Surfacing Tension: Toward a Political Ecological Critique of Surfing Representations

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Abstract

Historically, surfing has been perceived as an environmentally conscious endeavor. Some attribute this environmentalism to the ways in which surfing became a manifestation of American counter-cultural political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, although others, like deep ecologists, indicate an inherent environmentalism in surfing, which makes surfing an important tool in developing an ecologically mature 'self'. The evolution of surf culture, however, presents complexities to these representations; the commodification of surfing introduces contradictions to surfing as ecologically benign. Technological advances, while dramatically changing the face of surfing, have also had significant impacts on the environment. Surf-parks, world travel, and the construction of surfboards bring to light not only the complications of an environmentally conscious surfer, but also the complexities which all humans face as ecological actors. Surfing may lead to an ecological ethic, but at what cost to the environment? Using the critical theory of political ecology, this research aims to illuminate the contradictory relationship between representations of surfing and the environment.

Introduction

It is estimated that more than 10 million people around the world enjoy surfing in its various forms (Buckley 2002). Surfers occupy a unique position in their beloved pastime as they linger amid the most ecologically productive parts of the ocean. The stretch of coastal ocean affects and is most affected by human activity than any other part of the ocean (Center for Sponsored Coastal Ocean Research 2005). Being immersed in these critical environments, surfers have the opportunity to essentially voice the changes that are rapidly affecting the coast. In many ways, surfers have spoken against the human-imposed changes that have been plaguing the oceans in which they dwell. Kelly Slater, often regarded as the greatest surfer in the world, in considering surfers as environmentalists, affirms, 'if you're one, you're the other – you have to be' (Kampion 2003, 165). In contrast, some critics have asserted that the vast majority of surfers have failed to be critical of the surfing industry itself, and have neglected to

accept their duty as ecologically responsible beings by continuing to engage in environmentally degrading practices that have been constructed into the surfing lifestyle (Latourrette 2004).

While there is little doubt that surfing can be a deeply profound and humbling experience, this research seeks to unveil the representations of surfing that have fostered the culture's reputation as environmentally enlightened (at best, and environmentally neutral at least) vis-à-vis its praxis. Political ecology provides several theoretical frameworks that we feel offer fruitful avenues for understanding contradictory elements within surf culture. We offer a political ecological critique of surfing and its representations following several theoretical threads. We juxtapose popular and scholarly representations of surf culture with the realities of surfing in the United States, using four epistemologies, as outlined by political ecological theorists (Robbins 2004): radical constructivism, green materialism, the degradation and marginalization thesis, and feminist political ecological perspectives.

Situating Surfing Studies

Despite concerns about the legitimacy of researching surf culture, there is a broad base of literature regarding surfing, although relatively little of it has focused on the environmental impacts of the sport or lifestyle. Sport studies have grown considerably in recent decades, as researchers have discovered that 'mediated sport is saturated with ideas, values, images, and discourses which at times, reflect, construct, naturalize, legitimize, challenge and even reconstitute attitudes which permeate wider society' (Boyle and Haynes 2000, 111).

Much of the environmentally relevant surfing literature comes from within the surfing community itself and tends to celebrate surfing as a force aligned with nature (Crockett 2005; Kampion 2003, 2006). Although wider cultural perspectives tend to apply a sense of environmentalism to surf culture as a whole, within surf culture this ethic is most commonly attached to the more counter-cultural 'soul surfers', as opposed to competitive surfers, ideas which were born of the 1960s and 1970s (Kampion 2003; Taylor 2007). The 1970s saw a residual presence of the explosion and cultural creativity of the mainstream countercultural movements of the 1960s, within wider American society and surf culture. These decades presented unique questions that would ultimately shape the future of the nation, and modern perceptions of surfing itself. The dichotomous question for surfers was, 'Is riding waves a sport or an art?' (Kampion 2003, 77).

This question fundamentally divided some surfing communities. Surf historian Drew Kampion asserts that two distinct sects formed as a result: 'soul surfers', 'a reactionary movement . . . [that] resonated with the era's back–to–the–land Luddite sensibilities and followed a parallel course off the beaten path,' and competitive surfers, who 'saw surfing as a ladder to

stardom and greatness or as a vehicle for simple domination' (Kampion 2003, 77). This era saw the expanding ideals of surfing as a competitive endeavor and the increasing objectivity imposed by scoring mechanisms and competition circuits, which sparked the counter-cultural 'soul' movement whose alternative ideals have lived on and are still apparent in modern surfing communities. The competitive surfing scene eventually took root and has become the mainstream surfing ideal, although the soul surfer movement is still flourishing today, and is an increasingly fashionable version of the surfing lifestyle.

