



Surf travel behavior and destination preferences: An application of the Serious Leisure Inventory and Measure

Carla Barbieri^{a,*}, Sandra Sotomayor^b

^a Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management, North Carolina State University, 3028D Biltmore Hall, Raleigh, NC 27695, United States

^b Tourism Management Department, Universidad San Ignacio de Loyola, Av. La Fontana 550, Lima 12, Peru

H I G H L I G H T S

- ▶ The study examines surfing as serious leisure and its implication in surf tourism.
- ▶ Surfers show high levels of serious leisure qualities and a strong disposition for surf tourism.
- ▶ Serious leisure qualities do not have any effect on surf travel behavior.
- ▶ Serious leisure qualities are significant associated with preferences on the surfing appeal of the destination.

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A B S T R A C T

Surfers are characterized by the time and effort they invest in surfing and their propensity to travel in search for the perfect wave. In spite of such characteristics and the economic significance of surf tourism, little is known about surfing as serious leisure and its implications in surf tourism. Thus, a study was conducted using a convenient sample of 126 surfers to examine whether the six serious leisure qualities (Effort, Ethos, Career, Identity, Perseverance, Benefits) are associated with surf travel behavior and destination preferences. Results confirmed that surfers have a strong disposition for surf tourism and that they show high levels of serious leisure in their six qualities. Statistical tests also revealed that although serious leisure qualities are not associated with surf travel behavior, they do predict destination preferences especially related to the overall surfing appeal of the destination, the variety of waves, and the quality of the natural environment. Management and marketing implications for surf tourism operators and destinations are discussed. Besides filling a gap in the literature, this study augments the marketing intelligence for owners and managers of surf-related business as well agencies and organizations promoting surf tourism.

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1. Introduction

Since the sixties, the popularity of surfing among participants and spectators has steadily increased fostering a multi-million dollar industry that stimulates local economies (Buckley, 2002a; Frank, Zhou, Bezerra, & Crowley, 2009; Ponting, 2008; Tantamjarik, 2004). Such increased popularity, as well as the surfers' quest for the perfect wave, have created the surf tourism industry (Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003b; Pitt, 2009). In 2007, it was calculated that 112 countries offered some sort of surfing tours or had available surfing-related information for tourists (Ponting, 2008). Although calculating the size and economic significance of the global surf tourism is

not an easy task (Buckley, 2002a, 2003), its world total value is likely to be at least one quarter of a billion U.S. dollars (Ponting, 2008). However, such estimate may fall short when taking into account that most popular surf destinations in developed and developing countries have hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of small surf tourism operations which value has never been calculated (Ponting, 2008). This industry also encompasses businesses offering ancillary products (e.g., souvenirs, clothing) to fans, who although are not always surfers, pretend being part of the surfing world mostly through the surfing mode of dress and branded garments (Moutinho, Dionisio, & Leal, 2007). Furthermore, the surf tourism industry promises further growth with the development of more specialized services such as surf schools as well as increase of the market for surfing-related consumer brands (Moutinho et al., 2007).

In spite of the size and economic implications of the surf tourism industry, few studies have examined this form of niche tourism

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 919 513 0351; fax: +1 919 515 3687.

E-mail addresses: carla_barbieri@ncsu.edu (C. Barbieri), ssotomayor@usil.edu.pe (S. Sotomayor).

(e.g., Buckley, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003a, 2003b, 2004; Ponting, 2008, 2009; Tantamjarik, 2004). In particular, and to the extent of the authors knowledge, it is yet to be examined the application of Stebbins' (1982, 2001) six qualities of serious leisure among surfers and its influence on surf tourism. Aiming to fill such a gap in the literature, a study was undertaken between 2010 and 2011 to examine the application of the Serious Leisure Inventory and Measure – SLIM (Gould, Moore, McGuire, & Stebbins, 2008) among surfers residing in different countries. Specifically, the study addressed two objectives: (1) to explore whether socio-demographic and surfing behavior are associated to the six qualities of serious leisure; and (2) to examine the six serious leisure qualities as predictors of surf travel behavior and destination preferences.

