

'Gang mentality' of middle-age surfers keeps outsiders off Palos Verdes Estates waves



A surfer rides a big wave at Lunada Bay, where a local group called the Bay Boys keeps away outsiders. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)



By **Garrett Therolf**

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Jose Lopez, a 38-year-old fisherman from Bell, stepped gingerly to the bluff's edge. He scanned the trail where, for years, beachgoers who don't live in Palos Verdes Estates have complained that they get bombarded with rocks thrown by a local surf tribe that calls themselves the Bay Boys.

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He noted that from the beach, 100 feet below, he would not be able to see the parking area, where outsiders' cars have been vandalized.

A burly man, Lopez knitted his forehead and decided to drive away rather than head to the beach and start casting for perch.

"Everyone knows how it can be here," he said.

"How it can be" at Lunada Bay's well-shaped surf break has made news on and off for years.

This summer, a video shot surreptitiously by the Guardian showed local surfers intimidating journalists as they prepare to paddle out.

"People will just ... duke it out, ... work your car and get in fights," one voice says as a hidden camera rolls.

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The video has gone viral, bringing Lunada Bay's reputation for hostility to outsiders back into public focus.

Perhaps most embarrassing to the leaders of this usually placid community of multimillion-dollar homes, stunning vistas and a \$163,000 median income is that the journalists also recorded their effort to report the harassment.

A dispatcher at the police station is caught on camera saying: "We know all of them. They are infamous around here."

"They are pretty much grown men in little men's mind-set," she said. "They don't like anyone who isn't one of the Bay Boys surfing down there. It literally is like a game with kids on a schoolyard to them, and they don't want you playing on their swing set. It is what it is. If you feel uncomfortable, you know, then don't do it."

Palos Verdes Estates Police Chief Jeff Kepley acknowledged that a group of "affluent, mostly middle-age men" have adopted a "gang mentality" to Lunada Bay's waves.

"Listen," he said, "Our city is calm, and every time the media stirs up the issue, it sure stirs up. I would prefer that our council and our local residents sort this out ourselves."

Kepley said the officer in the video had been "dealt with internally."

In the past, police have charged members of the Bay Boys with criminal assault. But in the last year, there have been no arrests or sting operations. The boat used for water patrols sits unused while it awaits repairs. Kepley said enforcement has dipped because the department rarely receives reports of trouble.

"I am embarrassed by the localism that has shed a negative light on our city, but I definitely need people to come forward and report it when something happens," he said.

City Council members declined to be interviewed about the problem. Mayor James Goodhart said in a brief email that the bay is "open to the public and they are welcome."

A little more than a decade ago, a previous chief set up a camera to watch the waves from the bluff. Such cameras keep an eye on popular surf breaks up and down the coast. But the camera focused on Lunada Bay lasted only three months. Residents complained that a Web broadcast would bring too many outsiders into town and the council ordered it removed.

The hostility toward outsiders is hardly unique to the Palos Verdes Peninsula. Surf breaks in Hawaii, Oxnard, La Jolla and Hollister Ranch in Santa Barbara County have similar reputations.

In Lunada Bay's case, it's the rocky reef and points of land on both sides that helped earn its coveted status, allowing waves to unspool as one rideable ribbon, not crash at once in an unbroken wall of water.

Michael Sisson, 60, an attorney based in Torrance, said he has heard about "localism" at Lunada Bay since was 15. He said recorded complaints are low because the community understands the Bay Boys have the "tacit support" of the police.

Sisson has twice sued members of the Bay Boys and the city of Palos Verdes Estates on behalf of "outsiders" whom locals injured. In 1996, a Bay Boy agreed to pay \$15,000 in damages and Palos Verdes Estates conceded to issue a public proclamation that the beach was open to everyone. In 2002, Sisson won another undisclosed settlement from a Bay Boy.

"It seems like it's been getting worse lately," Sisson said. "... Every generation, it rises again."

Sisson has urged the city to issue a gang injunction against the Bay Boys to prevent them from congregating in Lunada Bay, but said the city refused to pursue the idea.

Michael Fern, a deputy district attorney who worked for years in the office's hard-core gang division, said such injunctions can require thousands of government staff hours to pursue and are typically used only against the most violent street gangs.

Chad Nelsen, chief executive of the Surfrider Foundation, a lobbying group that pushes for public access to waves, said the city should do more to stop the threats and harassment.

"Look," he said, "it's gotten nasty and violent over the years.... I surf some of the most crowded waves in Southern California or the world, and in most of those places you see the social order working."

Up and down the state, surfers informally compete to paddle into the most advantageous position at prime takeoff points and take turns riding the waves. Locals and more veteran surfers enjoy a higher level of deference.

"There are unwritten rules that we all respect and you see scuffles pretty much anywhere people break the social order," Nelsen said. "But at Lunada Bay, this is a case where you don't even get to that point because they don't even give you a chance to even get in the water."

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