It is important to note that surfing is in many ways defiant to cultural conventions, but the form of surfing that became the ideal, the competitive, conformist spirit – the more dominating approach to surfing – can be seen as a direct product of the growing consumer culture of the 1980s, mirroring the widespread capitalist growth of the United States. During the mid to late 1970s, surfing birthed the 'first professional surfing governing body', which evolved into the modern ASP [Association of Surfing Professionals], and crowned the first professional surfing world champion in 1976 (Aspworldtour.com 2008). By the 1980s, the early ASP further solidified and the world surfing tour expanded from 'isolated pockets of structured competition surfing' 'to an excess of 20 internationally rated events' (Aspworldtour.com 2008). These events, coupled with the expansion of surf media, ushered in 'a booming surf industry' and 'paved the way for enormous growth' for the ASP tour (Figure 1) and the popularity of surfing on a global scale (Aspworldtour.com 2008) (Figure 2).

Fig. 1. The crowd for a professional surf contest. Photograph courtesy of Jimmy Wilson.

Fig. 2. Overcrowding has become a source of contention for many surfing communities. Photograph courtesy of Jimmy Wilson.

Drawing on the work of Marxist philosophy, political ecologists have documented the inherent flaws in capitalism: that 'capitalist production requires the extraction of surpluses from labor and nature' and that one of the fundamental flaws of capitalism is that environmental degradation inevitably follows (Robbins 2004, 46). From this, one would surmise that as surfing has grown into a capitalist enterprise, it has also come to increasingly exploit and degrade the environment. That is not to say, of course, that there are not meaningful outliers to this idea, where surfers have helped to protect natural environments, rather, that environmental degradation has been the general trend in popularized surfing locales.

ROMANTICIZING NATURE

Coastal studies have revealed that the beach is revered in Western cultures as a place of relaxation, escape and release of inhibitions (Dutton 1983). The culture of the beach is often represented as 'a symbolic rejection of the values of the consumer society' (Banham 1971, 20). Furthermore, there is a perception of the beach as a meeting of human and uninhibited wild nature where 'boundaries between nature and culture are constantly blurred' (Ormrod 2006, 3). These perceptions coupled with a pervasive romantic view of the ocean (Figures 3 and 4), lingering from the Victorian era, form the ideological foundations for perceptions of the beachscape by surfers, and of wider representations of surfing culture itself (Ford and Brown 2006).

Fig. 3. The romantic surfing ideal. Photograph courtesy of Jimmy Wilson.

Fig. 4. The archetypal beach scene. Photograph courtesy of Jimmy Wilson.

Willems–Braun (1997) has written on the importance of recognizing conceptions of nature and realizing how these conceptions tend to 'naturalize' interactions with the environment (p. 24). In *Buried Epistemologies*, he reveals the importance of conscious representation, stating,

> There is always, as both Derrida (1976) and Spivak (1988) have noted, a 'double session' to representation; to represent as a proxy is always already to frame a constituency. Both aspects of representation, speaking of and speaking for, are present simultaneously. Failure to attend to this . . . risks engaging in an unacknowledged, hidden, or buried politics . . . one needs to be vigilant about the problem and politics of representation. (Willems-Braun 1997, 25)

In a similar fashion to Willems-Braun's exploration of the hidden politics behind representations of nature in (post)colonial British Columbia, we intend to explore the buried implications beneath popular representations of surfing. Essentially, because there is no *a priori* reality from which to judge a phenomenon, such as surf culture, its representations, born out of past conceptions of related phenomena, form the reality.

The ethics of deep ecology are important to examine when considering the ecological ethics of surfers, not only because they provide a meaningful attempt at recognizing and reforming ecological degradation on a fundamental, philosophical level, but also because deep ecologists have presented their own representation of surfing (Sessions 1995). Seeking a biocentric worldview, deep ecologists distinguish themselves from shallow ecologists, who employ dominant anthropocentric perspectives of nature and natural resources. Foundational principles of deep ecology rest on assumptions about the intrinsic value of all living beings, the importance of personal experience with wild nature and the development of the 'ecological self', that is, 'developing a sense of place and intuitive understanding of the connections between humans and nonhumans together with a respect for the principle of biocentric equality' (Devall and Sessions 1985, 188). Deep ecology represents an ideology that informs ecological values, but it has been widely criticized for political inaction.

