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# Regulating “Nirvana”: Sustainable surf tourism in a climate of increasing regulation



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## ABSTRACT

Indonesia's Mentawai Islands are widely regarded as a surfer's “Nirvana.” This paper uses qualitative interviews and participant observation to explore the politics of surf tourism recreational capacity management in the Mentawais, and the wider implications for Mentawaiian host communities' involvement in the surf tourism economy. While much of the Mentawaiian surf tourism industry was vehemently opposed to a recently introduced capacity management model, the market responded favourably. There appear to be immediate advantages for government and local communities in incentivising low-volume, high-yield land-based surf tourism development, and social carrying capacity measures such as vocational training and cultural interchange emerge as viable adjuncts to purely physical carrying capacity regulation.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, much research has addressed crowding with reference to outdoor sport and recreation (Budruk et al., 2008; Manning, 2007; Navarro-Jurado, Mihaela-Damian, & Fernández-Morales, 2013; Vaske & Shelby, 2008). One strategic response to crowding is to install mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing a recreational carrying capacity. The notion of “recreational carrying capacity” refers to, “the level of use . . . which a natural resource can sustain without an unacceptable degree of deterioration of the character and quality of the resource or the use of that resource” (Davis & Tisdell, 1995, p. 34). Davis and Tisdell (1995) demonstrated how scuba diving tourists were discouraged from visiting focal areas due to the overcrowding and congestion they experienced. This has implications for resource sustainability and the place it holds in the lives of host communities. In the sport tourism literature, work on recreational carrying capacities and their implications for stakeholders is growing (Buckley, 2002b; Martin & Assenov, 2012; Ponting & O'Brien, 2014).

Many adventure sport tourism products such as snowboarding, ice climbing, and surfing, take place in remote corners of developing countries. For these regions and the sport tourism operations they support, sustainability requires careful consideration of recreational carrying capacity; that is, how many enthusiasts can the host community and/or resource viably accommodate in a given period? Hinch and Higham (2011) note that overcrowding and environmental damage are interrelated and may, “compromise the quality of the sport tourist experience (particularly) where naturalness forms an

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important, perhaps central, element" (p. 129). One burgeoning sport tourism niche market in which naturalness forms a central element is surf tourism (Martin & Assenov, 2012).

Recent estimates of the global surfer population range from 23 million (International Surfing Association cited in [Warshaw, 2004](#)), to 25 million ([Aguerre, 2009](#)), through to 35 million participants ([O'Brien & Eddie, 2013](#)). Indeed, it is safe to say that participation in surfing is large and growing ([Buckley, 2002a](#)) in at least 161 countries ([Martin & Assenov, 2012](#)). The resultant surf crowding in urban settings is currently driving demand for surf tourism to less crowded destinations ([Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003a,b](#); [George, 2000](#); [Hugues Dit Ciles, 2009](#); [Ponting, 2008](#); [Preston-Whyte, 2001, 2002](#)). Consequently, surf tourism has become a significant niche within the adventure/sport tourism sector ([Barbieri & Sotomayor, 2013](#); [Buckley, 2002a](#)). One destination that is enduringly popular with travelling surfers is the Mentawai Island chain, 130 miles off the central west coast of Sumatra, Indonesia.

Much of the surf tourism market in the Mentawais has evolved around charter vessels ([Ponting & McDonald, 2013](#)). Surf tourists pay for all-inclusive 7–12 day surfing holidays on vessels that cruise around the various surf breaks with up to 12 surfers aboard. By the time the Macaronis Surf Resort opened in 2005/2006 on Pasangan Island near the village of Silabu, approximately 50 surf charters were operating in the Mentawais. The resort is adjacent to the surf break called "Macaronis" which has been voted the world's "funnest" wave ([Warshaw, 2004](#); [Waterways\\_Travel, 2013](#)).

