



Searching for the perfect wave: Profiling surf tourists who visit the Mentawai Islands



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 March 2015

Received in revised form

7 October 2015

Accepted 1 November 2015

Available online 21 January 2016

Keywords:

Surfing

Surf tourists

Local community

Economic linkages

Tourist profile

ABSTRACT

Surfing tourism is emerging as a vital source of economic income and employment opportunities for remote communities in less developed countries. Yet little is known about the adventurous surfers themselves. Therefore, the aim of this paper was to profile surf tourists visiting the Mentawai Islands, Indonesia through an online questionnaire. The results of the research highlighted that many of the surfers travelling to the Mentawai Islands were different from the perceived stereotype of being well-educated middle-aged males, with high discretionary income and travelling on expensive prepaid packages. A key finding was that surf tourists on package holidays had only a slightly lower daily local expenditure (US\$21) than independent travellers (US\$22). In conclusion, economic linkages between surf tourists and the local community were present, and there was a trickle-down effect from both independent travellers and surfers on inclusive packages.

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1. Introduction

The economic benefits that surfing tourism brings to destinations around the world have been significant (Gough, 1999; Nelsen, Pendelton & Vaughn, 2007; Lazarow, 2007; Lazarow, Miller, & Blackwell, 2008; Ntloko & Swart, 2008; Martin & Assenov, 2012; Ponting & O'Brien, 2014). However, in some locations, the amount of income that filters down to the local community has been limited (Ponting, McDonald, & Wearing, 2005; Ponting, 2007, 2009). Furthermore, two studies in Costa Rica and Indonesia, suggest that surfing tourism at a local scale can be responsible for adverse environmental, socio-cultural and economic impacts (Lazarow, Miller, & Blackwell, 2007; Ponting, 2008; Ponting & O'Brien, 2014).

Such adverse impacts are potentially more problematic for newly discovered surf destinations such as the Mentawai Islands, where communities are less experienced in tourism development and the natural environments are pristine. Surfing tourism has only relatively recently appeared in the Mentawai Islands with the first surfing tourism operations commencing in 1994 (Towner, 2014). The number of surf resorts have increased from just one in 2000

(Ponting, 2008) to over 15 in 2015. Many indigenous Mentawai communities have low education levels, and there are very few tools available to assist them in achieving greater participation in the surfing tourism industry. The majority of Mentawai inhabitants continue to live in poverty with poor health despite the increased tourist dollars being spent in the region (Surfaid International, 2014).

With growing pressure on local resources due to increasing foreign surf tourist numbers, the sustainable management of the Mentawai Islands surfing tourism industry is becoming more important. An understanding of visitor perspectives towards tourism and related developments is vital if the industry is to be managed in a sustainable fashion (Stewart & Draper, 2007; Cunha, 2010; Drabkova, 2013). Although the Mentawais are one of the greatest studied surfing destinations on the globe (Martin & Assenov, 2012) there is little empirical data regarding surf tourists who visit the Islands. It is necessary to examine the characteristics of surf tourists visiting the Mentawais and to gain deeper insights into their motivations and expenditures.

1.1. Surfing tourism research

Surfing becomes tourism as soon as surfers travel away from their local surf break, with riding waves as the primary purpose for travel (Towner, 2014). Buckley (2002a, p. 414) comments that a surf tourist is a surfer first and a tourist second. Surfing tourism occurs

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on a continuum – from commercial to independent. Commercial surf tourists travel on all inclusive prepaid packages and expect high level of service while independent surf tourists make their own arrangements, are price conscious and often travel by themselves or in small groups. Boxing surf tourists into any broad single definition using temporal and spatial parameters does not recognise this continuum (Orams & Towner, 2013).

Most of the academic literature on surfing tourism published in the last ten years has focused on examining the relationship between surfing economics and tourism (Scarfe, Healy, & Rennie, 2009, p. 541). Studies by Nelsen et al. (2007), Lazarow (2007), Lazarow et al. (2008), and Wagner, Nelsen, and Walker (2011) have identified that surfing tourism has brought significant economic benefits to several mature and economically developed world surfing destinations such as the Gold Coast, Australia, and California in the United States. Lazarow et al. (2007, p. 5–6) estimates that 64,000 visits are made annually by surfers to South Stradbroke Island on the Gold Coast, generating a total annual spend of approximately AUS\$20,000,000. Wagner et al. (2011, p. 6) note that although Californian surfers commonly travel comparatively short distances to surf, each visit produces a significant spend of between US\$54 and US\$70.

Another growing sub-field within surfing tourism literature is 'surfonomics' (Scorse, Reynolds & Sackett, 2015). Surfonomics attempts to evaluate the economic value of a wave and surfing to local communities and regional economies. Over the past decade Save the Waves Coalition has commissioned six surfonomic reports on internationally recognised surfing destinations (Table 1). The aim of these reports is to help decision makers implement informed strategies to safeguard their coastal resources and waves (Save the Waves Coalition, 2015).

