Pilgrimage to the Playas
Surf Tourism in Costa Rica

Stefan Michael Krause

ABSTRACT: Surf tourism is a largely ignored mode of touristic behaviour in the academy. This investigation adds to a very limited body of work by providing explorations of the significance of surf tourism for surfers and by bringing forward data and observations of the impacts surf tourism has had on Playas Jacó and Hermosa, Costa Rica. Interview, statistical and observation data are used here to argue that: a surfer habitus creates dispositions for many surfers to travel to exotic coastal destinations on the periphery; surf trips to Costa Rica in many ways are experientially similar to pilgrimages; and that surf tourism can be seen to be directly and indirectly associated with many economic, environmental and socio-cultural costs and benefits to the local communities under study. Considering the applied dimension of surf tourism it is argued that surfers may indirectly set in motion a process of development and foreign investment into areas that are ill prepared for large numbers of visitors.

KEYWORDS: anthropology of policy, applied anthropology, Costa Rica, development, pilgrimages, surf tourism, sustainability

[A] tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist. Even when people bury themselves in anonymous crowds on beaches, they are seeking an almost sacred, often symbolic, mode of communitas, generally unavailable to them in the structured life of the office, the shop floor, or the mine. Even when intellectuals, Thoreau-like, seek the wilderness in personal solitude, they are seeking the material multiplicity of nature, a life source. (Turner and Turner 1978: 20)

With an estimated 20 million surfers worldwide (Kampion 2003), the sport of surfing generates large numbers of tourists who travel to exotic destinations in search of optimal surf experiences. The beaches at Playa Jacó and Playa Hermosa on Costa Rica’s Pacific Coast are prime locations to offer such opportunities. According to an official of the Instituto Costaricense de Turismo, in 2004, a peak year for surf tourists in Costa Rica, over 200,000 surfers made their way to the country and represented 26.2 per cent of all tourist arrivals (Maricruz León Miranda, personal communication, 17 May 2007). These figures are substantial and point to the need for a greater understanding of this mode of tourism and its impacts, especially given the growing popularity of the sport and lifestyle that will continue to generate more and more surf tourists in years to come. Yet, as the Australian scholar Ralf Buckley notes, ‘surf tourism has received very little study to date, either practical or theoretical. Research, analysis and predition [sic] has not caught up with growth and changes in the industry itself’ (2002: 421). This study therefore adds to a highly limited body of work by providing observations and analyses concerning the importance of surf trips for the surfers and
the significance their mode of tourism may have for host communities.

**Structuring Surfer Habitus**

For Pierre Bourdieu (1990), ‘habitus’ is a regenerative force in our lives that unconsciously guides us along certain paths by adaptively situating us within familiarized social fields. Those who identify themselves as surfers navigate through social and natural fields, through structuring social forces at work that are augmented and reinforced by an embodied sense of a communion with nature – a ‘flow’ experience, as Csikszentmihalyi (1990) would put it. It is this ensemble of ‘structuring structures’ that leads surfers to organize practices and representations throughout their lives, thereby facilitating the likelihood the surfer lifestyle will constantly be reproduced, reaffirmed, and re-presented. As Ford and Brown, in *Surfing and Social Theory: Experience, Embodiment and Narrative of the Dream Glide* (2006: 123) state, ‘the practical transmission of surfing knowledge, competency and legitimacy become embodied through a repeated practical engagement with the world’. Another telling element of the surfer habitus is found in Ford and Brown when they discuss the powerful draw that the ocean has on the surfer’s body. They state that ‘over time, a relationship between the developing surfer’s habitus and the practical surfing world around them becomes stronger, more logical, until eventually the body begins to feel itself being “hailed” by the surf’ (2006: 125).

