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Les territoires touristiques et sportifs en transition

Articles

Activist Surfing-based Groups in the Tourism Transition: Localism and Universalism in the French Basque Country

Les mobilisations politiques des surfeurs en faveur d'une transition touristique et sportive : entre localisme et universalisme au Pays basque français

LUDOVIC FALAIX, JÉRÉMY LEMARIÉ AND JÉRÔME LAFARGUE

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Abstracts

English Français

The concept of tourism transition was developed in the 1990s and 2000s by scholars working on winter sports in Alpine resorts. It refers to the economic and social changes taking place in relatively small resort towns as the result of tourism development. While mountain tourism causes conflicts between stakeholder groups, this paper demonstrates that tourism in seaside resort towns can also be a source of controversy. In coastal cities of the French Basque Country, tourism development is primarily managed by local government representatives, yet contested by pressure groups. This paper analyzes the two activist groups *Save Marbella* (SMG) and *Paddle-out For Your Planet* (POFYP), founded by surfers in Biarritz, France. It is based on observation of and interviews with SMG and POFYP members. Whilst acknowledging the difference between these two groups, this work indicates that surfers' environmental activism often comes from their subjective and intimate relationship with the ocean. This paper argues that participants' emotional bond with nature fosters environmental awareness and that their intimate relationship with the ocean is the primary cause of political activism. As surfers report facing fear, disgust and anxiety when they encounter ocean pollution and environmental degradation resulting from mass tourism, research has also shown that they feel compelled to protest and demand that policymakers include their considerations in democratic decision-making processes.

Cet article examine les mobilisations citoyennes et politiques de deux collectifs de surfeurs concernés par le développement touristique et territorial à Biarritz, ville considérée comme la capitale européenne du surf. Ces collectifs (*Sauvons Marbella* et *Rame pour ta planète*) s'indignent des injustices territoriales et environnementales liées à l'aménagement du littoral et la gestion de l'environnement maritime et côtier. Les motifs de la contestation reposent sur une expertise profane inscrite en lien avec une connaissance spécifique du milieu océanique forgée dans le cadre de leurs pratiques sportives. Les deux études de cas soulignent que la justification environnementale et l'attachement à la nature constituent le registre argumentaire et émotionnel



qui préside à la mobilisation collective. Cet article démontre également que les revendications politiques des surfeurs suggèrent aux pouvoirs publics d'engager un tournant paradigmatique dans la conduite de l'action publique. Dans le cadre du tourisme sportif, il est attendu des pouvoirs publics une transition qui puisse prendre en compte la crise environnementale d'une part, et proposer une nouvelle offre touristique locale d'autre part. De surcroît, cet article, fondé sur la sociologie de la contestation et des émotions, identifie le fait que l'attachement à la nature – qui constitue le socle identitaire commun aux deux types de mobilisations politiques étudiés – n'est pas incorporé dans les mêmes perspectives. En effet, et même si les mobilisations politiques étudiées soulignent la nécessité d'un réenchâtement de la démocratie participative, le premier type de mobilisation politique, *Collectif Sauvons Marbella*, est avant tout l'expression de la défense d'intérêts particuliers. Le second cas, celui de *Rame pour ta planète*, témoigne du désir d'un renouvellement des liens entre les humains et les non-humains afin qu'émerge l'idée que l'océan constitue un bien commun à préserver d'urgence.