In 2002, [Buckley \(2002b\)](#) warned that the Mentawai Islands were, "particularly vulnerable to crowding and downmarket competition . . . recreation capacity is hence particularly critical to maintain an economically, social and environmentally sustainable tourism industry" (p. 440). More than 10 years later, crowd saturation in the islands is extreme. For example, 11-time world surfing champion Kelly Slater tweeted, "If there was any question as to whether we've ruined the Mentawais, the sobering reality of 16 boats @ 1 average break tonight confirmed it" ([Slater, 2012](#), July 8th).

In response to levels of crowding threatening viability, in April 2010 Macaronis Surf Resort introduced a unique model to manage recreation carrying capacity. The model has been extremely controversial with the Mentawai charter fleet; however, the Mentawai Government sees potential in its broader application across the archipelago. The overriding question guiding this research is, how does the introduction of carrying capacity regulation impact upon the sustainability of surf tourism in a developing country? This paper, for the first time, applies common pool resources literature to the notion of crowding in international surf tourism and through the Framework Analysis for Sustainable Surf Tourism (FASST) ([O'Brien & Ponting, 2013](#); [Ponting and O'Brien, 2014](#)) provides the first structured analysis of the impacts and issues of existing and proposed regulations to manage crowding and how they influence the sustainability of surf tourism in the Mentawais. The premise being that the more the FASST principles are incorporated into the management of a destination, the more sustainable a surf tourism system is likely to be.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Surf tourism

Surf tourism is, "generating sufficient economic, social and environmental significance to justify academic attention" ([Barbieri & Sotomayor, 2013](#), p. 112). [Martin and Assenov \(2012\)](#) cite 156 individual pieces of surf tourism research published between 1997 and 2011 and claim that surf tourism now has its own distinct, multidisciplinary literature. Previous surf tourism research has explored the sustainability of management plans, policies, and regulations in a range of geographical settings including Indonesia ([Buckley, 2002b](#); [Hugues Dit Ciles, 2009](#); [Ponting et al., 2005](#); [Ponting, 2001](#); [Ponting, 2008](#)), Thailand ([Martin, 2012](#)), Costa Rica ([Tantamjarik, 2004](#)), Fiji ([Hugues Dit Ciles, 2009](#); [Ponting, 2007](#); [Ponting and O'Brien, 2014](#)) and Papua New Guinea ([O'Brien & Ponting, 2013](#); [Ponting, 2007](#)).

Since the landmark definition of sustainable development by the Brundtland Commission in 1987, the concept has been applied widely to tourism. [UNESCO \(2012, p. 3\)](#) defines sustainable tourism as, "tourism that respects both local people and the traveller, cultural heritage and the environment." The notion of sustainable surf tourism fits with this conception of sustainable touristic activity centred on the sport of surfing, where the needs of surf tourists are met whilst also respecting the current and future social, cultural, economic, and ecological welfare of local people. [Ponting et al. \(2005\)](#), [O'Brien and Ponting \(2013\)](#) and [Ponting and O'Brien \(2014\)](#) initiated a normative framework for analysing the sustainability of surf tourism development in developing countries based on five broad principles designed to be applicable across different geographical, cultural, political, policy, and regulatory settings. While the FASST is explained later in the paper, the ensuing sections address the related issues of common pool resources and recreational carrying capacities in the context of the communities where adventure sport tourism takes place.

### 2.2. Common pool resources, recreational carrying capacity and host communities

Common pool resources (CPRs) are those resources from which it is difficult to exclude users and where exploitation by one user reduces availability to others ([Moore & Rodger, 2010](#); [Ostrom, 1990](#)). Early theorists pointed out that individuals acting in self-interest leads to unfavourable collective outcomes; they concluded that the assignment of property rights was the appropriate response to ensure that common pool resources were not subject to over-use and under-investment ([Hardin, 1968](#); [Olson, 1965](#)). [Hardin \(1968\)](#) assumed that CPRs are always open access ([Bromley, 1978, 1992](#); [Powell, 1998](#); [Wade, 1987](#)) and presented a binary choice between open access and tragedy, versus private property and prosperity ([Gibson, 2009](#)). In reality,

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