

## Is Surfing Still a Sport?

- *The Culture of Catching Waves*

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March 15, 2011

The Beach Boys' in their 1962 release "*Surfin Safari*" sang: "*Let's go surfin now, everybody's learning how, come on and safari with me.*" These words about surfing continue to apply today, but well beyond just learning a sport.



Surfing has variously been described as a sport, an art form, a religion and a lifestyle. Surfers themselves have been described as: *a diverse culture based on riding waves with practitioners often dedicating their lives to searching for the perfect wave.* A true sport involves physical, competitive, or recreational activities. Surfing can be thought of as an individual sport that is only limited by the surfer's ability and the conditions of the waves. Some surf competitively or as a recreational activity, while others make it the central focus of their lives.

Clearly, surfing has now transcended from an activity with religious and social roots, starting long ago in the Hawaiian Islands, to a sport, and finally a modern culture and lifestyle. As such, it now influences the lives of millions of surfers, would be surfers, and wanna-be surfers, and in doing so has created a multi-billion dollar industry. This industry includes directly and non-directly related products and services, spinoff activities--including other board related sports--and in some parts of the world, a tourism driver. Not all sports can move from fun and recreation to lifestyle and culture. Surfing did because of multiple influences.

### Psychosocial Development

"Psychosocial" refers to psychological development in and interaction with a social environment. It addresses solutions for individual challenges in interacting with an element in a person's social environment. This concept applies to surfing as a cultural influence, particularly in adolescent development, and also as an individual reaches middle age or older?

According to psychosocial researcher Eric Erickson<sup>i</sup>; the adolescent is concerned with how they appear to others. Superego identity is the accrued confidence that the outer sameness and continuity prepared in the future are matched by the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for oneself. Certainly, within a beach-centered environment, surfing and its culture would be a major influence. This is particularly true along the Southern California coastline, throughout the Hawaiian Islands, Australia's coastal cities, and even along the Costa Rican coastline. One could also suggest that board related sports like skateboarding, snowboarding, and even Stand up Paddle would have similar influences in non-coastline regions.

"Teens of today generally face more issues and problems as compared to their peers from yesteryears. Today's teenagers appear to be more complex and

dynamic.” According to author Mia Ava<sup>ii</sup> She adds that “since everyone is a product of his/her influences, identifying the major influences of a teenager’s life will help understand they act the way they do.” Obviously, culture tops the list of influences. Movies, music, television, magazines, and the internet are cultural components which greatly influence teens.

In this author’s opinion, middle age adults are also influenced by external factors, but less than in their youth. However, these early influences often reappear as one ages, particularly once an individual has the established financial ability to pursue and reestablish their fonder memories. Consider how many aging adults who surfed when they were young, take up surfing again in their later years. The concept will be discussed further in the NSSIA referenced study later in this paper.

### **Culture and Lifestyle**

What constitutes a culture? Culture includes collectively the art, music, literature, and related intellectual activities of a group. This concept incorporates having shared beliefs and practices including the attitudes that characterize them as a group of people.

A lifestyle is a way of life or manner of living that reflects the characteristic of a person, group, or culture. It implies a conscious or unconscious choice between one set of behaviors and some other sets of behaviors. It includes the way people live, their social relations, attitudes, consumption, entertainment, dress and even spirituality.

In some parts of the world like Costa Rica and Hawaii, surfing is a significant part of the local culture and often a major contributor to an individual’s early socialization. In the case with ancient Hawaiians, it formed the basis of a cultural religion.

Lifestyles also traditionally provide a focus for targeting consumers in the business world by advertisers with marketers continuously endeavoring to match consumer wants with products. Some successful surfers capitalize on this business focus and make a career out of surfing by receiving sponsorships for competing, or marketing and selling surf related products and clothing. Other “soul surfers” abhor the commercialism and practice the sport purely for personal enjoyment

### **Evolving Influence over Time**

There is evidence that the sport of “wave-sliding” was practiced in the Sandwich Isles (Hawaii) in ancient times. It was the ruling class of these ancient Hawaiians who promoted surfing. Their class system determined how, why and with what materials surfboards were to be made. The board shapers were called a Kahunas<sup>iii</sup>, and making a board was considered a religious act.