This practical engagement is ingrained and affirmed each time a surfer steps foot in the water with a board, but the surfer’s habitus is also structured by a surfing culture and the imagery, beliefs, lifestyle and representations entailed in what it means to be a surfer. Surfing culture has evolved to the point where an indeterminate availability of styles and representations have taken hold to allow a much broader means of affiliation that can inform dispositions that are outwardly manifested in different ways. These affiliations are located in commodification and in travel. Reed, for instance, examines the role of the various social inputs that act upon surfers, situating surfing in ‘commercial and cultural production’ (1999: 3). Surf films, magazines, literature, media and other elements of the social field provide the structured structures that inform the surfer habitus, all part of the ‘(social) conditions of acquisition and realization’ of this habitus, that become ‘the accomplices of the processes that tend to make the probable a reality’ (Bourdieu 1990: 65).

While a review of the history of surfing in its entirety is beyond the scope of this article, what should be noted is that surfing and its lifestyle entered the purview of mainstream U.S. society via the image-building vehicle of Hollywood during the middle of the twentieth century. Numerous surf magazines, books, films and other industry-related marketing productions make up the ‘mediascapes’ (pace Appadurai 1996) that help to generate images of the surfer lifestyle. As a result, the narrative history of surfing that has been and continues to be constructed informs the surfer habitus by creating associations with which to identify. The history of surfing is thus embodied in the present as surfers negotiate the presented images in the mediascapes with their own lived experiences. Often, surfers associate expert knowledge and expert practice with ‘true’ surfer identity while drawing social boundaries by rejecting the overt and widespread commodification of things surfer. As Chris, aged 24, a U.S. American surfer I interviewed in Costa Rica, said:

> When I was a little kid, I would wait for all the surf magazines and read every article. I would look up to all the guys. I knew everybody on tour. Anybody that is over, that's my age or over, I could see one turn and tell you who it is. Taylor Knox, Luke Egan, Kelly Slater, whoever it is. I can tell you how many world titles they won, what year it was. So it is definitely something I
follow like something else someone would follow with major-league sports. I would wear all the different surf brands. I thought that was cool. It differentiated me from Joe Schmo, a kid in an apartment in East County doing his math every night – I was like going surfing. But recently, it was kind of like what insulated me from the outside. After evolving and living in Berkeley and growing up, just paying that extra 15 bucks to have a Hurley brand, just the fact that Hurley came out of nowhere and it’s become this monstrosity, this force and industry – it’s kind of sickening to me.

In fact, many surfers receive status for appearing to turn away from an identification with heavily marketed surf-related products and, instead, receive status for an authenticity – culturally constructed, to be sure – that entails a rejection of these commercial associations and, instead, an evocation of narratives that portray the surfer as an escapist or even a radical element of social resistance (see Reed 1999; Lanagan 2002; Ford and Brown 2006). The narrative of the surfer as an escapist searching for an authentic reality outside of the bounds of mainstream society resonates powerfully with many surfers. Yet, surfers do not necessarily reflect upon the locations within neocolonial and class privilege of their abilities to make these journeys, nor the consequences of them, where mainly white, relatively well-to-do First World men test the limits of their dominance in the world by taking on the role of the intrepid adventure traveller. Reed posits that during these modern-day journeys to the periphery:

surf tourists are involved in extending the West’s cultural influence to the far corners of the planet as well as reifying dominant categorizations of the Other. Surfing magazines and films emphasize and elevate both real and imagined exploration of ‘foreign’ territory while rarely, if ever, reflecting the ideological, economic, and cultural effects of these journeys. The result is a discourse that encourages simplistic stereotyping, aggressive intrusion, and the efficient utilization of economic imbalances, all of which involve the exercise of power. (1999: 101–2)

The narrative of surf adventure travel is now a central one. The film *Endless Summer* (1966) became an international sensation and exposed millions to the image of the travelling surfer on expeditions into ‘the wild’. Since that earlier period, numerous articles in surf magazines, surf books and a growing industry of surf films and videos have actively maintained and reinforced the image of the young, white male surfer on journeys of discovery in constant search of perfect waves. For many U.S. surfers, Costa Rica has emerged as one of the most popular spaces in which surfers can take on the role of the intrepid adventurer. Costa Rica has consistent warm waves, is a relatively inexpensive travel destination in terms of the cost of airline flights and of lodging, and it has an appropriate balance of exoticness and security – all of which make it an attractive option for the surf tourist. Costa Rica was put on centre stage by being featured in the highly popular *Endless Summer II* (1994) and thus becoming immortalized as a destination where adventure seekers can land, rent a four-wheel drive vehicle, and roam mountainous coastal trails in search of uncrowded, perfect waves. Surfing alongside crocodiles, cracking coconuts open on the beach, living among toucans, monkeys, sloths and iguanas, and interacting with a peaceful, non-English speaking native population are all images that have come to represent the Costa Rican surf experience.

