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Peleando las olas: An exploration of surf localism in Pavones, Costa Rica

Lindsay E. Usher
Old Dominion University

Edwin Gómez
Old Dominion University

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Problem context

Localism, the territoriality of resident surfers over a nearby surf break, has been widely acknowledged by surfers and academics as a problem in surf culture (Alessi, 2009; Warshaw, 2003). While there are varying degrees of localism, in the most extreme form (heavy localism), surfers may violently force non-resident surfers from the water, harm them physically or inflict property damage (Nazer, 2004). Localism may discourage beginners from taking up surfing and repel tourists from certain surf destinations if places develop reputations for hostile local surfers. For destinations that rely upon income from tourism for their livelihoods, especially in developing countries, localism can be incredibly detrimental to the local tourism industry. Studies in Central America have found that often it is not the native residents of a surf destination that enact localism, but the local expatriates that engage in heavy localism (Krause, 2013; Usher & Kerstetter, in press). Researchers have acknowledged that localism manifests itself differently in different places and therefore it is important to examine this phenomenon in multiple surf destinations (Kaffine, 2009; Usher & Kerstetter, in press). Pavones, Costa Rica, is known as the second longest left point break wave in the world. With the exception of fishing and alternative forms of tourism which recently begun attracting visitors (i.e., yoga), residents of the town are heavily dependent upon surf tourism. Increasingly accurate online surf forecasts have decreased the amount of time tourists stay in the town, but have increased the number of people surfing the break at the same time. The situation has resulted in overcrowding, which is considered one of the causes of localism (Sweeney, 2005). The purpose of this study is to examine localism in Pavones among two different resident groups: Costa Ricans and resident foreigners.

Theoretical contribution

Human territoriality has been studied by a range of scholars and across a variety of contexts. Geographers, psychologists and anthropologists have explored territoriality in different scales, from homes, offices and public spaces to political boundaries and nation-states (Altman, 1975; Bauder, 2014; Brown, Lawrence, & Robinson, 2005). Localism is repeatedly described as a form of territoriality (Alessi, 2009; Evers, 2009). While a number of scholars have acknowledged the issue of localism in surfing and surf culture, few studies have used a territoriality framework. Both studies measuring territoriality were conducted in developed countries: one in Southern California and the other in Christchurch, New Zealand (Comley & Thoman, 2011; Dorset, 2009). Localism has a different meaning in the developing world, where it may threaten local livelihoods and there is often more than one group of resident surfers. This study extends previous work which examined the territoriality of indigenous surfers in Nicaragua (Usher & Kerstetter, in press). This framework, which drew from Altman (1975) and Sack (1983), maintained that territoriality consists of three aspects: ownership, boundaries and regulation. Using the same framework, this study examined local Costa Rican surfers but also explored the territoriality of resident foreigners in greater depth than the previous study.

Methods

This study is based on two months of ethnographic field work conducted from May 2014 to July 2014 in Pavones, Costa Rica. The first author lived with a Costa Rican family in Pavones and immersed herself in the local surf community. She took extensive field notes, which

included observations, interpretations and reflections of her time surfing, kept a daily journal of her time there and captured photos and videos of the community, people surfing, and various aspects of daily life (Bogdewic, 1999). The first author conducted in-depth interviews with 23 current and former local Costa Rican (Tico) surfers, 28 resident foreigner surfers, and 31 surf tourists. She obtained her sample through snowball sampling: her host family and community leaders introduced her to local surfers and resident foreigners, who referred her to other local surfers and resident foreigners whom she could interview. Data analysis occurs throughout the process of data collection in ethnographic research (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Therefore, as certain themes developed throughout her interviews and observations, the first author sought out participants that could provide disconfirming viewpoints (Kuzel, 1999). The interviews were transcribed into the speaker's native language (English or Spanish). The first author used NVIVO to code the interview transcripts, field notes from surfing and daily journal. While she coded the data within the territoriality framework, she also remained alert to other emergent themes within the data. The second author, who is a native Spanish speaker, reviewed the Spanish transcripts of interviews with Tico surfers and the first author's journal in order to challenge or affirm the primary researcher's findings through peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The following research questions guided this study: 1) How do local (Tico and foreign) surfers express ownership over the surf break? 2) What are the boundaries of local (Tico and foreign) surfers' surfing space? 3) How do local (Tico and foreign) surfers regulate the surf space?

Findings

Tico surfers were more likely than resident foreigners to claim ownership over the surf break. However, some Ticos and foreigners preferred to characterize it as having a right to the break instead of owning it. Ticos were also careful to say that while they did feel a sense of ownership or a right to the wave, it did not mean that others could not surf there or that Tico surfers were aggressive. However, Ticos said that foreigners were aggressive and routinely fought (mainly verbally) with tourists in the surf because they viewed themselves as local surfers. Foreigners confirmed this as well: describing fights (some of which were physical) they had seen or been in. Ticos would only fight if people insulted them or continually disrespected them. A major difference that several foreigners pointed out was that while tourists could distinguish local Tico surfers by the color of their skin, they could not tell which foreigners were local surfers because they looked like tourists. Therefore the foreigners had to be more aggressive in order to establish themselves as locals who should be respected in the surf. Both groups blamed some of the aggressive behavior they saw in surfers on the large crowds that descended on Pavones during a big swell.

Some Ticos considered their boundary as a local to be the main wave in Rio Claro de Pavones, but others considered the entire area, stretching from Pilon to Punta Banco, as their territory. Several also described which section of the Pavones wave they surfed on a regular basis. In terms of foreigners' boundaries, said they would surf other nearby waves to avoid the crowds at Pavones, but said they lived there because of the world-class quality of the wave in Rio Claro. Ticos and foreigners said they regulated the surf break by telling beginners, or people with longboards, to move further down the wave, away from the main point, since it was much faster and bigger at the point and they could get hurt. Both groups also said they had to remind others of surfing rules (e.g., not dropping in front of someone on a wave or waiting your turn in the surf line-up at the point).

Implications

These findings highlight the importance of examining localism in different contexts and in different surf destinations. While these two resident groups felt a right to the surf break because they live there, foreigners regulated the territory more aggressively in order to establish themselves as locals. The aggressive behavior of foreign residents, many of whom have other sources of income, may threaten the local Costa Ricans' livelihoods, which greatly depend on tourism. Many surf destinations in the developing world are characterized by disconnected stakeholders due to no governing body (e.g., visitor bureau) and a lack of management oversight. As such, maintaining open lines of communications or establishing a forum where local residents can convey to resident foreigners how their aggressive behavior towards tourists is affecting the community could prove beneficial for both groups.

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