In the period from the 1900s to the early 1960s, surfing was a practice and lifestyle of a select few. It was considered a renegade sport consisting primarily of social misfits who lived at the beach and seldom worked. These surfers continuously looked for virgin breaks, partied hard, were friendly and supportive of newcomers to their lifestyle and had tremendous respect for the ocean. Many of my surfing

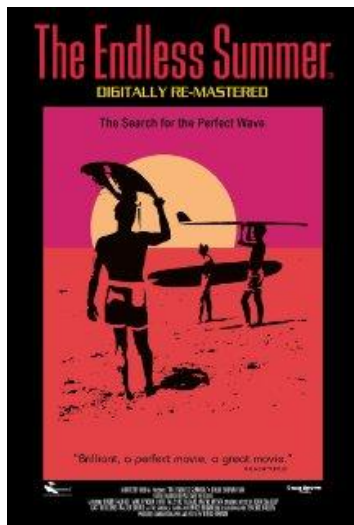
friends, including surfing legend Mickey Dora, often considered themselves part of an underground society.

In the late 1950s and early 60s the world of surfing and the perspective of surfers began to change. Films like “Gidget” and “Endless Summer”; music by the Beach Boys, Jan and Dean, the Ventures, the Safaris and Dick Dale; the emergence of surf-oriented magazines, television coverage of surf events on “Wide World of Sports”; and finally, the growth in spinoff-related board sports like skateboarding, snowboarding, wind surfing, kite surfing, and skimboarding influenced the world and the sport of surfing in major ways.

A classic Hollywood surf movie of its day was Gidget (1959), with Sandra Dee as Malibu female surfer Kathy Kohner. Previous non-Hollywood, surf-related movies ranged from amateur films without a storyline or sound, to some with sound and state-of-the-art cinematography. Most early “real” surf movies had no sound tracts and were often narrated by the filmmakers themselves.



When “Endless Summer” was released in 1964, it not only introduced people to the fun-loving carefree culture of surfers but it also suggested that it would be possible to follow the summer around the world, making it endless.



This suggestion significantly influenced the youth culture of the time, and pushing them into finding their own uncrowded surf, meeting new people and riding the perfect wave.

Film critic Roger Ebert said of Bruce Brown's film, "The beautiful photography he brought home almost makes you wonder if Hollywood hasn't been trying too hard." Time magazine wrote, "Brown leaves analysis of the surf-cult mystique to seagoing sociologists, but demonstrates quite spiritedly that some of the brave souls mistaken for beachniks are, in fact, converts to a difficult, dangerous and dazzling sport." In his review for The New York Times, Robert Alden wrote, "the subject matter itself - the

challenge and the joy of a sport that is part swimming, part skiing, part sky-diving and part Russian roulette - is buoyant fun."

Popular music at the time also reflected this new perspective of the sport. The Beach Boys had a significant influence on rock and roll and the emerging youth sub-culture of the time. The words to the Beach Boys 1963 hit “Catch A Wave” addressed this surf-cult mystique:

*Not just a fad 'cause it's been going on so long  
Catch a wave, catch a wave  
All the surfers going strong*

*They said it wouldn't last too long  
They'll eat their words with a fork and spoon and watch 'em  
They'll hit the road and all be surfin' soon  
And when they catch a wave they'll be sittin' on top of the world  
Catch a wave and you're sittin' on top of the world*

Those words were clearly on the right path as a cultural influence considering the growth of the sport since that time and also that the business world took advantage of the Beach Boys' influence on young people—the message of freedom and an alternative non-establishment lifestyle. This influence gave us the current worldwide inland and coastal area, multi-billion dollar industry with a significant lifestyle influence on consumer items purchased by non-surfers and surfers alike. Contributions by the Beach Boys included:

- They brought the surf craze into the national consciousness
- Their harmonies had a major influence on both pop and rock music
- They created a rock soundtrack focused on summer fun
- They developed a repertoire that memorialized the California youth surf culture.