**Pilgrimage to the Playas**

Playa Jacó lies 108 kilometres to the southwest of San José, the capital city. Situated on the Pacific Coast, there was a reported population of between six and seven thousand people in 2000 for the municipality (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos 2007). It is likely, however, that many more actually live in the area (one local business owner suggested that over 20,000 people now live in the nearby vicinity). Just a few kilometres to the south of Jacó,
Playa Hermosa (see Figure 1) is made up of about two kilometres of cabinas (a Costa Rican variation of the term cabañas, or cabins) and restaurants that separate the highway from the beach. Because Playa Hermosa is within the Playa Jacó municipality, it is difficult to estimate the number of locals who actually live in the small town. The land between the beach and the highway is very narrow, thus limiting space for housing (I counted approximately ten local dwellings). A small school and a soccer field are situated centrally between the approximately fifteen to twenty hospitality-related establishments. To the south of the restaurants and cabinas a small partially paved road turns off of the highway and runs adjacent to the beach, pastures, and a couple of recently developed beachfront parcels.

How and why surf tourists reach these destinations transcends their geographic locations, however. Starting over three decades ago, Nelson H. H. Graburn (1977, 1983, 1989, 2001, 2004) had suggestively argued that tourism is a secular ritual embedded with cultural significance, by extending Arnold van Gennep’s ideas, as well as Victor and Edith Turner’s reformulations, to the modern-day leisure traveller, where all modes of tourism can be seen to be activities that take travellers through the experiential processes of removal or separation from familiarity, immersion into unfamiliar, liminal and socially constructed sacred spaces, and then a return to the mundane.

I argue surf trips to developing regions on the periphery strongly exhibit these experiential processes. Furthermore, they contain many of the same liminal elements as the religious pilgrimages analysed by the Turners:

Pilgrimage, then, has some of the attributes of liminality in passage rites: release from mundane structure; homogenization of status; simplicity of dress and behaviour; communitas; ordeal; reflection on the meaning of basic religious and cultural values; ritualized enactment of corre-

Figure 1: Playa Hermosa
spondences between religious paradigms and shared human experiences; emergence of the person from multiple personae; movement from a mundane centre to a sacred periphery which suddenly, transiently, becomes central for the individual, an axis mundi of his faith; movement itself, a symbol of communitas, which changes with time, as against stasis, which represents structure; individuality posed against the institutionalized milieu; and so forth. (Turner and Turner 1978: 34)

Like pilgrims who are in a state of liminality all along their journey, the surf tourist going to Costa Rica likewise enters an enduring experiential state that lasts from the time they step foot off the airplane until they pass back through customs on their return home. Their ‘pilgrimages’ are structured. The surf tourists adopt a common dress that levels any social distance among them (although enforces distance between themselves and the locals) as they wear a simple combination of flip-flops and surfing bathing suits (‘baggies’ or ‘trunks’) and t-shirts whenever going shirtless is inappropriate. In the water, social distance is even less detectable as everyone is reduced to only bathing suits and boards. The vast majority travel light and choose asceticism over luxury: Even though there are options for higher standards of accommodation, surfers often choose to stay at simple cabinas and to eat the cheap local food available at sodas (small Costa Rican restaurants that provide typical fare). There is danger. Some of the surf tourists in my study complained about being the victims of theft (mainly while travelling on buses or when their rental cars were broken into while surfing) and rip-offs as they tried to buy marijuana – but Costa Rica is highly regarded by travellers as a safe and peaceful haven. There are also natural dangers such as crocodiles, sharks, snakes, mosquitoes, and strong powerful waves that challenge surfers’ abilities to the fullest. And there is the beach, the playa, possibly one of the most liminal of all spaces (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Surfers relaxing in Boca Borránca, one of the world’s longest waves
playa is a literal threshold between land and sea, and thus symbolically between nature and culture:

