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The governance of the Boscombe Artificial Surf Reef, UK

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ABSTRACT

The Boscombe Artificial Surf Reef (ASR) is the first ASR in Europe and is the flagship project of an ambitious scheme to regenerate Boscombe Spa, a resort-suburb of Bournemouth, UK. The Boscombe ASR therefore presents a unique coastal management challenge in Europe for which there is no precedent and little pre-existing management capacity. Through a multi-stage research process, this paper identifies the likely governance challenges that will face the Boscombe ASR. These were found to include overcrowding, a lack of surf skill and etiquette amongst visitors, conflict between different uses, and localism. Through a consideration of approaches to surf governance elsewhere, suggestions are identified for management interventions that may work in Boscombe. The paper concludes by identifying underlying tensions between the need to attract visitors to support the regeneration of Boscombe, the surf safety issues created by an influx of novice surfers, and the potential for the breakdown of the norms governing the self-regulation of surfing.

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Introduction

The regeneration of Boscombe Spa

Boscombe Spa is located on the central south coast of England within the Bournemouth-Poole conurbation. The resort-suburb of Boscombe has a population of 16,871 with the main component of the settlement situated upon sandy sea cliffs of 20–35 m height, fronted by a an artificially recharged beach. Boscombe developed as a popular seaside spa resort in the mid nineteenth century, reaching its hey-day during the inter-war period (Emery, 2008). In common with many other British seaside towns during the post war period, Boscombe experienced socio-economic decline, which can partly be attributed to changed demographies, holiday habits, outdated facilities, negative place image, and changes in the taste and fashions of British society (Urry, 1990; Gale, 2005). The impact on towns such as Boscombe has been significant, with long term challenges identified as their "physical isolation, high deprivation levels, the inward migration of older people, the high levels of transience, the outward migration of young people, poor quality housing, and the nature of the coastal economy" (HCC and LGC, 2007: 3). A multiple deprivation indicator study of social exclusion in English seaside resorts showed that many resorts exhibit signs of social exclusion, with Bournemouth being identified as 'very deprived' in terms of income and defined overall as a 'particularly deprived' seaside resort (Agarwal and Brunt, 2006). Boscombe is arguably in what Priestley and Mundet (1998) describe as the post-stagnation phase of Butler's (1980) resort life cycle.

To tackle the socio-economic challenges facing Boscombe, Bournemouth Borough Council initiated a regeneration strategy focused upon a rejuvenated seafront. Elements of this included new seafront residential development, the refurbishment of a derelict public building to provide a seafront bar, restaurant, and modernised beach huts (termed 'surf-pods'), the refurbishment of Boscombe Pier, and the re-landscaping of the Boscombe Gardens public park. In common with the trend in many regeneration initiatives to include a flagship element (Smyth, 1994; Degen, 2003; Smith, 2004), the focal point of the Boscombe regeneration project is an artificial surf reef, the first in Europe. The artificial surf reef, which formally opened in November 2009, has prompted significant international interest in Boscombe and has served to differentiate Boscombe from other resort destinations, not just locally, but within the UK and Europe. However, the Boscombe Artificial Surf Reef (BASR) will present a new coastal governance challenge for which there is little or no pre-existing capacity or experience in the UK or Europe. This paper reports on a research project to anticipate the likely management challenges that will face the operational governance of the BASR. The paper begins with an overview of the BASR, followed by a brief review of the regulation of surfing and how this might relate to ASRs. The research

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methodology is then presented, followed by the presentation of the results.

The Boscombe Artificial Surf Reef

An Artificial Reef (AR) is "an area within marine waters in which approved underwater structures have been intentionally placed for a purpose" (Rousseau, 2006, p. 2). The purpose might be to promote marine biodiversity, manage beach erosion, or increasingly to enhance the recreational and tourism value of a resort (Corbett et al., 2005). Artificial Surf Reefs (ASRs) are ARs whose function is, at least partially, intended to improve surf conditions. To date five ASRs have been constructed, located in Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Of the limited research has been conducted into the operation and governance of these ASRs, key themes to have emerged are the mixed perceptions of the quality of the surf break produced and the public safety issues associated with the use of the reef (Jackson et al., 2005; Ford, 2007; Rowen, 2008). However, it has been noted that regardless of the resultant wave quality, the number of surfers and beach users at ASR sites has increased (Fluker, 2003). This has lead McGrath et al. (2000) to conclude that the success of wave formation may be of limited relevance, as the reef will attract non-surfing tourists who will view the surfers within a "purpose built stadium" (Fluker, 2003, p. 3) and contribute to economic well-being.