Another musical group, the Sufaris, influenced the emerging teenage “surf rock” world in 1963 with their two songs "Surfer Joe" and "Wipe Out." *Wipe Out*, one of the best-remembered instrumental songs of the period, is identified by its introduction before the music starts, a cracking sound (imitating a breaking surf board), and a maniacal high pitched laugh followed by the only two words of the song, “wipe out”. The beat of this song recreated an almost physical sense of what it feels like to drop in on a big wave.

Dick Dale is the legendary “*King of the Surf Guitar*.” Dick created his own Dick Dale Sound in the 60s with Fender Amplifiers. He subsequently significantly influenced the entire music industry and inspired other surf bands to evolve. Dick Dale also did a lot to make the Fender Stratocaster the most recognized electric guitar in the world. One of his songs, “Miserlou” has also been featured in many movies such as Beach Party movies, Pulp Fiction, and even a recent pizza advertisement.

The magazine “Surfer” was another early influence. First produced as a small book in 1959 by John Severson, the magazine consisted primarily of photos of exotic places with beautiful waves being surfed. Originally targeting a youthful male audience, Surfer and similar magazines have visualized the beauty of sport and its healthy lifestyles for audiences all over the world. Surfer became extremely successful and many similar magazines have evolved since that time.





## Religion

Many individuals and organizations over the years have promoted surfing as a form of nature religion. Byron Taylor<sup>iv</sup> wrote an extensive paper on this titled *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*<sup>v</sup> for a university journal in 2010. In it he describes the emotional and spiritual connections people have (and do not have) with nature. He supports the concept that environments shape human perceptions and how human perceptions shape environmental and social systems.



One worldwide organization, the Christian Surfers Association, helps surfers combine their love of the sport with their own religious or spiritual beliefs. According to their mission statement “We have a passion for Jesus, a passion for surfing and passion for our world surfing communities. Combined, this makes for a worldwide family of individuals and mission groups who are dedicated to reaching the world surfing community for Jesus.”

The deep connection between surfing and religion exists today in many forms as exemplified by the Annual Blessing of the Waves ceremony held in October each year in Huntington Beach (pictured).

Another spiritual connection with surfing exhibits itself often in the numerous paddle-outs such as the one pictured honoring surfers who have died. This last tribute and recognition of a true surfer has become a regular phenomenon with the passing of many of the “Golden Age” surfers in recent years.



Billy Sarosi in his 2005 history class essay: *Popularizing the Surf Culture*, had this to say about the connection between surf culture and religion: “The rising popularity of surf culture portended influence in other, unexpected, areas. While the boarding lifestyle influenced the leisure time of many California youth, people thought that was as far as it would go. However, it managed to enter, of all institutions, the Church.” According to an LA Times article<sup>vi</sup>, teenagers met daily during the summer of 1967 to discuss their own brand of LSD—learning, surfing, and discussion. The Red Hill Lutheran Church used surf culture to increase youths’ interest in biblical studies and other religious programs. By providing surfing

lessons, Chip Worthington, program director of the Red Hill Lutheran Church, captured their curiosity and taught youth life lessons about drugs and other contemporary issues.

### The Modern Era

Modern surf orientated magazines cover surfing, historical roots, lifestyle, fashion, art, music and other social activities. They are primarily visually biased with pictures of renowned surfers, beautiful landscapes, female surfers and non-surfers, and plenty of advertising. They focus on surf trips to exotic breaks (search of the perfect wave), competitions, and interviews with professional surfers, surf enthusiasts and people in the industry, profiling their lifestyles, etc. These magazines can be found in newsstands both near the ocean and well inland from coastal environments.