The beach ... is a quintessentially liminal space. It is a site that not only incites possibility and surprise, but also danger and unpredictability. The beach defies permanence – its shape perpetually changing, its inhabitants constantly on the move, a landscape relentlessly in motion. Provoking not only ideas of margins, exchange and openness, the beach ... also represents a deeply contested site, suggesting struggles over issues of ownership, belonging, nationality and culture. (Brown, Fox and Jaquet 2007: 1)

Costa Rica with its unfamiliar landscapes, people and culture provides for surfers a context in which to live, if only for a short time, in a completely different domain of experience. For them, Costa Rica represents a departure – expressed in stereotypical and romantic terms – from the realities with which they are familiar, starting with the experience of time. Tripper, a 19-year-old surf tourist, said:

The vibe is just like incredibly different than in the U.S. I mean you see all of these people just kind of like standing around, just hanging around. No one is really in a hurry to do anything. In the U.S., everyone is just kind of like, ‘time is money, time is money. You gotta do this, bigger and better’. I don't know. I really don't agree with that attitude. I don't know, I just can’t understand it. I'm not saying that everyone should just sit around and do nothing. But I like how around here people are just happy with what they have and do what they need to do to just live and get by. It's just not like that at home, everyone is always doing something. It's like you come down here and the whole world is on pause, it's crazy.

Surf tourists in Costa Rica experience feelings of communitas through the mediation of ‘pura vida’ (literally, ‘pure life’), a term famously Costa Rican. It is used among Costa Ricans in many settings as a greeting and all-purpose rejoinder reflecting a carefree lifestyle and way of understanding. The term has also been appropriated and mediated by surf tourists to encapsulate their Costa Rican experience. J.D., aged 30, said:

This country couldn't have a better saying because that is exactly what it is all about. Basically like I said, waking up early in the morning, watching the sunrise, surfing early in the morning, eating fruits and vegetables, trying to communicate with people and like living pure. Like pure life. Living here, if you are surfing, you are getting exercise. You’re walking around, you’re getting exercise. You’re talking to Americans or other people. For me, pura vida is why I am here. Because like I said, it's what it is all about. Living pure. Pure life. I am all about it. I'm all about it.

‘Pura vida’ comes to signify anti-structure or communitas, opposing ‘differentiated, culturally structured, segmented, and often hierarchical systems’ which they mediate at home. This is evident in responses that show a ‘recognition [of] an essential and generic human bond’ (Turner 1969: 97). The Costa Rican way of life is imagined as a model in which happiness is not dependent on material possessions. ‘Pura vida’ becomes an ambiguously romanticized designation of the communitas surfers feel, or believe they are supposed to feel.

As Ford and Brown point out, a sense of communitas among surfers also develops into a ‘surfer bond’ that is felt to exist: ‘there is, in surfing as with all such expressive and vertigo-related practices, a sense of a shared embodied knowledge, which takes on the form of a feeling of communitas’ (Ford and Brown 2006: 163). Adam, a 34-year-old surf tourist, articulated this point precisely:

Well, I think it's the relationship of knowing what one's done. I know what it's like to be out there on the water. I know what it's like to surf 'x', 'x' being the wave. So anybody else who has done that, like, we share that common experience. And that becomes exclusive from those who don't, who haven't. So I think there's that bond. And there's the bond of knowing the force of the water, of having gotten pounded, you know. And it's like a brotherhood to people who have been through it together or know what the
other has been through because they have been through it themselves.