Index terms

Mots-clés

mobilisation politique, émotions, transition sportive et touristique, démocratie participative, surf, Biarritz

Keywords

activist groups, emotions, sport tourism transition, participatory democracy, surf, Biarritz

Author's notes

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Full text

Introduction: Connection with nature in recreation-based activist groups

1 Tourism is a complex social activity that occurs during free time, holidays and, more recently, during work (*i.e.* business travel). Since the 1800s tourism in France has taken the forms of seasonal mass tourism, nature tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, and sports tourism (Corbin, 1995; Équipe MIT, 2002; Viard, 1984; Vlès, 2015). Like most locations across the globe, French tourism destinations have been profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. But, before the pandemic, French-speaking scholars had already argued for a structural change in sociology, geography, sociocultural anthropology, and sports sciences. Depending on the field of study, authors coined the terms *after-tourism* (Bourdeau, 2009), *recreational turn* (Stock, 2007), *recreational transition* (Corneloup, 2017; Falaix, 2017), and *tourism transition* (Lorenzetti and Delmenico 2017; Vlès, 2021). Despite theoretical differences, all these concepts indicate that leisure and tourism redefine the economic and social dynamics of a place. For example, the case of skiing in the French Alps shows that seasonal sports tourism has structured the ways local residents and authorities rely on and adapt to consumer behavior (Langenbach, Clivaz, and Tuppen, 2017; Tuppen, 2000).

2 Even though the *tourism transition* has been historically identified in the French and Swiss Alps with skiing, this paper argues that surfing is also worth studying, because this visitor attraction may significantly impact or reorganize the life of coastal residents. In the field of surf tourism studies (Martin and Assenov, 2013), the most frequent issues are mass tourism, localism, environmental degradation, and dilution of local communities (Booth, 2017). Depending on the destination, these issues are either



addressed by the local government, by the surfer residents, or both. For instance, surfer residents actively manage surf breaks¹ through territoriality and the practice of localism in Hawai'i (Walker, 2011), Aotearoa New Zealand (Towner and Lemarié, 2020) and Nicaragua (Usher and Kerstetter, 2015). In Indonesia (Ponting and O'Brien, 2015) and in the Maldives (Buckley, Guitart and Shakeela, 2017), surf tourism is rather controlled by political intervention, and business regulation. In other locations, it is managed in urban planning and branding, like in Huntington Beach, California (Lemarié and Domann, 2019), and Hossegor, France (Falaix, 2012a; Guibert, 2006).

- 3 To deepen our understanding of the *tourism transition* paradigm in a coastal setting, this paper sheds light on two activist surfing-based groups protesting against the artificialization of the beach and ocean pollution that result from seasonal mass tourism in the French Basque Country. Admittedly, seaside tourism in the French Basque Country has been an important issue since the 1980s, particularly during summer. Seasonal mass tourism buttresses spatial segregation with the rise of rents during July and August. It increases social inequality with limited surf breaks access to locals due to intensive surf schools' activity. Most coastal cities have been looking for solutions, and this paper brings attention to the ability of resident surfers to offer alternatives to tourism development projects.

Theory: Surfing and environmental activism

- 4 Depending on statistics, there are between 20 million and 35 million surfers worldwide (Towner and Lemarié, 2020). Globally, the surfing community is a heterogeneous group, and each surf destination carries a specific dynamic (Anderson, 2014a). Yet, it appears that resident surfers at different locations share some common attributes when they address tourism issues (Hales, Ware and Lazarow, 2017; Heywood and Montgomery 2008; Wheaton 2007). For example, surfer-based protests happened in Hawai'i, Indonesia, Ireland, and El Salvador since the 1970s (Borne, 2018; Laderman, 2014; Walker, 2011; Whyte, 2018). Gathered in surf clubs, NGOs, non-profit organizations or *ad hoc* committees, surfers campaign for preserving surf breaks, preventing plastic waste from getting into the ocean, and opposing tourism development projects. Two of the best-known surf-related environmental NGOs are *Surfrider Foundation* (Corne, 2009; Hill and Abbott, 2009), and *Surfrider Foundation Europe* (Ospital and Templier, 2018; Weisbein, 2017²). Other grassroots movements can be mentioned, such as *Save Our Surf* (Walker, 2011, p. 105-115), *Surfers Against Sewage* (Wheaton, 2007), and *Save The Waves Coalition*. Most of these organizations do not originally link surf tourism development with environmental degradation, but they often end up doing so, as the global number of visitors and Microsoft Office User2022-04-03T20:04:00MOUtraveling surfers has increased consistently over the past 50 years.
- 5 While research has demonstrated that surfers contribute to sustainable tourism through environmental activism (Borne, 2018; Borne and Ponting, 2017), it is unclear why surfers protest in the first place. Is it due to their interaction with the visitors? Is it because they want to pursue their interests? Is it related to environmental degradation occurring when tourism increases? One can thus wonder what causes surfers to become pro-environment activists. Knowing why people get politically engaged is one of the most difficult questions in the sociology of social movements, given that individual engagement has become more flexible, diverse, and inventive since the 1990s with the rise of new social movements. To fill this gap, the sociology of emotions has given a new impetus (Fillieule 2001; Goodwin and Jasper, 2004, 2006; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2001; Jasper, 1998; Sommer, 2020). Without minimizing the rational strategies of the stakeholders, this field considers the ways by which individual beliefs and feelings permeate collective identities and social movements (Della Porta and