Amid the relentlessly mechanized culture in which we live, there is increasingly little contact with the so-called 'natural' world. Many, especially popular surfing magazines, frequently address themes regarding the supreme connection with 'wild nature' which surfing is capable of tapping into as it serves as a kind of escapism from 'civilization' (George 2001; Kampion 2006). Tim Baker, in his book *High Surf: The World's Most Inspiring Surfers*, profiles 'the surfing world's most inspiring characters, encountered over two decades of surf writing, to highlight the life lessons . . . to be gained from a lifestyle built around waveriding' and voices perspectives that address 'waveriding [a]s far more than mere sport or recreation' (Baker 2007). Rather, through the life experiences of his interviewees, Baker focuses his book on the unique experiences and lessons to be had from surfing and being immersed in and connected to nature. Similarly, surf historian Drew Kampion insists that surf culture is richer than most because it is one of the most powerful ways to experience 'wild nature'. He asserts that surfing as a phenomenon (as well as a philosophy), feeds a freedom 'born out of real, actual day-to-day interaction with the Wild Earth' (2006).

In explaining the experience of surfing, many surfers liken it to a kind of spirituality, ascribing a sense of sacredness to the act, as well as notions of purity in being totally engulfed in nature. In an early edition of *Surfer Magazine*, one surfer verified, 'surfing is a release from the exploding tensions of twentieth century living, escape from the hustling, bustling city world of steel and concrete, a return to nature's reality' (George 2001, 38). The admittance of this longing for return reifies the dualism in the language and representations of Western culture, and surfing by extension; the deeply ingrained divide between nature and culture. This dualism, and a host of others, is essential in assessing surfing culture because it shapes, as exhibited in earlier statements, our very motivations for engaging in such a practice. Escapism is then evidence of the constructed dualism between nature and culture, suggesting that there is a pristine part of the world that humans are somehow separate from, and necessitating the escape from culture into this allegedly unspoiled, nonhuman place called 'nature'. This dualistic worldview also molds the systems of domination that shape the way we think about, and act within our environment. The 'radical' constructivist perspective of political ecology exposes this idea, asserting that 'it is the social context alone that conditions and determines our concepts for understanding the world, and so *creates the world*' (Robbins 2004, 114).

Deep ecologists have recognized surfing as one of the most useful ways of developing an ecologically mature 'self' (Devall and Sessions 1985). However, deep ecologists Bill Devall and George Sessions do a disservice to their romantic arguments by trying to separate surfing as an individual act from surf culture. Surfing, in and out of the water, has all but completely become a scene in modernity as it has been thrust into mainstream culture. Jamie Williams found this to be especially true in her study of surfers in the UK as approximately half of the respondents to her survey agreed that 'pre- and après-surf experiences are as important as surfing itself' (2002).

In *Surfing the Third Millennium: Commodifying the Visual Argot*, David Langan gives an analysis of the commodification of surfing, and writes on the importance of 'surfing capital', a specific manifestation of Pierre Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital, in terms of the major manufacturers of surfing apparel and lifestyle (Langan 2001). He attempts to distinguish, in a similar fashion to deep ecologists, between the 'surfing body', which forms the movement and exists 'away from the beach . . . recognized by a style of clothing . . . a "politicized form",' and the actual body of the surfer who performs the act of wave riding. McGloin's (2005) *Surfing Nations* calls attention to the instability of this convenient vision,

> [B]ecause the movement that exists 'away from the beach' produces the individual surfer whose surfing style is realized *at the beach*. Surfing capital is therefore the product of active bodies who consume the products associated

with the movement so they can re/present themselves as a particular body type or politicized form. (p. 133)

As exhibited in McGloin's quote, the surfing body may be seen as a consumptive body, not necessarily immersed in the ecological milieu, but self-involved and culturally defined as a commodity. The increasingly mainstream nature of once 'alternative' outdoor activities, like skateboarding and snowboarding, similarly highlights the growing demand for this politicized body image.

   A variety of surfing analyses have aimed, directly or indirectly, to reveal the degree to which cultural capital, rather than material wealth, is essential to the surfing lifestyle (Ormrod 2005). Cultural critic Bourdieu 'defined cultural capital as knowledge accumulated through upbringing and education that confers social status, in a system of distinction in which refinement in cultural tastes is the foremost marker of status' (quoted in Ford and Brown 2006, 62). Surfing, as with other lifestyle sports, embodies this concentrated concern with authenticity that defines status in surf culture. The pertinent contradiction that arises from this investigation is that, because surfing is not popularly defined by material accumulation, it necessitates cultural capital, which, to some degree, is defined by environmental consumption.

