PERFORMANCE, AGENCY AND CHANGE IN SURFING TOURIST SPACE

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Abstract: This study seeks to advance knowledge of the production and consumption of tourist space and its implications for tourism destinations. A social constructionist approach to grounded theory was employed to investigate surfing tourist space in Indonesia's Mentawai Islands. The construction and maintenance of a utopian surfing tourist space based on myth and dubbed 'Nirvana' was found to be a four-stage process that has simultaneously enchanted surfers and ignored indigenous experiences. Over the 10-year period of this study the agency implicit in embodied surfing tourists experiences of place has weakened Nirvanic myth and indigenous issues have come to light. The dilution of Nirvanic myth has also resulted in threats to Nirvana being realized with significant implications for the future of the industry. **Keywords:** social constructionism, surf tourism, myth, tourist space, performance, agency. Published by Elsevier Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Surf tourism takes place in thousands of coastal locations from Iceland to Antarctica (Ponting, 2009a). Crowded urban surf breaks in surfers' home countries drive demand for surf tourism to destinations offering high quality waves and uncrowded conditions (Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003; George, 2000; Hugues Dit Ciles, 2009; Ponting, 2008; Preston-Whyte, 2001, 2002). At least 38 specialized surf travel guidebooks cover 112 of 161 countries known to host surfing tourists (Martin & Assenov, 2011) from a global surfer population estimated to be between 20 (Lazarow & Nelson, 2007) to 25 million (Aguerre, 2009). The aim of this study is to develop a theoretically and empirically grounded explanation of how surf tourist space is socially constructed, threatened by the on-going negotiation of meanings in liminal surf tourist space, protected by the deployment of reality maintaining

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myths, performed, and resisted by surf tourists resulting in a more so-cially inclusive tourist phenomenon.

The production and consumption of tourist space involves constant negotiation and renegotiation, not only through discursive elements (Urry & Larsen, 2011) and culturally informed imaginaries (Salazar, 2010), but also through the lived experience and co-performances of tourists, tourism industry professionals and destination communities (Crouch, 2010; Mavric & Urry, 2012; Rakic & Chambers, 2012). Com-mercial surf tourist space, as a mediated space between the world of destination communities and the world of foreign tourists, is a liminal space ripe with potential for the inversion of standard understandings of the world and reimagining possibilities (Graburn, 1983; Jafari, 1987; Shields, 1991; Turner & Ash, 1975).

Based on a case study conducted in three field visit phases over a ten-year period this study explores how surf tourist space is produced and consumed in a four-stage process of social construction, threat, myth dissemination and resistance. Our analysis shows that over time the agency inherent in the re-negotiation and re-performance of this liminal space enabled commercially driven discourse to be resisted and reimagined despite the surf industry's best attempts to avoid this. These changes have undermined the symbolic elements of utopian surf tourist space with significant implications for the visitor experience and the profitability of the industry. Our study illustrates the analytical utility of understanding tourist destinations as socially constructed spaces of touristic production and consumption in terms of the 'dream' being sold to tourists, its ethico-political impli-cations, and the potential for agency in tourists' performance of that space.

THE PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF TOURIST SPACE

The late twentieth century shift to service based economies and glo-bal information technology networks led to broad changes in spatial organization (Zukin, 1991). In response, geographers began to include society and culture in the analysis of space, and sociologists and anthro-pologists began to place increased importance upon space in social interactions and relationships (Agnew, Mercer, & Sopher, 1984; Ellen, 1988; Gregory, 1994; Gregory & Urry, 1985; Harvey, 1985, 1989; Ley, 1985; Sennett, 1977; Soja, 1989). Similarly, tourism destinations and attractions are increasingly being considered as 'tourist spaces' that are consumed symbolically as well as in the more traditional modes of products and services (Cunningham, 2006; Diekmann & Hannam, 2012; Edensor, 1998, 2000; Knudsen, Soper, & Metro-Roland, 2007; Ponting, 2009a, 2009b; Ponting, McDonald, & Wearing, 2005; Thur-nell-Read, 2012; Wearing, Stevenson, & Young, 2010; Young, 1999a,b). Urry's (2002) characterization of touristic consumption as a 'tourist gaze' was criticized for failing to recognize that tourism is an embodied experience that involves all the senses, as well as emo-tional and cognitive processes (see for example Cloke & Perkins,