Along with the shared sense of embodied knowledge, surf tourists, like pilgrims, are also bonded through the communitas of a shared journey of liminality while abroad. The singular goal of surfing that frames their experiences in Costa Rica allows an essential surfer identity to emerge in place of the plurality of differentiated roles they navigate in the structured social fields at home. This ‘leveling’ of status among individuals was evident as travelling surfers of varying skills became fast friends in and out of the water. The sense of communitas that was felt was also noticeable with the spontaneous formation of small groups of surfers from all over the world who gathered together for long periods of time in commons areas to share stories or play games while waiting for the optimal conditions to surf. Similarly, the bonds between travellers were evident as they often ended up surfing together and at times travelling together to other breaks when necessary. The heightened sociability that communitas creates meant that for many surf tourists, bonds were therefore formed with others whom they would not normally associate with. Chris, aged 24, describes such a bond that emerged with a fellow traveller:

Well I have been chatting [to] Greg, he’s like a classic guy. He’s a lawyer who ties up boats now. That intrigues me, you know. I’m going home thinking, should I take the LSAT [the Legal Standard Aptitude Test, an exam for entrance to law school], he has information that I need, that I want. So obviously my chances of running into him at home are far, far less than they are on this trip when we are sitting around waiting for waves all day playing chess. I would never see him in La Jolla [a suburb of San Diego, California]. If I saw him out in the lineup in La Jolla I would ‘snake’ him [steal his wave].

For some, however, this bond can appear unstable at times – especially, for instance, when competition for waves increases. Qualifying the existence of a ‘surfer bond’, Luke, a 33-year-old Australian surf tourist, said:

So when you are out in the water, some days you meet a lot of fantastic people. Some days you’re out there and it’s like every man for himself. Surfers are a reflection of society. But saying that, there is sort of a common bond where if you’re a surfer and you go to a different country, you don’t know anybody, and you meet surfers. So there is that. That’s a double-sided question (laughing).

Reflecting on Luke’s comments, as well as similar responses from others, it becomes clear that a precondition of communitas for surfers is the lack of crowds at surf breaks. On other visits to Costa Rica, I had been to many breaks that were crowded. The experience was indeed different, partly because locals (mainly expatriates from the United States) often claim these spaces as their own and thus structure emerges with localism and the importance of status that becomes felt.

The behaviours and attitudes of the expatriates bring up a couple of final points about communitas in Costa Rica. There exists an atmosphere of localism and general unfriendliness towards surf tourists from many expatriate American surfers who now live in Costa Rica. This condition is illustrative of two important positions taken thus far. First, it supports the argument that a common bond between surfers is not always evident. Like localism anywhere, there develops a structured differentiation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ as a result of the competition over scarce resources (good waves). The perceived communitas of a universal surfer bond thus breaks down in such conditions. Second, and most significant, the expatriate behaviour also confirms the importance of travelling outside of one’s mundane sphere and entering the unfamiliar and liminoid realms on the periphery. Now that the expatriates live in Costa Rica, it is no longer a sacred space for them that facilitates the communitas experience – over time it has become familiar and mundane.
Also supporting the tourism as a scared journey model, surfers represent themselves as fundamentally changed by their experiences upon completion. They feel that they are provided with opportunities for personal growth and enrichment due to the exposure to different environments and ways of living, and that surf trips are therapeutic for them because they provide a temporary release from the stresses and pressures of their home societies. Todd, who is in his late 30s, said:

[A surf trip is] a soul-searching type of thing, where it's improving your life. Not that I'm always searching, but this kind of makes my life richer. And it makes me feel good about myself ... So when I go back to San Diego, and I go to work, I can feel good about myself. So it's kind of like an accomplishment. Yeah, I come back changed. More confident, more comfortable with myself. A lot happier.

John, in his early 40s:

'I go back rejuvenated I guess you can say. Recreation: root – re-create'.