Surf music continues to influence our culture today. According to Executive Producer Jim Facey<sup>vii</sup>, “*The Surfari*s classic surf band continues to ride that wave with Jim Pash’s original dynamic surf sound. Today that one and only sound comes from lead guitarist Paul Johnson & Jim Fuller. Paul’s unique dynamic style double picking takes *The Surfari*s on that ride to a Surfin Surfari. Playing such hits as *Wipe Out*, *Surfer Joe*, *Point Panic*, *Scatter Shield*, and many more. Three days before Jim Pash died he told me to remember that this band is the one and only true *Surfari*s sound<sup>viii</sup>. ”

On his D.R. Surfboards website, Dennis Ryder<sup>ix</sup>, a surfer and musician claims that many in the 1960s thought "Surfing is just a fad fuelled by this crazy music with electric guitars, Fenders no less!" Considering the humble beginnings of Fender and their association with Dick Dale, Fender by itself has grown into a multi-million dollar business.



Founded in 1993, the North East Surf Music Alliance (NESMA)<sup>x</sup> is an organization of bands dedicated to further expanding the musical expression of the surf/instrumental genre to the general population, and to accept and support the different influences that original music and bands have contributed, created, and developed, and are playing. NESMA is currently a 90+ band member network. According to the NESMA website, an average of 6 new surf/instrumental bands began their careers each year from 2000-2010 in the eastern part of the U.S. alone. Further, according to NESMA’s Sandy "Oceana" Rosado; “There are many other bands in the western U.S., and indeed throughout the world. Spikes of interest bring surf music into the mainstream. Surf music, like surfing and surf culture, continues to expand and grow despite the ebb and flow of popular culture.”



A big consumer base involving big money is another indicator of cultural influence. In our modern culture, personal image, clothing selection, interests, and lifestyles have all been influenced by surf wear related marketing. Both Old Navy and Hollister Co. focus marketing the California surfing and beachwear culture towards mainstream America. Even the original large surf companies like Quiksilver, Rip Curl, Billabong, Hurley and O'Neil, are now high-street brand names, listed on the stock exchange or owned by even bigger corporate giants. Car manufacturers use beach and surfing scenes to advertise their products for lifestyle themes. Other products, such as sun glasses and even blood pressure medications have been promoted with

similar lifestyle themes. A huge travel and tourism industry has grown in tropical climates that promote both exotic beaches and learning to surf vacations.

Television also continually uses surfing backdrop themes in its series shows like 90210 and Hawaii 50.

The surf industry itself is large and growing according to the Surf Industry Manufacturers Association (SIMA), the official working trade association of more than 300 surf industry suppliers. SIMA's Executive Director, Sean Smith in a 2006 press release: "Several years ago, when the surf industry began exploding, naysayers hypothesized that the industry could plateau, largely because surfing was going mainstream with corporate giants like Target and Abercrombie cashing in on the popularity of the surf culture. The reality is that those companies helped surf brands get smarter about distribution and marketing, and that's why they continue to grow." Among the products tracked by SIMA are surf and/or skate related footwear, accessories (sunglasses, watches, hats, etc), apparel, wetsuits, and hard goods (decks, fins, boards, etc.)



In July 2009, SIMA published a market study that determined there was approximately \$7.5 Billion retail sales that year and that the surf industry had shown substantial growth of 10% for the previous five years. According to Doug Palladini, SIMA President, "While the surf/skate retail industry is not immune to the downward pressure on retail sales nationwide caused by the global recession, the resiliency of the surf/skate industry is very positive and promising." Additionally, he stated: "Powerful brands with close connections to their consumers will see us through these challenging times and put us in a strong position as the overall economy rebounds."