Unfortunately, most of these studies failed to identify the community impact dimensions, and apart from recent research by Save the Waves Coalition (2014) the studies were largely limited to economically developed countries. Buckley (2002a) comments that a key reason for researchers overlooking socio-cultural impacts is because surfing tourism is connected to the particular features of the natural landscape, and although it has strong economic linkages, it is largely disconnected from the cultures of the host communities. The last two years however have seen an increase in the number of studies into a variety of socio-cultural impacts generated by surfing tourism. Research relevant to this study include: work by Martin and Assenov (2013a and 2013b) on creating sustainable social indicators for surf beaches; research into sustainable surfing tourism and the community-centred approach in Papua New Guinea (PNG) (O'Brien and Ponting, 2013) and a study looking at the effects of deregulating common pool resources in Fiji's surfing tourism industry (Ponting & O'Brien, 2013).

Ponting & O'Brien's, 2013 research is relevant to the surf tourism industry in the Mentawai Islands because of their existing government management and regulation issues. Their study definitively showed that in 2010, when Fiji's government policy changed by terminating licences that permitted resorts private use of surf spots, there were both immediate impacts on the local community

and long-term effects on industry sustainability. Literally overnight, the government's neo-liberal policy shift increased surf tourist numbers and disintegrated joint ventures that were profitable for locals. As a result, indigenous Fijian communities faced marginalisation from the surfing tourism industry. Open access to popular surf breaks produced overcrowding of the waves, and dwindling tourism profits for local communities who were profiting from regulated access to the breaks are primary concerns for the sustainability of the industry. These factors threaten to compromise Fiji's established place as a world class surfing destination.

O'Brien and Ponting's (2013) study in PNG on community centred development offers an alternative view to the neo-colonialist models of surfing tourism development exhibited in other developing countries such as the Mentawai Islands and the Maldives. Unlike Fiji, PNG is a relatively new surf destination. The Surfing Association of Papua New Guinea has administered formalised surfing management plans which aim to sustainably manage this tourism through the empowerment of traditional indigenous communities to make their own decisions about their resources. O'Brien and Ponting (2013, p. 170) note that unlike remote Indonesian villages which find themselves "spectators" as surfing tourism advances without them, communities in PNG are actively involved in the decision-making process prior to commercial surfing tourism even beginning.

Research from Buckley (2002a), Ponting et al. (2005), Ponting (2008), and Ponting and McDonald (2013) undertaken in the Mentawai Islands suggests that surfing tourism development has the potential to produce negative socio-cultural impacts on the local community and that current tourism management in the region is unsustainable. Ponting and O'Brien (2013, p. 108) note that surfing tourism in the Mentawai Islands has the potential produce positive outcomes including the promotion of cross cultural understanding and the development of village-level sport.

Martin and Assenov (2012) systematic analysis of surfing tourism research between 1997 and 2011 found 156 studies with approximately two-thirds being grey literature. Only 23 of the 42 published academic journal articles were dedicated to surfing tourism. Sixty percent of the 156 works on surfing tourism have been published in the last five years, and this increase in publication rate is indicative of an emerging field of research (Martin & Assenov, 2012). Whilst studies into surfing tourism have increased over the last decade, surfers themselves are still a little known tourist group. The few studies that have investigated surf tourists have focused on constructing simple socio-demographic profiles, travel motivations and destination preferences (Dolnicar & Flucker, 2003a and 2003b, Barbieri & Sotomayor, 2013).

Investigating surf tourist motivations is an area of research that has received limited consideration from academics. Motivations are defined as "a meaningful state of mind which adequately disposes an actor or group of actors to travel, and which is subsequently interpretable by others as a valid explanation for such as decision" (Dann, 1981, p. 205). Another suggestion by Dann (1977, 1981) is that a person's desire to travel is influenced by both the allure of the destination – the "pull factors", and their emotional requirements,

Table 1
Surfonomic studies commissioned by Save the Waves Coalition.

Location	Author	Surf tourist daily expenditure	Annual economic contribution
Mundaka, Spain	(Murphy, 2008)	\$120/day	\$1–4.5 million dollars
Mavericks, California, USA	(Coffman & Burnett, 2009)	N/A	\$24 million dollars
Uluwatu, Bali, Indonesia	(Margules, 2014)	\$150/day	\$35 million dollars
San Miguel, Baja, Mexico	(Save the Waves Coalition, 2014)	\$111/day	N/A
Huanchaco, Peru	(Save the Waves Coalition, 2014)	\$45/day	\$1.7 million dollars
Pichilemu, Chile	(Wright et al., 2014)	\$168/day	\$2–8 million dollars

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