By investigating the experiential significance of surf trips for surfers, it is argued that a surfer habitus creates strong dispositions for some surfers to travel often to Costa Rica, which has been culturally constructed as a sacred site within the narrative of the subculture. Akin to pilgrimages, surf trips to Costa Rica also take on the ritualistic processes of separation from the mundane, entrance into liminality, and re-incorporation into the familiar: surf tourists leave their mundane, structured society; become immersed in liminality in Costa Rica where they mediate symbolically oppositional experiences; and finally return to the society they temporarily left behind. During the period they are in Costa Rica, surf tourists experientially navigate the sacred dimensions of liminality through surfing challenging waves often, settling in to a distinct routine that is built around the singular goal of surfing, encountering exotic people and landscapes, and transiently experiencing a way of living that contrasts sharply with their own. During this phase, communitas also emerges as status roles and other structural ties are temporarily vacated. If, as the Turner’s put it, a ‘tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist’ (Turner and Turner 1978: 20), then it would appear that surf tourists in Costa Rica are indeed more than just ‘half’ pilgrims. Having provided a theoretical analysis of the significance of surf tourism for surfers, the following discussion will now consider the importance of this mode of tourism to the host communities of Playas Jacó and Hermosa in Costa Rica.

**Ticos and Surf Tourists**

According to statistics from the Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT), 1.4 million tourists flew in to Costa Rica in 2010 (ICT 2010). Perhaps surprisingly, this number is only slightly less than the number of tourists arriving in the country just before the global economic recession in 2008, thus demonstrating Costa Rica’s enduring appeal as a destination to world travellers. While recent statistics on surf tourism specifically are elusive, earlier data does give a picture of just how significant this particular sector of tourism has been to the country. As mentioned in the opening, in 2004 more than a quarter of all tourist arrivals to the Costa Rica reportedly had an interest in surfing (Maricruz León Miranda, personal communication, 17 May 2007). Furthermore, according to statistics from the ICT, during the year 2006, surf tourists in Costa Rica spent approximately US$122 per day on trips that lasted an average of seventeen days (Maricruz León Miranda letter to surf shop owner Frederic, 5 December 2006). Given these statistics, each visiting surf tourist on average introduces approximately US$2,000 to the Costa Rican economy per trip.

In the coastal communities of Playas Jacó and Hermosa, all of the local business owners I was able to talk to agreed that, were it not for
surf tourists, their towns would not be able to survive economically. This growth, however, has led to what has become the other side of the economic coin for local Costa Ricans, nicknamed ‘Ticos’ by themselves and others. While it is true many of the fortunate locals who had land at one point have been able to capitalize on the real-estate boom, for others, the prospects of buying property anywhere near the coast are slim due to prices that are now approaching those in the United States. This gentrification that has been occurring over the years was reported by local business owners to be one of the main drawbacks of the growth the area has seen. Antonio, a professional surfer and owner of a surf school who was born and raised in the town, provided a response that is telling of the frustrations of locals who have seen the growth in the area over the years and how they are not always the ones who benefit:

There are no more Costa Ricans living close to the beach now, almost. They’re living far away in the mountains. They sell everything. The thing is people come here and look for land, and maybe one local guy has a piece of land, maybe $1,000 per square meter and then comes an American who says ‘Okay I’m going to buy’. And then comes another American and says ‘I’ll give you $1,500 per meter’ and then another one comes and says he’ll give you $2,000 for the square meter. So they are driving prices up. That’s why everything is getting crazy.

As with these economic shifts, environmental changes in the area were also observed to be both positive and negative as a result of surf tourism and the growth it has facilitated. Owners and tourism officials reported, for instance, that surfers were environmentally minded and on balance had a minimal impact on the coastal ecologies. Ethnographic data on surf tourists supported this perception. Yet, there is another side to the issue that emerges when one looks at long-term impacts that can be indirectly associated with surf tourism. One of the most pronounced changes in the area that many see as being detrimental to the Costa Rican environment is the recent surge in coastal development that has included the construction of multiple high-rise condominiums in the area that are being sold to wealthy foreigners as vacation homes (see Figure 3).
Even with laws in place that regulate the development of areas near the coastline, there is a sense that the large multinational companies that are moving into the area are not playing by the rules by building sites in sensitive areas that cannot handle the impacts associated with them (see Figure 4). Furthermore, with such rapid growth, providing fresh water and adequate sewage treatment have become major issues on the minds of many locals. No one I spoke with, for instance, dares to drink the tap water anymore.