Examining the application of serious leisure among surfers augments the marketing intelligence for owners and managers of surf-related business (e.g., tour operators, surfing resorts, surf schools) as well as agencies and organizations promoting surf tourism; this information is critical given the size of the global surf tourism industry and its economic significance especially for surfing destinations in developing countries (Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003a). For example, identifying the demographics and surfing behavior that are associated with the seriousness of surfing can be utilized to craft promotional messages targeting certain surfers' segments. Examining whether the serious leisure qualities predict surf travel behavior and preferences has important management implications as such information can assist the development or enhancement of surfing destinations as well as to guide businesses in the provision of complementary activities and services to enhance the satisfaction of their clients. The following section of the manuscript reviews the literature related to surf tourism and serious leisure, detailing the application of the latter construct among tourism studies. The remaining sections detail the study methods, results and conclusions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Surf tourism

Although surf tourism has been examined in the last years, its definition is yet to be settled. For Buckley (2002a), surf tourism occurs “when surfers travel at least 40 km and stay overnight with surfing as the primary purpose for travel” (p. 407), including domestic as well as international travel (Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003a). In their several studies, Dolnicar and Fluker (2003a, 2003b, 2004) do not refer to any minimum distance traveled, but they mention at least one overnight stay as long as the stay does not exceed six months for domestic travels or 12 months for international locations; they also refer to an active surfing participation. Ponting (2008) highlights the primary purpose of surfing waves in his definition of “surfing tourism”, thus rejecting those positions that include spectators and non-surfing travel companions (e.g., Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003b) which he labels as “surf tourism”. In both definitions, Ponting (2008) refers to the minimum of one overnight away from home. It is important to note that Fluker's (2003) pioneer study on surf tourism referred to the use of the wave power to ride the wave (as cited by Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003a, 2003b, 2004), thus excluding similar water-based activities using other types of power such as sail-wind surfing or kite-powered surfing (Ponting, 2008).

Surf tourism has become a significant component of the worldwide adventure tourism sector, generating sufficient economic, social and environmental significance to justify academic attention (Buckley, 2002a; 2002b). Started with independent travelers searching for new surfing spots, surf tourism

peaked in the 1960s mostly because of more affordable air travel, lighter surfboards, and the image of a surfing culture delivered through mass media (Butts, 2001; Ponting, 2006; Tantamjarik, 2004). Numerous surf-related films including Hollywood beach-related stories, aficionado “pure” surfing films, and surfing industry videos, have popularized surfing-style fashions and values (Booth, 1996), while printed material, music, clothing, and competitions, have created a demand for people traveling to several beach destinations, portrayed as perfect unspoiled beaches in paradisiacal tropical destinations (Ponting, 2009). As a consequence, surfers usually accompanied by a partner or with up to four friends (Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003a), flock to such portrayed destinations searching for their main attraction: the perfect waves (Butts, 2001; Tantamjarik, 2004).

Although surf tourism started as a self-guided adventure driven by the quality of the surfing experience in other regions or climates (e.g., wave height and period, swell direction, tide), the majority of current surf travelers are no longer backpackers with plenty of free time but travelers relying on surf tour operators to help them coordinate their travel arrangements and find the perfect wave (Pitt, 2009; Ponting, 2008; Tantamjarik, 2004). Thus, the specialized commercial surfing tours that began with rudimentary surf camps and live-aboard a boat in the late 1970s has led to a global industry involving thousands of tour operators, village homestays, resorts, charter boats, wholesalers, retail travel agents, and vertically integrated service combinations around the world (Nourbakhsh, 2008; Phillips & House, 2009; Ponting, 2009).

Dolnicar and Fluker (2003a, 2003b, 2004) advanced our understanding of surf tourism marketing by identifying five segments of surf tourists with different socio-demographic characteristics, namely, age, education and income levels (Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003a, 2003b). Although they concluded that all surf tourists are concerned for their personal safety and prefer non-crowded surf destinations, each segment has different preferences for the waves they would like to ride and the overall surrounding of the destination including its friendly facilities, infrastructure (e.g., quality of the meal) and its easy access (Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003a).

2.2. Serious leisure and the Serious Leisure Inventory and Measure (SLIM)

During the early 1980s, Stebbins (1982) introduced “serious leisure” as a framework for the research of leisure as a means for personal fulfillment, identity enhancement, self-expression, among other benefits. Ten years after his first publication, Stebbins (1992) defined serious leisure as: “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for a participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge” (p. 3). Aiming to define, describe and interrelate three types of leisure (i.e., amateurism, hobbyist pursuits, and career volunteering), he found that although serious leisure practitioners sometimes get paid, they are not dependent on such remuneration (Stebbins, 1982).

Six interrelated qualities distinguish serious leisure from casual leisure: (1) The occasional need to *Persevere* in the activity to overcome difficulties; (2) the tendency for individuals to create a *Career* of their activities; (3) a significant personal *Effort* which leads to the development of special knowledge, training, or skill; (4) the attainment of some long-lasting *Benefits*; (5) the formation of a strong *Identity* with the activity; and (6) a unique *Ethos* that grows around the activity and leads to the development of a special social world (Brown, 2007; Gould et al., 2008; Stebbins, 1982, 1992, 1999). According to Stebbins (2008), as serious leisure participants endure in their pursuits and progress through different stages (beginning,

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