to MacIver and Page (1962: 32), they are those private interests each individual has which, may or may not, resemble those of other individuals, whereas common interests are those which individuals share with others.

As far as the surfing session is concerned, individual interests may normally be characterized as "like" rather than "common". Each person is there apparently to catch and ride waves and in pursuing this activity they run the risk of conflicting with other persons whose like interests bring the individuals together in a basically competitive situation. Each surfer has an individualized interest in the surf and, under normal circumstances, this does not lead to a common shared interest. Occasionally, an external event or happening can suddenly change the main focus of the surfers' like interests and present a set of conditions in which all surfers have a common interest. Such an event occurs when an outside force switches the initial focus from wave riding to survival itself as in the case of a shark attack. Surfers then come together and act in a combined way to combat the shark or remove themselves as a group from the scene of the danger. Such circumstances are rare and serve to alter the nature of the surfing session in a radical manner.

There are various manifestations of what is at least an implicit recognition of the competitive situation existing in these surfing sessions. Occasionally, as already noted, competition may become overtly hostile. There are, however, other examples of latent hostility.

The first is the development of a norm of ignoring others, and the second, a form of masking behavior. Surfers may, and frequently do, choose to treat fellow surfers as if they were not there, even though they are interacting with them, often in an intense way. There is frequently no verbal communication during a surfing session except between one or two friends while waiting for waves.

The focus of each surfer is normally on the incoming waves, and each surfer may act as if he is only concerned about his relationship to the waves and not at all with other surfers. This may even extend to apparently not watching their rides. Such behavior seems to spring from an attitude that, in a competitive situation, a person who performs well and gets a good ride should not have the additional satisfaction of knowing that it was appreciated by his fellow surfers.

Yet the silence and attitude of apparent disregard belie the importance of others surfers during a surfing session. In fact, such persons form an audience of some importance to most other surfers, few of whom report the enjoyment of surfing alone and normally surf with other persons. The attitude of disregard is part of an interactive setting in which each surfer knows what he and the others are there for, that these interests are essentially "like" rather than "common", and so are mutually exclusive to some extent. Furthermore, most surfers seem to be aware of gestures and nonverbal forms of communication that indicate to other surfers what the situation is. Important among these are signs involving various degrees of threat. The positioning of one's legs over the back of a board in such a way that pushing off another board is possible is one of these threats. Another is when a surfer is attempting to paddle for a wave behind persons waiting closer inshore. He may steer a collision course, thereby requiring evasive action on the part of those who are in his way. Thus, while verbal forms of communication may be curtailed, there is evidence to suggest that other forms of communication take its place.

The second manifestation of the implicit recognition of what can be a competitive situation among surfers is the technique of masking one's commitment to a course of action. When a surfer assumes a somewhat nonchalant manner in an approach to a forthcoming take-off, while at the same time he is striving to out-paddle other surfers, he is masking his intentions. It appears likely that this behavior functions in at least two ways; firstly, it is likely to reduce the incidence of overt hostility by avoiding interpersonal confrontations; and secondly, more importantly for the surfer if successful, establishes the rider's prowess in the eyes of other surfers at that session, making it easier to repeat the performance.

What clearly emerges in many surfing sessions is a social hierarchy, or a pecking order in which some individuals are capable of establishing themselves as dominant. It is often the social trappings associated with surfing sessions that surfers react to when they report disliking crowded surfing. Again Goffman's (1972: 96) analyses of situated activity systems may be used for illustrative purposes. He observes that when the runs of a situated system are repeated with any frequency, fairly well-developed situated roles seem to emerge: "action comes to be divided into manageable bundles, each a set of acts that can be compatibly performed by a single participant . . . a situated role, then, is a bundle of activities visibly performed before a set of others and visibly meshed into the activities these others perform.'"

The surfer who is able to paddle into a critical take-off situation — especially if it involves competing with surfers already in the take-off area — and successfully gains the inside position, is carving a situated role for himself. Repeat performances serve to enhance or detract from the establishment of such a position. The playing of aggressive roles in relation to other surfers at take-off is often not explicit. The technique of ignoring and an affected nonchalence may assist the aggressive role player to maintain a façade which obscures his intentions and gives some insulation from direct confrontation with other surfers.