Surf tourism is seen to have varying effects on local cultural practices as well. One of the important differences between surf tourists and other travellers is that surfers stay longer and frequent local establishments more often than other types of tourists. Both of these factors lead to more cultural exchange between surfers and locals than likely takes place with other tourists. One positive result has been a large increase in Costa Rican children who take up the sport. Several research participants noted that this gives the youth a safe alternative to street life, while also providing an entry into a range of surf-related market opportunities. Conversely, it was also reported and observed that some Costa Rican youth have been influenced by the negative elements associated with the counter-culture, surfer lifestyle. Drugs, prostitution and crime were each discussed in relation to surf tourism. According to the local business owners, many surfers often either bring marijuana with them to the country or actively search it out while on the trip. This has led to a growing number of local kids and young adults who not only smoke marijuana themselves, but also get involved in selling it to the surf tourists because of the demand (almost every day

Figure 4: Entrance to Playa Tulin, the southern end of Playa Hermosa
I went into Jacó, I was confronted by someone who offered me drugs. Recently, cocaine and crack cocaine have apparently become more of a problem as well. For those I talked to, however, the increase in availability of cocaine (as well the sharp increase in prostitution) mainly came about after the multimillion-dollar marina in Herradura opened and attracted a much wealthier segment of male tourists who come down on sport fishing vacations.

Richard Butler (1980, 2004) proposes an explanatory model known as the Tourism Area Life Cycle to delineate the stages of growth and potential decline for popular tourist locales. According to this model, destinations begin as spaces of exploration for tourists and then progress through periods of local involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation and then either rejuvenation or decline (Butler 2004: 159). Surf tourists, it is argued, are frequently responsible for the first stage of this process due to their dispositions for travel to places with uncrowded, quality waves in remote areas. As they bring back tales of their travels, or if these places are depicted in the media-scape of the subculture, more and more surfers thus make their way to these destinations and the stages move forward as the need to accommodate more tourists translates into economic opportunities for the host locations. In the communities under study here, the rising popularity of the region thus led to a rapid increase in foreign investment and development that many see as going forward too fast, without necessary oversight, and leading to many of the perceived problems mentioned above.

Ethnographic research into the motivations and practices of surf tourists can help to inform policies directed at developing tourism strategies that are resilient to the processes Butler forewarns. There are many surf destinations in other developing regions of the world that are currently experiencing what Costa Rica’s beaches began seeing three decades ago. Coastal communities in neighbouring countries such as Nicaragua and El Salvador, for instance, have within the past few years become new frontiers for many adventurous surfers. They are not nearly as far along the developmental scale as those in Costa Rica, but given time, they likely could experience the same growing pains that come about without the necessary structures in place to handle rapid growth. In places such as these, applied practitioners have a role in identifying the vulnerabilities and opportunities that can be expected so that local communities can be better empowered to respond and control the process. With an estimated 20 million surfers worldwide (Kampion 2003) and the likelihood of many more in generations to come, more and more surf tourists will no doubt continue to encroach into areas such as these. It therefore becomes prudent to develop the knowledgeable foresight needed for effective planning to prevent today’s surfing outposts from becoming tomorrow’s unsustainable tourist destination.

Stefan Michael Krause is an anthropologist working for the Federated States of Micronesia. He received his M.A. in anthropology from San Diego State University in 2007. His research interests include tourism, cultural heritage and anthropological theory. E-mail: uberkrause@hotmail.com

Notes

1. For the history of surfing, one can begin by consulting Drew Kampion’s Stoked: A History of Surf Culture (2003).

2. ‘Chris’ here is a pseudonym, as are the other names in this article. The research for this article took place in early 2007. I conducted participant-observation fieldwork, semi-structured and structured interviews in the coastal towns of Playas Jacó and Hermosa, Costa Rica, among surf tourists, local business owners and tourism officials. Supplementing these data are personal observations that have accumulated over a decade during previous visits to the area for work and surfing.
References