THE PRAXIS OF SURFING AS ENVIRONMENTALLY DESTRUCTIVE

In *Surfing and Social Theory*, a book that has proven to be the most expansive collection of academic works on surfing, Nick Ford and David Brown (2006) highlight various theoretical analyses of surfing, although they neglect to incorporate political ecological perspectives. A pertinent example of their work uses Arjun Appadurai's five dimensions of the global cultural economy (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, and ideoscapes) to describe the 'cultural flow' of surfing. The finanscape is relevant to the political ecological discussion of surfing because it is most obviously of materialist concern. Although surfing itself may not be an inherently ecologically destructive act, many externalities of surfing, as a modern capitalist endeavor, are manifestations of the ethics of consumption and accumulation, which tend to negatively affect the environment (O'Connor 1996). Regarding the ideoscapes of surfing, Ford and Brown note the general lack of overtly political ideologies inherent in surfing cultures, with the exception of the ever present 'thread of ecological concern running through surf media', as they assure that 'the surfing world does contain some substantial ecologically oriented bodies' (p. 51). Although Ford and Brown mention two specific organizations, the Surfrider Foundation and Surfers Against Sewage, they neglect to elaborate on this concept, leaving readers to make the seemingly natural ideological extension of accepting all surfers as somehow ecologically concerned.

Jamie Williams's (2002) multimethod research involving surfing identities in the UK proves useful as a basis for investigating surf culture from an ecological perspective. Williams found that 87% of her respondents who had been participating in surfing for more than 6 years agreed to the statement 'environmental consciousness is an important part of surfing', highlighting the degree to which environmental consciousness apparently correlates with extended participation in surfing. It is not within the scope of Williams work to delve deeper into the specific implications of environmental consciousness as an important part of surfing, so she did not identify the behaviors, if any, which accompany this awareness.

Glen Henning, co-founder of the Surfrider Foundation, a surfing environmentalist organization, asserts, 'Polynesian traditions [of aloha] aside, the fundamental problem with surfing is how powerfully it drives the ego' (Henning 2000). The threat of this, he states, is that 'it gets to the point where we dare think of ourselves as masters of the waves after a good ride.' In effect, while surfing can certainly be a powerful agent of changing an individual's relationship to the environment, it is increasingly a reassurance of preconceived hierarchical notions of the environment and anthropocentric worldviews, which disrupts the romanticized vision of surfers as solely harmonious with their environments. If we, as surfers, think of ourselves as masters of waves, then how can we simultaneously be becoming more ecologically mature, as ecological maturity requires a certain slaying of the anthropocentric self?

On a material level, the act of modern surfing requires a level of consuming nature in order to be closer to it. Perhaps the greatest contradictions in the surfing lifestyle are surfboards, the very foundation of surfing, which, for the majority of modern surfing, have been made from toxic petrochemicals (Taylor 2000). In addition, most surf wax, an essential surfing product for standard surfboards used by the vast majority of surfers, and wetsuits are primarily made from crude oil products, which are by no means environmentally sound considering the political and ecological means necessary to retrieve the resources. The adaptation of ultra light polyurethane-foam materials and use of modern surfboard wax concoctions forever changed the maneuverability of surfboards and the accessibility of surfing for a wider spectrum of potential surfers, but surfboard and wax construction have tended to be overlooked (sometimes consciously) by surfers as inconsistent with environmentally sensitive representations of surf culture.

Surfboard construction and the manufacturing process have greatly contributed to surfing's rapid growth in the late twentieth century. The evolution of the surfboard combined with increased accessibility to an endless array of waves via international travel has led to highly specialized boards that are constructed to perform only in particular conditions. This specialization has led to the modern idea of the 'quiver', the concept that surfers need a multitude of surfboards in order to be prepared for any type

Fig. 5. Motorized vehicles, such as jet skis, now have their place in the surfing line-up. Photograph courtesy of Jimmy Wilson.

of surfing condition. This idea severely detracts from the highly simplified and romanticized framing of surfing by deep ecologists, as only requiring one surfboard, one's body, and a wave (Figure 5).

Green materialism, of Marxist philosophy, provides valuable insight into the logic of market expansion behind the idea of the 'quiver'. This frame illuminates the role of creative destruction in creating demand for newer, more-specialized products, an inherent aspect of capitalism. Thus, the consumption of surfboards, and associated specialty products, by consumers can be seen as a direct product of the capitalistic culture from which it came. Although critics have tended to emphasize the importance of cultural rather than material capital for surf culture, the idea of the 'quiver' is certainly an important starting point for the material exception.

With the current explosion of modern technology, surfers are being presented with new ways of exercising their passion. Perhaps the most significant in terms of widespread appeal is that of the newly conceived Surfpark, a kind of theme park which houses a series of surfing wave pools. Surfparks have already been successfully opened around the world, most notably in California and Japan, although Orlando, Florida, will soon be home to one of the most extensive collections of surfing wave pools that the United States has ever seen.

Deep ecologists and surfers themselves often explicitly cite the 'act' of surfing as a pure 'psychological removal of the self from the urban scene' that is especially useful in developing one's ecological consciousness

Fig. 6. The construction and preliminary use of a Surfpark. Photograph courtesy of Jimmy Wilson.

