



Title: Riding the sustainability wave: Surfing and environmentalism

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Riding the sustainability wave: Surfing and environmentalism

Gregory Borne shows that engagement with nature can lead to pro-environmental behaviours.

There is a myriad of reasons why the relationship between surfing and sustainability is an attractive focus for academic study. The relationship between cultural and subcultural dynamics, the transition of the multibillion-pound surfing industry to sustainable business models, or the technological developments that create artificial wave environments that challenge our very perception of what is natural are just a few deep academic topics to dive in to.

THE SURFER-ENVIRONMENT PARADOX

The sheer raw beauty of the act of surfing engages millions of people all over the world. The direct contact with a wave and the hours spent immersed in nature surely means that surfers are more environmentally aware than the general population? Could surfers act as environmental stewards and leaders? Do they act as the 'canaries in the coal mine', highlighting oceanic pollution and the impacts of climate change?

Anecdotally, this proposition is supported by groups such as Surfers Against Sewage, who have successfully changed legislation, lobbied government and mobilised thousands of people across the country to engage in environmental actions such as beach cleans.

Unfortunately, there is little empirical evidence to support this proposition. Indeed, it has been observed that there is a tension within surfing between individualism and broader engagement, which makes it important to understand competing values and motivations. The surfing industry relies on the production, packaging and distribution of consumer products, it relies on the production of surfboards and wetsuits that contain toxic and polluting materials. The following discussion explores the research that has sought to address this paradox and tensions within the surfing community.

THE VALUE-ACTION GAP

It is worth briefly outlining some of the broader debates that relate to environmental knowledge and action. The question of whether direct engagement with nature, not only promotes environmental awareness but also engenders individuals to undertake pro-environmental behaviours has received increased academic attention. The research suggests that raised awareness of the environment and environmental issues does not necessarily translate into environmental action on a personal or societal level; this is termed the 'value-action gap'.

A review of the academic literature points to a complex process that engages socio-psychological insights that change according to the geographical location, cultural context, age range and gender category. Nevertheless, there is an emerging consistency in the data that points

to the important influence of direct engagement with nature on pro-environmental behaviours. Whether on land or in the ocean, there is increasing evidence that outdoor pursuits have a significant impact on an individual's relationship with the environment and their action towards it. However, the question of what creates pro-environmental behaviour is so complex that no single model can appropriately express the multitude of variables involved.

Work relating to environmental attitudes and behaviours frequently follows Schwartz's norm-activation theory¹ and the application of the altruistic behaviour concept.² Norm-activation theory highlights the importance of such factors as values, perceived consequences of behaviour, ascription of responsibility or control attribution. The altruistic behaviour concept focuses on personal norms, feelings of moral obligation and altruism. Schwartz went on to argue that values in society are ordered along two pivotal dimensions. The first extends from the self-enhancement pole (which relates to self-interest) to the self-transcendence pole (which relates to altruism).³ The second dimension contrasts analysis associated with openness to change with conservative values.

These insights combine with an acknowledgement that perceptions of nature alter significantly and are highly contextual.^{4,5} With these observations in mind, research indicates that engagement with nature can enhance pro-environmental behaviours. The underlying premise is that engagement and identification with nature promote not only an awareness of environmental issues but also a personal sense of stewardship and protection that translates into pro-environmental behaviour. For example, Larson *et al.* (2010), looking at outdoor recreation in state parks, concluded that outdoor recreation does impact environmental behaviours.⁶

Situational variables are also important in exploring environmental behaviours. Proshansky *et al.* (1983) claimed that humans, through their interactions with the physical environment, develop a cognitive structure representing memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings and conceptions of behaviour and experience related to the physical environment.⁷ Proshansky's place-identity concept relates to a system of references to the environment that are constructed by the individual over time. Another term in the literature that has been used to describe bonding to an environmental setting is 'place attachment'.⁸ Together these terms enable the construction of environmental identity and attachment, not just at the local level but also through an expanded global awareness.

ENGAGING THE SURFING COMMUNITY

Our research⁹ took the form of a broad-based survey conducted in partnership with a not-for-profit organisation based in the USA, Sustainable Surf.



