

The sport of surfing

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Introduction

Surfing is an increasingly popular recreational pursuit. It is estimated that more than 10 million people around the world enjoy surfing in its various forms (Buckley 2002). In terms of recreation and tourism, surfing is a fascinating subject for geographers: surfing is one way to stay fit and healthy; it can teach people about the oceanic and beach environment, whilst surfers generate revenue for many economically deprived areas through surf tourism and the merchandising of surf-related equipment, clothes and music. It is estimated that the surfing industry is worth \$2.6 billion a year (Buckley, 2002).

The purpose of our research was to find out who participates in surfing, why they participate in surfing, where the surfing 'hotspots' are in Wales, what the benefits and problems are of surfing, and how these problems can be addressed by policy makers. Funded by the Sports Council for Wales, this research interviewed 134 surfers in Wales to find out where they surfed and why.



Findings

Surrounded by sea on three sides and with outstanding water conditions throughout the year, surfing is an increasingly significant sporting, cultural, and economic activity for Wales. There are 16 surf clubs and 22 surf schools in Wales, with participation in surfing rising every year.

Who surfs?

From the survey of 134 surfers, the case study discovered that the age of surfers in Wales ranged from 14 to 64 years old. Most surfers are aged between 20-29 years old (42% of the

total sample). There were 15 respondents in the under 20 age category (11%); 38 respondents in the 30-39 age category (29%); and 25 respondents over 40. The average age (mean) was 30 years old. The research showed that the majority of surfers in Wales are male (83%). However many respondents suggested that the number of females participating in surfing is increasing rapidly.

In terms of surfing ability, 17% said they were novice surfers, 55% said their skill level was 'intermediate', whilst 28% said they were 'advanced' surfers. Those who class themselves as 'advanced' would be highly skilled surfers, perhaps competing in championships at the national or international level.

Why do people surf?

Surfers were asked why they participated in the sport. Over 90% said they did so because they enjoyed being in the sea and riding waves, 80% said they felt it was an enjoyable 'escape' from their jobs and school life, 70% felt it kept them fit and healthy, and 45% enjoyed the friendship and camaraderie between surfers.

Which beaches are most popular for surfing in Wales?

Surfers were asked where they go surfing. The 'top five' most popular surfing beaches in Wales are: Llangennith, Porthcawl, Rhossili, Langland, and Caswell. These beaches are popular for a number of reasons. Many beaches were popular because the waves were appropriate for expert surfers, whilst other beaches were popular because the waves were appropriate for beginners. In general, beaches were popular due to the quality of waves (54%), their facilities (e.g. car parking (48%) or the presence of webcams (15%), or for their clean water (34%).

Personal benefits of surfing

The benefits of encouraging young people to participate in surfing were mentioned by several participants. Surfing is a key way of having fun, increasing fitness levels, improving self-esteem and confidence. Surfing can also enable young people to interact with the sea and promote a greater environmental awareness; as one surfer states:

Surfing teaches youngsters about being safe in the sea, about the environment, the weather and the tides, if we could use surfing to teach these subjects in an interesting way, whether through websites or events, it would be great, and certainly beneficial to the next generation of beach users who may go on to become great surfers or groundbreaking meteorologists.

As one respondent put it:

Surfing is an amazing sport which always challenges me physically and mentally. I have learnt about the weather, the environment, and my own physical ability which is

always challenged when surfing. It has taken me all over the world in its pursuit. I have experienced places and people that I would have never if I didn't surf.

Economic benefits of surfing

Surfing directly generates revenue for the local and national economy (an estimated £10m per annum), and indirectly contributes through associated tourism (an estimated 100,000 people come to Wales every year to surf). As the owner of one surf school states:

Surfing pulls people to the area, people come specifically for the surf, they spend money in the area, use our local B&Bs and therefore contribute to the local economy.

Surfing is particularly important in more remote areas of Wales, as the following respondent states:

Surfing benefits the local economy quite dramatically because we're based in West Wales where there isn't a lot of income. There's a small retail market in the area but it's quite low in employers. Surf Tourism in the summer is one of the biggest industries, especially where we are near the beach.

Problems

It is important for surfers to know how clean the water is at any given time, yet it was found that it is often difficult for surfers to find out this information because there is inadequate pollution monitoring of surf beaches in Wales. There is often a lack of waste and recycling facilities at surf beaches. There are often insufficient facilities for surfers on busy beaches e.g. showers, lockers where they can leave their clothes, cafes etc. There is a lack of provision of good quality training for new surfers so they learn in conditions that are safe and not beyond their ability. This was seen as particularly important as surfing becomes more popular and waves become more crowded.

Recommendations

The case study found that the following issues need to be tackled by policy makers in order to ensure surfing can continue to grow and remain a safe and healthy sport:

- Better pollution monitoring at surf beaches across Wales.
- The provision of waste and recycling facilities at surf beaches.

- More facilities for surfers on busy beaches e.g. showers, lockers, cafes etc.
- The provision of good quality training for new surfers.

Conclusions

Surfing is a growing sport in Wales, and is becoming increasingly important in terms of health, employment and income generation. The sport of surfing can attract tourists who wish to have fun on the waves, but also requires clean and safe beaches and a certain level of facilities.



References

- Buckley, R. (2002). Surf tourism and sustainable development in Indo-Pacific Islands. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 10 (5), pp. 405–424

Further information

- Anderson, J. Jones, K. (2008) Surf's up! Participation Regimes and Motivations for Surfing in Wales. Cardiff University and Sports Council for Wales. Available at <http://www.spatialmanifesto.com/research-projects/surfing-places>