(Devall and Sessions 1985, 188). But, what if the act of surfing is taking place tens of miles from the nearest ocean, over a plastic composite floor and surrounded by a 1.1-million-square-foot mall and entertainment complex, fine dining and hoards of people waiting to take their turn in the line-up? This mass marketing will soon be surfing reality as the first of a series of new Surfparks opens in 'the heart of Orlando's theme park zone' (Surfparks 2004).

No available research has seriously touched on the enormous environ-mental impact this structure will have, not to mention the resources that will be necessary to power it. Not only does the concept of the Surfpark inherently rely on the vast consumption of nature, but also it seeks to completely eradicate the natural processes and spontaneity that make surfing so unique and potentially personally beneficial (Figure 6). This, another seeming contradiction in the consumer choices of surfers, proves to be an interesting point of investigation considering surfers' perceived and actual environmental ethics, as it brings a new dimension to the surfing experience, driving it from its roots in freedom (at least from physical structures) and nature. Additionally, it plays into the predictive pattern of capitalist enterprise elucidated by green materialist theory. Robbins (2004) writes in *Political Ecology*, 'by expropriating nature's capital and under investing in restoration or repair of impacted ecological systems, capitalist firms squeeze surplus from the landscape' (p. 51). Despite the nearby ocean, surfer entrepreneurs have chosen to construct their own

artificial surfing playgrounds, with little concern for the ecosystems that they are paving over and the extraneous resources they are consuming for capitalist gain.

In recent years, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has become involved in regulating the noxious materials used in surfboards. Although EPA standards have forced surfboard materials to become somewhat less toxic, these same standards have counter-productively decreased the durability of surfboards and have thus led to a higher production of surfboards (Latourrette 2004). This regulation by the EPA recently culminated in the closure of the world's largest supplier of foam surfboard blanks: Clark Foam. Clark Foam, which supplied the foam blanks for as many as 9 out of 10 American wave riders over the past 40 years, was shut down due to massive breaching of environmental standards (Finnegan 2006). Since then, surfboard suppliers have been given what may be seen as a gift or a curse (depending on whose interests are being considered) in being forced to rethink traditional surfboard construction. Alternatives to polyurethane-foam surfboards abound, though to relatively little acclaim (Taylor 2000). Although these newer composite surfboards, constructed largely from epoxy, styrofoam and/or carbon fiber, tend to be more durable, they introduce new environmental and social challenges as they are constructed from toxic chemicals themselves, and are increasingly being manufactured overseas, factors that also play into the neocolonialist facet of surf culture which will be explored in the following section (Borden 2005).

While surfing is often framed as the relationship among a single surfboard, surfer and wave, it is also connected to the exploratory spirit that idealizes, and actively seeks, a situation with perpetual surfing opportunities. This can certainly be attributed to the so-called 'travel bug' that has become such an essential aspect of the surfer, which can be traced to Bruce Brown's enduring idyllic surfing lifestyle in the *Endless Summer*, but more directly to the endless push of the necessity of travel in all surfing publications (Brown 1966). Surfboards, Surfparks, surf wax, 'quivers', and surf travel are all salient examples of how surfing, in many ways, is 'predicated on [the] consum[ption]', of goods, services, and natural resources (Ormrod 2005, 44).

NEOCOLONIALISM IN SURFING FRONTIERS

Travel is central to the surfing lifestyle. Surf travel has become such an integral component of what it means to be a surfer in modernity, that it has gained notoriety among scholars, who have compared modern American surfing to the myth of the American frontier (Buckley 2002; McGloin 2005 Ormrod 2005; Pointing 2005). Surfers, in their quest for the 'perfect' wave, have been portrayed as 'frontiersmen venturing into the wilderness and colonizing waves in undiscovered territories' (Ormrod

2005, 48). In her analysis of the surfing film the *Endless Summer*, Joan Ormrod suggests that the reason for the vast popularity of the film was because it so soundly played into the consumerist vision of youth during the 1950s and 1960s. She asserts that the film was 'so attractive to American culture in this period because [the surfer's quest for the perfect wave] articulat[ed] a re-enactment of the conquering of the American Frontier' (Ormrod 2005, 40).

By the 1960s, the only major frontiers facing the United States were space and the ocean; surfers, as noted in a 1968 edition of the *Saturday Evening Post*, represent[ed] the pursuit of 'the last frontier' (Ormrod 2005, 43). A major element of the *Endless Summer* involved not only 'discovering' new surfbreaks, but also naming them. Although sometimes breaks are given indigenous names corresponding to the beaches they are near, Ormrod illuminates how the tradition of renaming surfing spaces tends to bury the names that native people have given their particular places, 'echo[ing] a colonial enterprise as [one] claims symbolic ownership of the wilderness for surfing and America' (p. 49). The quest for the perfect wave, then, 'emulates an underpinning value of American culture, an aim to extend the frontier of "civilization" and explore the wilderness' (Ormrod 2005, 41).