The study further states: "Passion and youth largely drive the surf industry. Surfers and skaters view the industry as a lifestyle, not a passing trend. Because of this, core retailers often tend to feel the downward pressure of sales in tough economic

time less than the larger retailers and chains as the core retailers attract enthusiasts. While large-scale retailers may attract customers seeking mainstream fashion trends, when times get tough, those customers often are not loyal. For core surfers and skaters their sport is a necessity and, while they might not be spending as much, they keep frequenting their surf and skate shops looking to fill-in on items such as accessories and replacing old or worn-out items.”

In recent years, the internet has become a very dominant medium and has a cumulative effect that creates ultimately the kind of culture in which teens live in. The internet has become the hub by which American teenagers tend to establish their long term values and ethics. It’s interesting that surfing has had a major presence on the internet since its original construct as DARPANET. The ftp blog site for surfers, alt.surfing was established at the Naval Research Lab in 1988 and still exists today. Subsequently, the first surfing oriented website, Snake’s Surf Page, was placed on the Internet in 1990. Surfing oriented sites have become widespread and highly visible on the Internet in recent years.

Another important statistic from surf products and advertising on the Internet comes from Global Surf Industries. According to Mark Kelly, sales manager for GSI, a major board supplier; “Currently [www.surfindustries.com](http://www.surfindustries.com) gets about 20,000 unique visitors a week. Last year we had over a million visitors to our site. The traffic is growing by a minimum of 50% per year.



An interesting trend regarding surfing reappears during middle adulthood. The US based National Surf Schools and Instructors Association<sup>xi</sup>, the official US certifying association for the surf instructor and surf school industry, has experienced significant growth since its founding. NSSIA surveyed surf schools throughout the world in 2008 for the Wall Street Journal. What they found was that there is a significantly increasing number of adults in the 40 to 50 year old range taking surfing lessons. Additionally, a larger number of middle age females than males are taking lessons. Among the conclusions of the study, the age and increase in lessons overall is likely due to the increasing popularity of the sport (including the lifestyle), the influence of movies and television advertising, the availability of inexpensive longboards, and the increasing number of schools and surf camps located in interesting and exotic places to visit, particularly during the winter months. One interesting opinion of surf school owners was they felt that all lifestyle sports are becoming more popular in this decade.

Among other conclusions of the study related to the opinion of surf school owners and instructors was that many men and women over fifty are returning back to surfing again after retiring at a younger age. They felt this could be attributed to contemporary equipment being safer and conducive for learning by heavier adults with less physical endurance. Fifty plus students are trying surfing for the first time with their children in a family lesson. This could possibly be attributed to the amount of information or awareness about surfing and it representing an “all ages” fun activity for the whole family that wasn’t available five to ten years ago.



Ruben Cotam, International Director for the NSSIA, stated in 2010 that “Surfing and the Surf School Industry have been identified by the Mexican government as major tourism activities to be supported and expanded.” The situation in Peru is also similar. In fact, surfing related tourism is also growing throughout all Central and South America as well as in the US based on the ever increasing number of surf schools and camps springing up in these locations yearly.



Environmental interest and influences have a significant following in many parts of the world. Surfing plays a role in this arena as well. The Surfrider Foundation<sup>xiii</sup> is an organization dedicated to the protection and enjoyment of the world’s oceans, waves and beaches. Founded in 1984 by a handful of surfers, the organization now maintains over 50,000 members and 90 chapters worldwide.

They have proven to be powerful spokespeople and caretakers of the ocean environment with many surfers and non-surfers alike of all ages being strongly influenced by this organization.

Finally, the real estate market in countries that have strong surfing communities and offer mild climates have experienced tremendous growth in recent years. Surfers in increasing numbers have been purchasing property along coastal regions in Costa Rica. It may be that they don’t still surf that much, but these retired folks still long for the beach environment and/or lifestyle they have enjoyed over the years. Having worked until retirement most can now afford it.