The BASR is constructed from sand-filled geotextile bags. It is located 225 m from the beach and is intended to create a point break with a stable position, generating a predominantly right-handed breaking wave of 75 m. The BASR wave has been designed with the competent surfer in mind and is widely publicised as being not suited to novice surfers. It is predicted that the number of days in which there is surfable conditions will increase from 77 to 153 as a result of the ASR. To some extent, the BASR also addresses the decline in the number of usable surf breaks along the Bournemouth seafront that resulted from successive phases of beach replenishment.

Surfing regulation and artificial surf reefs

There is a growing body of evidence related to the influence of surfing on culture, place and economy in many geographical contexts (Booth, 1994, 1995; Augustin, 1998; Rutsky, 1999; Preston-Whyte, 2002; Dolnicar and Fluker, 2003). Yet despite its popularity and potential risks, there is minimal formal regulation of surfing activity (Nazer, 2004). Indeed, surfing remains regulated by norms rather than formal rules (Plessis et al., 2005). Norms can be described as a set of rules that are not legally enforceble but which are regularly complied with, which guide behaviour (Posner, 1997; Atkins, 2001; McGrath et al., 2000), and are primarily, if not exclusively, enforced by the parties themselves. Attempts to formalise surfing norms include the 'Surfriders Code', 'Surfers Code of Ethics' and 'Tribal Law of Surfing' (Poizat-Newcombe, 1999; Fitzgerald and Clarke, 2001; Nazer, 2004; Plessis et al., 2005). These norms, the common basis of which is respect, reflect the cultural value of surfing as a sport of self-regulation freedom and expression. Thus, surf culture and the regulation of surfing activity are intimately connected. A potential implication of this is that any attempts to manage a surf break, either real or artificial, is likely to create a tension with the traditional values of surfing and surf culture. This may be a particular challenge for ASRs as their role is to increase surf activity and take advantage of income derived from surf tourism.

The governance of the BASR is distinctive from most natural surf breaks, which have very limited governance arrangements. The BASR has a number of initiatives to manage activity on and around the reef, with public safety being the key priority. First, Bournemouth Borough Council has developed a risk assessment based policy framework that identifies specific actions that reduce the likelihood of specific risks occurring (Bournemouth Borough Council, 2007). Second, the Council is working with various bodies to develop a multi-sport code of practice for the use of the BASR, along with appropriate signage and information dissemination channels. Finally, the BASR area will have year round lifeguard cover. Although the lifeguards will have no formal authority, they will advise reef users on safety matters. Despite their instrumental role in the development of the BASR, Bournemouth Borough Council's responsibility towards the safe use of the Reef, is thought to be equivalent to any other piece of Council infrastructure, such as a skate park or public toilets, in that provided all reasonable efforts have been made to minimise public risk, then people use the BASR at their own risk. Thus, the BASR has numerous actors involved in the governance of the reef, none of which have overall control or responsibility. The multiple tensions between the tradition of self-regulation, the purposeful attraction of greater numbers of surfers to an artificial surf break, and the need to impose a safe use framework, create significant challenges for the governance of an ASR. The remainder of this paper seeks to explore these tensions within the context of the Boscombe ASR.

Method

A two-stage method was employed. First, a telephone interview survey was conducted with BASR stakeholders. A total of 15 in-depth detailed telephone interviews were undertaken with members of the Boscombe beach management and watersports community. The primary interests of interviewees related to beach management and safety, surfing, kite surfing, windsurfing, local business interests, and surf schools. Some interviewees held multiple interests in the BASR giving a total of 22 separate interests represented in the interviews. Each interview was conducted using a semi-structured approach, the answers to which were transcribed and returned to the interviewee for approval before analysis. The second stage of the research was a focus group convened with BASR stakeholders in order to refine the analysis of the results and to consider potential governance responses. A key element of the workshop was to review potentially transferable surf governance lessons from elsewhere, in order to consider the extent to which tried and tested solutions from elsewhere could be applied to the BASR. In order to facilitate this discussion, a comprehensive review of the governance arrangements of both ASRs and natural surf sites was conducted and additional interviews conducted with experts in surf site management. The interests represented at the focus group included recreational surfing, surf tuition, the management of recreational activities on the Boscombe seafront, strategic seafront management, lifeguards, and academia.

Challenges

This section presents the combined results from both the interview schedule and workshop. In order to better illustrate the comments from stakeholders, unattributed quotes are included (*in italics*) in the paper.

Overcrowding

Overcrowding of the entire Bournemouth and Boscombe surf area was highlighted as a major concern arising from the construction of the BASR. There was a consensus that whilst it would be the BASR that would attract visitors to the area, all local surf breaks were likely to experience increased usage due to the limited capac-

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