The idea of surfing as a kind of neocolonialism has important ramifications in terms of the consumption of nature that these extensive travels require. When considering the resources required to power the cars, boats, planes, and buses that surfers rely on for their quests into 'wild nature', it is hard to reconcile the surfing lifestyle, and the lifestyles of many other varieties of outdoor sportspeople, as ones with little ecological impact. Surf travel may contribute to the homogenization and degradation of foreign cultures, as they too are consumed as the exotic 'other' (Ormrod 2005; Pointing 2005).

The degradation and marginalization thesis presents an important political ecological framework for the effects that surfing tourism often imparts on its host nations. Paul Robbins (2004) affirms, 'economic and political change predicates ecological transformation' (p. 130). As tourist economies grow in nations to which surfers frequently travel, it is possible that 'otherwise environmentally innocuous local production systems undergo transition to overexploitation of natural resources on which they depend' (Robbins 2004, 131).

Research in the field of ecotourism may serve as case studies for the degradation and marginalization thesis and prove significant in our discussion of surfing as several studies have revealed the extent to which 'relatively innocuous pursuits (e.g. swimming, surfing, sailboarding and dinghy sailing) . . . marketed for [their] environmentally-friendly nature . . . cause measurable deterioration' to the world's ecosystems 'despite good management practices' (Davenport 2006, 280). J.L. Davenport's research, the *Impact of Tourism and Personal Leisure Transport on Coastal Environments: A*

Fig. 7. 'Discovery' on a chartered surfing boat trip. Photograph courtesy of Jimmy Wilson.

review, specifically highlights the deleterious effects of coastal tourism, such as 'intertidal trampling by tourists on rocky/sandy [substrates]' that negatively affect these ecosystems. R. Buckley's work, *Surf Tourism and Sustainable Development in Indo-Pacific Islands*, closely examines and thoroughly outlines the economic, social, and environmental impacts of surf tourism (Buckley 2002, 416).

Pointing's (2005) study of the construction and consumption of surfing tourist spaces elucidates specific instances of how modern surfing has been largely shaped into a commodified industry which engages in a kind of destructive neocolonialism (Pointing 2005). She notes that the major sources of surfing media have collectively played on the normative imagery of exotic surfing locales, and have established an *Endless Summer*-like vision of the untouched surfing nirvana on foreign shores as fundamental to modern surfing (Figure 7). This apolitical vision is perhaps no better depicted than in Albert Falzon's (1972) surf classic *Morning of the Earth*, set on the as yet 'undiscovered' (by surfers) coasts of Indonesia and, specifically, the surfbreak 'Uluwatu' (Pointing 2005). Of this film, Steve Barilotti observes:

> *Morning of the Earth* did little to dispel the sentimental notion of an isolated South Seas utopia that had somehow survived intact after the 400 years of Dutch colonial rule, two world wars and a recent military coup . . . *Morning* depicted a naïve surfer's paradise of perfect green barrels, flower bedizened festivals and sultry Balinese maidens porting water on their heads down the trail to Uluwatu. (Barlotti in Pointing 2005, 10)

Native peoples in these locales are depicted in Selwyn's (1993) 'view from the throne' style of travel writing in which locals serve as mysterious inferior others, only to observe and confirm the traveler's experiences. Pointing (2005) shows how this film and the tourist economy it sparked, initiated radical changes in this area of the world, not the least being changes in the landscape. By 1977, the first all-inclusive surf-camp was opened there, followed by tour operators and live-aboard yachts for surf travelers. The ongoing surf exploitation of the 1990s led to the surfing industry's 'discovery' of the Mentawai Islands off of the coast Sumatra (Pointing 2005). Within 6 years of their introduction to the surf industry, the Mentawai's became home to at least 35 surf charter boats, an exploding real estate market driven (and managed) by wealthy Westerners, and even the conversion of whole islands into luxury resorts. In 2001, *Tracks* surfing magazine described the Mentawai archipelago as the world's most photo-graphed waves (Blakely 2001).

Pointing's (2005) research highlights how dramatically the lives of native peoples have been completely 'reconstructed from subsistence agriculturalists to service providers for traveling surfers' in many areas of Mentawai, such as Nias. Questioning the social costs of their travels has been rare among surfers, but one surf commentator, Peter Reeves, dares to ask,

> Surfing has certainly boosted the Lagundri economy [sic], but I feel it's come at a huge price . . . The alcoholism, gambling, crime, and on my last trip here, the small kid I taught to surf in 1981 is now a pimp for working girls on the point. I wonder if the simple life of harvesting coconuts and rice would have been a better destiny for these people? (Pointing 2005, 15)

This portrayal, and many of the portrayals of native people within surfing literature, vastly oversimplifies the agency of locals, and unjustly suggests a rejection of technological advancements by indigenous peoples. While it presents a particularly disconnected version of interactions between surfer-traveler and native person, the statement speaks to the fact that many of the benefits of outsider initiated development have not accrued for the majority of the native people working in this area, in a way that better development models might imagine.