This organisation has had a significant impact over the past six years in moving the surfing industry towards a more sustainable operating model. The survey was open on the Sustainable Surf website from June 2017 until January 2018. Participation was encouraged through a prize of a surfboard. There were 575 responses from people in 35 countries. The vast majority surfed and felt that being in nature was the most significant motivating factor. This was ranked higher than friendship, exercise or having fun, though these also scored highly.

“Whether on land or in the ocean, there is increasing evidence that outdoor pursuits have a significant impact on an individual's relationship with the environment and their action towards it.”

The majority of participants indicated that they engaged with surf culture such as surf media, films and clothing. Overwhelmingly, they pursued other outdoor activities. All respondents considered themselves to be environmentally aware, and over 80 per cent indicated that they felt that it was the act of surfing that made them more environmentally aware. Equally significant was that respondents felt they behaved in an environmentally-friendly manner. When asked what respondents felt were the main barriers to doing so, infrastructure was the most significant, followed by money and information. Initial insights indicated that, as a subgroup of recreational ocean users, surfers were not only engaged with nature, aware of environmental issues, but also translated these into action.

Evoking environmental concern through risk association is identified as a prominent factor in activating behaviour and engaging the general public¹⁰. The research presented surfers with several sustainability risks, including climate change, ozone depletion, biodiversity loss, carbon footprint, ocean acidification, marine plastics and sea-level rise. There was a high level of awareness of these risks, again pointing to an engaged population with a propensity to act in a positive way in order to mitigate against or adapt to these risks.

COMMUNITY AND PLACE ATTACHMENT

Community and place attachment have been identified as significant variables in connection with environmental behaviours. This is particularly pertinent in light of the processes associated with



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globalisation and the exponential growth of interactive web technologies, mediums and platforms. Focusing on community as a variable of analysis within the research therefore allowed insights into how surfers understand their position within global networks. Overwhelmingly, the research indicated that surfers felt that they were part of more than one community. These communities included family and friends, hobbies, work and more, and were not seen as being geographically fixed, but combining local and global elements. The global connection resonated strongly with their perception of the environment: participants indicated that they were most concerned with the environment, followed by health and education; the economy and crime were of lower priority. The majority also said the environment was important in their everyday lives.

OCEAN CONNECTION

A significant component of the research sought to establish the impact of the ocean on environmental awareness and action. Most of the surfers in the research displayed very high concern for the health of the oceans, and the act of surfing increased their interest in protecting it. Direct connections were also made with their wellbeing – a reduction in the quality of the ocean environment directly impacted their own wellbeing. This connection to the self is important, as it addresses the tension between individualism and broader action.

RESPONSIBILITY

It has been argued that feelings of responsibility are intimately tied to an individual's ability to act in a pro-environmental manner. The research therefore sought to establish who participants felt was responsible for environmental problems. The majority placed responsibility on everyone, followed by several closely related issues (corporations, government, the economic system then the general public) indicating a diverse assignment of blame for current environmental issues. Over a third of participants said that they themselves were responsible. This result presented a certain level of contradiction within the data: this self-responsibility versus a transfer of responsibility from the individual to a more generalised understanding of responsibility ('everybody').

CONCLUSION

Overall the results suggest a highly environmentally engaged and motivated group. There was consistency in relation to being engaged with nature through surfing and a resultant raising of awareness and environmental action. Participants identified strongly with nature in their everyday lives and overwhelmingly indicated that the act of surfing contributed towards this engagement. There was also a strong engagement with multiple communities, both locally and globally. Respondents also identified strongly with the ocean at a personal level.

The results present just a glimpse of one outdoor recreational groups' engagement with the environment. This snapshot – part of a broader research project conducted over six years on three continents¹⁰ – contributes to an emerging body of evidence of the ability of environmental recreation within natural environments to foster the right conditions to engage and motivate people to think more meaningfully about their everyday actions and the impact these have. **ES**

Gregory Borne is a Senior Lecturer at Plymouth Marjon University and the Director of the Plymouth Sustainability and Surfing Research Group. His research focuses on multiple dimensions of sustainable development at both the global and local levels. Gregory is the author of four books, the most recent of which explores the relationship between surfing and sustainability. His next book is examining the relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals to local communities with an emphasis on parish councils.

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