Viewing interaction during a surfing session from both a configurational viewpoint and also in terms of the interests of participants, a useful total picture emerges. It becomes possible to see the general nature of the configuration of surfers in terms of a tension deriving from their "like" interests in riding waves at a particular surfing location during a specific session. The tension, which appears to be based to some extent on the generalized excitement and individualized reaction to the surfing act, also appears to have roots, in many circumstances at least, in the interpersonal dynamics of the situation. Individuals compete with each other for scarce wave resources. The norms that develop to make possible "traffic" regulation under conditions in which there is considerable likelihood of conflict (because of the mutually exclusive nature of the situation) are inextricably intertwined with the interactive social system in which they emerge and function. It has been argued that the "drop in" rule is a functional necessity (and a cross-cultural universal) during point surfing, but the way this rule is interpreted, the latitudes of tolerance for deviation, and the nature of control mechanisms for sanctioning it, vary tremendously. Under conditions where a group of friends are surfing together, the "drop in" rule may be little more than a loose guide. Here it is occasionally possible to see two or even three persons sharing a wave and sacrificing some of their freedom of movement accordingly. In this case, should a wipe-out or collision occur, social control reactions are likely to be minimal, with a good chance that the whole incident will be treated as a joke.

Under crowded, impersonal conditions, the "drop in" rule tends to be enforced more rigidly and may lead to a very competitive situation in the take-off area as surfers each try to get the inside running. Deviants are more likely to be subject to comparatively severe control measures (e.g., abuse, physical violence on the spot, or similar measures delivered when the person is paddling for a future wave or riding on a wave).

These two extreme cases illustrate the dynamic interrelationship between the social system in which norms emerge and the nature of the norms themselves. As far as surfing is concerned, the relationship appears to manifest itself in terms of more explicit formulation, more rigid interpretation and more obvious and severe sanctions as the potentiality for conflict increases. On the other hand, the type of social behavior which the norms guide to some extent can influence and change the nature or interpretation of the norms themselves. As already noted, the "drop in" rule under competitive conditions can lead to a cycle in which surfers may attempt to take-off in ever more "tight" situations. On some extremely competitive occasions, the take-offs are so critical that the wave is virtually unmakeable even for the very best surfers. This can lead to a situation where parallel take-off points may develop. Despite the "drop in" rule, two or more surfers may paddle parallel to each other when attempting to catch a wave, on the chance that the inside rider will be wiped out, leaving the wave to those outside. The "drop in" rule still applies once the riders are on the wave. If the surfer on the inside looks as if he is going to "make the first section", outside riders are expected to give way. It is at the take-off point that the interpretation of the rule changes. Instead of parallel surfers giving way when they observe someone inside them taking off, they are much more likely to speculate that the inside rider will get wiped out, and take the wave also, even if they must later give way by kicking off the wave.

The interplay of forces in these situations resemble tensions which Elias and Dunning (1966: 401) have pointed to in their analysis of sport games. These authors posit a "context of interdependent polarities built into the game pattern [as providing] the main motive for the group dynamics of a football game". A number of the polarities (slightly modified) appear particularly relevant to surfers at point surf locations. Some of these are: the polarity between co-operation and competition (among those interacting at a surfing location); the polarity between affectionate identification and hostile rivalry; the polarity between the enjoyment of aggression by individual surfers and the need to sink such enjoyment in the interests of the assembly as a whole; and the polarity between elasticity and fixity of normative guides to behavior. While not formulated in this way, much of the foregoing discussion has concerned behavior indicated by these polarities.

Implicit throughout this chapter is the essentially informal nature of surf board riding for most board riders. Few board riders are members of any formal organization. The content of the surf board riding subculture learnt by neophyte board riders does not therefore

take place in the context of formal organizations. Where subcultural learning occurs directly through participation in surfing activities, it does so as a result of interaction in informal situations. In spite of this, however, numerous factors have been detailed affecting the way surfing activity is structured. There is an identifiable social structure to the surf board riding session. Surfers who interact with others at surfing locations learn "appropriate" ways of behaving. They discover that there are numerous guides to action. No detailed treatment has been given of the way these processes operate but some indication of the major learnings associated with the surfing session have been detailed. Many of these learnings are necessary for satisfactory performance at a surfing session. They are, therefore, an important part of the surfing subculture. Furthermore, the board riders' prowess that he values as part of his activity have been shown to be at least partially influenced by the nature of the social interaction occurring at surf board riding locations.

PART FIVE

Modelling Ludic Activity