This major shift in livelihoods for the local people, coupled with the onslaught of development, has obviously deeply impacted the Mentawai environment and culture. The impacts of the surfing tourism industry are not confined only to the Mentawai, however. As Barilotti affirmed, once surfing space becomes commodified, 'trash, roads, erosion, water pollution, development, environmental degradation, resource depletion – inevitably follow . . . the list of soiled Third-World surf paradises . . . is long and growing' (quoted in Pointing 2005, 16). That is not to say that surfing is an inherently destructive force decimating beaches around the world, rather, that neocolonialist institutions can be reproduced through surfing cultures. Through the lens of neocolonialism, we are able to see how

certain developments, including many sparked by the growth of surfing tourism, rather than providing goods, offer the natural beauty of exotic locations up for consumption, and the use of such areas is generally dictated through the terms of the user rather than the provider.

Sport studies have become a concentrated site for exploring relations of domination and subordination (Boyle and Haynes 2000). These developments reveal 'that sporting practices are historically produced, socially constructed and culturally defined to serve the interests and needs of powerful groups in society' (Hall 1996, 11). Many practitioners of surfing consider gender a 'non-issue' within surfing culture, assuming that women have been integrated into the media and sport unproblematically as surfing has grown more popular among women and girls over the past decade (Ford and Brown 2006). Gender studies work here to reveal tensions between or among gender types in particular social situations. The gender-neutral assumption of women's integration into surf culture overlooks the tendency to prioritize men's surfing experiences and knowledge. Using a gender study perspective helps us to begin the process of empowering multigendered perspectives of surfing, as opposed to single gender perspectives.

What has been overlooked in these assumptions, however, is the masculine center around which surfing revolves and the gendered power relations embedded in surf culture. This centered position makes men and masculinity the assumed subject around which all surfing knowledge is constructed. More specifically, the dominant ideological constructs that serve as the core of the surfing gender order are hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy (Ford and Brown 2006). Using the work of feminist political ecologists, we can visualize the connection between environmental and social domination. The purpose of gender studies, and using this lens to view surf culture, is not to erase gender, or the masculine point of view, but to identify and eradicate gender oppressions and construct surfing knowledge from many perspectives.

Although women have helped to shift their dominant gender roles within surfing communities, they still face the 'chronic low pay, uncertain contracts, limited team support, limited media coverage and sponsorship deals' familiar to many professional sports women (Ford and Brown 2006, 103). If we view surf culture as containing a variety of resources that become available to its participants, including, for example, access to line-ups, or socially constructed surfing spaces, then we may begin to see how surfing may be framed as destructive in a patriarchical sense. Because hegemonic masculinity essentially 'manages' the cultural and physical resources of surf culture, it is fundamentally biased against the non-patriarchical.

The values and activities of hegemonic masculinity, as Riane Eisler (1995) states, involve toughness, strength, heterosexuality, conquest, and domination. These are precisely the values that have come to define the core of mainstream surfing culture. Ecofeminist writings target these hyper–masculine traits as the root cause for the widespread subjugation of both women and the environment (Diamond and Orenstein 1990). Ecofeminist poststructuralist perspectives, which have been incorporated into feminist political ecology, 'examine the gendered and cultural under-pinning of hegemonic discourses in developing an understanding of the ways in which these discourses work to construct women and nature, each as the same, but different and inferior to males' (Barron 1995, 16; Roche-leau et al. 1996). Non–essentialist ecofeminist writings illuminate how these socially constructed exploitative views undermine environmental sustainability and equitable gender relations simultaneously by revealing how the interests of the dominant group are supported by discourses on gender and environment.

The highest compliment a woman surfer can receive, for example, is to be described as 'surfing like a man'. In regard to Lisa Anderson, four-time world champion women's surfer, who is often credited with igniting the women's surfing renaissance in the 1990s, Drew Kampion noted, 'it was the time, and she was the one. Just the looks, just the style, and everyone said she surfed like a man' (Kampion 2003, 145; Figure 8). This statement

Fig. 8. Professional surfer Sofia Mulanovich is a member of the select post-Lisa Anderson cohort of female surfers that enjoy increased acceptance into the masculine core of profes-sional surfing. Photograph courtesy of Jimmy Wilson.

is telling of the masculine standard that has been set in surfing, a standard that has been overtly exclusive of women in general. While essentialist perspectives have plagued the surfing community, justifying the inferiority of women's surfing to men's through biological origins, a real analysis of the gender order in surfing culture recognizes that hegemonic masculine standards are actually what prevent gender equality within surfing cultures, and perhaps broader environmental concern more generally.