ReMax Costa Rica has recognized recent record development near “surfable” waves. On their website they claim that until just a few years ago, commercial development in Costa Rica was characterized by inexpensive land, less sophisticated basic condos and rustic cabanas construction, and underfinanced small developers. More recently, experienced developers from around the world have now moved into the marketplace with many quality developments being built in close proximity to attractive beaches.

## **Conclusions**

Trends over the past few years suggest the surf culture/lifestyle phenomena is expanding worldwide, particularly among both the adolescent and middle age demographics. Manufacturing and sales in direct and non-direct related products continue to grow, Governments in temperate countries have recognized the future growth and tourism potential of surfing and even the real estate market in these countries is experiencing related sustained growth. It can now be concluded that due to its exposure to television, films, music, magazines, product advertising, and the Internet, surfing represents an alluring, exciting, and possibly ego consuming activity many teenagers can wish for, even if they are physically located far from an area where they can actually participate. In some cases, surfing often influences the way some individuals spend their time. These influences have led to their large scale consumption of related clothing and other products, as well as significant growth in the surf industry itself. If the teen does live in a surfing area, peer pressure and the drive to affiliate with the surfing culture often leads to the individual learning the sport. On the other hand, often many of those who live in

more remote areas but like the lifestyle and culture, encompassing both teenagers and middle age people, want to vacation to surfing areas and even take a surfing lesson.

Is there still a question that surfing has gone way beyond its status as a sport? The evidence proves surfing has transcended. Just ask any Surfer, or for that matter, most high school age students. They will almost unanimously say it's fun, cool, good exercise, a way to commune with nature, or a way to meet people with similar feelings. Others, including non-surfers, might also say they like the beach, cloths, "the surfer look", the carefree attitude of surfers, or it looks fun. Notice that among the comments expressed, only exercise relates to a sport and everything else described are lifestyle or cultural in nature. Surfing has indeed transcended itself into a culture and lifestyle.

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<sup>i</sup> Erik Erikson (15 June 1902 – 12 May 1994) was a Danish-German-American developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst known for his theory on social development of human beings.

<sup>ii</sup> *America's Culture and Influence among Teenagers*, Mia Ava

<sup>iii</sup> Kahuna is a Hawaiian word, defined in the Pukui & Elbert (1986) as a "Priest, sorcerer, magician, wizard, minister, expert in any profession.

<sup>iv</sup> Bron Taylor is a professor of religion and nature, environmental ethics, and environmental studies, at the University of Florida

<sup>v</sup> University of California Press, 103-126. [ISBN 9780520261006](#)

<sup>vi</sup> Youth Get Their Own LSD, Vi Smith. LA Times: July, 23, 1967

<sup>vii</sup> Jim Facey. Executive Director of Jim Facey Productions ([jimfacey.com](http://jimfacey.com)), is a music & TV producer, show host, and runs an artist management company for the past 25 years. Jim has worked with the following professional music artist: The Surfaris, The Chantays, The Ventures, Dick Dale, Neil Norman, Tim Reynolds, Dave Matthews, Marcus Eaton, Danny Barnes, Dan Whitley, Young Fletcher, Chuck E. Bumps, Duo-Tones Plus (with Dusty Watson & Ron Eglit), just to mention a few. He also produces shows with many of the Food Network Stars, and some of the Next Food Network Stars.

<sup>viii</sup> Note: Jim Pash died at 56, April 29, 2005. Jim will be missed by family, friends, and fans.

<sup>ix</sup> Dennis Ryder Surfboards; [dennisryder.com](http://dennisryder.com)

<sup>x</sup> North East Surf Music Alliance; [nesmasurf.org](http://nesmasurf.org)

<sup>xi</sup> National Surf Schools and Instructors Association; [nssia.org](http://nssia.org)

<sup>xii</sup> Surfrider Foundation; [surfrider.org](http://surfrider.org)