Discussion

Many have begun to note that representations of surfing as an environ-mentally defined activity are problematic (Brown 2007; Pointing 2005). Passionate environmentalists, such as Yvon Chouniard, founder of surf company Patagonia, have openly criticized surfboard makers, surf clothing manufacturers, and surfers in general for 'their lack of environmental leadership and independent thought' (Latourrette 2004, 1) This article sought to illuminate the fact that surf culture, and surfers themselves, represent surfing as aligned with nature and as ecologically sensitive, but that this is a simplified view of the reality of surf culture. The aim was not to demonize the culture, but rather to present a critical look at surfer's, and surf culture's, place in the environment through the critical lens of political ecology.

We recognize that there is much dissent among political ecologists regarding the primacy of representative, materialist, and gendered approaches to the study of the human place in nature (Castree 2005; Robbins 2004). Indeed, many of the theoretical frames discussed above are often posited against one another in academic debates, but our task here has not been to resolve these disputes. Rather, we demonstrate how understandings of surfers as environmentally aligned actors can be critiqued using any of these multiple approaches.

The intent of this work has not been to expose surfing as a global environmental crisis; this would overstate the sport's impact. Nevertheless, we can classify surfing within a group of activities, which also includes sports such as rock climbing, hiking, kayaking, and mountain biking, that is redefining the human interface with nature. These recreational activities are popularly framed as environmentally and culturally progressive or benign, but by using political ecological frames we can unearth facets of these activities that are contradictory.

By focusing on the praxis of surfing and surf culture, we can see how it can apolitically reify worldviews and activities that are at odds with its representations. Four diverse approaches from political ecological thought illustrate these contradictions and set the stage for further work in surfing and, perhaps, other outdoor recreational activity studies. These approaches, summarized most coherently by Paul Robbins (2004), are united by a focus on the human-environment interface, but differ markedly in their underpinnings and foci.

Radical constructivist approaches allow us to deconstruct the romantic imagery that pervades surfing, particularly references to deep ecology that set up dualistic modes of thinking that artificially separate cultures of consumption from the act of surfing. Green materialist approaches allow us to expose the surfing industry as a polluter through the making of surfing products and surf itself. Degradation and marginalization approaches allow us to critique the neocolonial dimension of surf tourism, as a sub-type of ecotourism, where international consumption drives development trajectories in less-developed locales. Feminist perspectives allow us to probe how masculine hegemony conflates ideas of nature and women to perpetuate relationships of domination.

Each of these approaches successfully illuminates the problematic interface of surfing and surf culture with the environment, and this speaks to the depth of the contradictions inherent to broader categories of outdoor recreation, tourism, and consumption today. Surfing is but one way that people experience the world through recreation, and such interaction may lead to deeper individual knowledge of human place within the environment. Ideally, outdoor recreation should engage its subjects in constructive ways that foster the health of people and the environment. Political ecological approaches help us to imagine how this might be done better.

In response to one of the largest surfer-led protests to date, Margo Oberg, decorated female surfing champion, in response to an oil spill, tellingly responded, 'so many good days of surfing were ruined for me by the oil. The sea, my temple and my play ground, was destroyed by a few people trying to make money' (Warshaw 2003). Although this comment reflects the countercultural vein running through surfing that seems anti-capitalistic, Oberg's statement also reflects the underlying ethic that tends to motivate surfers to act politically: self-interest and preservation of their pastime. The key idea here being that surfers do not necessarily possess acutely developed ecological ethics, rather, they, like most environmental activists, are inspired to act out of self-preservation, not necessarily any realization of biocentrism or environmental justice.

Although surfing does not necessarily preclude environmentalism or a deeply ecological ethic, it certainly does present a valuable opportunity for a reassessment of one's place, both on land and within the water. Although some researchers have trivialized the role of environmental movement among surfers, especially Reed (1999), this research reveals the possibility that surfers can, and should, play an important role in environmental issues because they have a unique perspective to voice and feel the immediacy of the problems we all face as ecological actors. Before this can happen, however, there must be a more coherently organized movement willing to cut a sustained and critical eye at the surfing industry itself and the inherently environmentally destructive practices embedded in the culture.

Short Biographies

Lauren L. Hill recently graduated from Stetson University, Deland, FL, USA, with a dual degree in Environmental Science and Social Science. As a former professional surfer, Lauren spent the past 8 years involved in surfing competitions and within the surf industry. Her research interests involve the intersection of cultural geography, gender studies, and political ecology.

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Note

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