Diani, 2015; Lafargue, 2005; Neveu 2019). While the rationality of individuals is often privileged to explain environmental activism, this paper argues the emotions are believed to be the origin of surfers' mobilization. As any human being, surfers feel emotions, and if these emotions are at the source of environmental engagement, most affective states (e.g. passion, anger, or enthusiasm) should be visible in their discourse.

Methods: Two cases of surfing-based activist groups in the French Basque Country

6 This paper applies a qualitative and a comparative research method to two surfing-based groups founded in Biarritz, France. The first one is *Save Marbella Group* (SMG), a non-profit organization protesting against the project of cementing the south end of the Côte des Basques cliffs. The second one is *Paddle-out For Your Planet* (POFYP)³, a grassroots movement asking local government representatives to prioritize the implementation of measures against climate change and plastic waste over the economic value of tourism. It is important to note that researchers adopted an emic (i.e. insider) approach. In other words, they are all surfers, and two of them have previously conducted fieldwork in surfing communities in France (Falaix and Favory, 2002), or in the United States (Lemarié, 2016).

7 For this research, data collection was divided into three phases over two years. Phase one lasted from September 2018 to May 2020 and was exploratory. The goal was to observe the birth of both activist groups and to identify the main stakeholders. One author applied direct observation. He attended the first POFYP protest in Biarritz and visited Marbella beach twice. Exploratory research further drew on collecting local newspaper articles and video recordings. For example, SMG protests were covered in the regional newspaper *Sud-Ouest* (Fourcade, 2017; Gourin, 2017, 2018), as well as on the national channel TV France 2 (La bataille de Biarritz, 2018).

8 Phase two of data collection consisted of interviewing nineteen members who belong to one of the two activist groups between July and November 2020.⁴ Participants are between 24 and 65 years old and comprise a group of eight females and ten males who are all surfers involved in environmentalism. Four of them are board members of SMG, seven are members of the POFYP steering committee. Three others are employees or volunteers of *Surfrider Foundation Europe*, two are local government representatives, and three are independent workers. Interviews were semi-structured and tape-recorded. They lasted between half an hour and two hours. They were made up of open-ended questions and guided by a check list of topics. These topics were political motivation, participatory governance, sustainable coastal engineering, and tourism. The main questions asked were: why do you protest? What is the purpose of your social movement? What issues are brought by surf tourism? How does surf tourism relate to plastic waste and the artificialization of the shoreline? Do you have an emotional bond with the ocean? How long have you been surfing for? Additionally, pre-coded questions related to socio-demographic variables were asked at the end of each interview. For instance, questions related to education and professional background were raised to define the social class and the social origin of the participants. These included: what is your job? How long have you done it for? What are your parents' jobs? Where did you grow up? What and where did you study? The goal of the in-depth interviews was to identify both the emotions and the interests of the participants in environmental activism.

9 Phase three corresponded to thematic analysis and involved a deductive line of reasoning, where authors interpreted surfers' political activism through the lenses of the sociology of emotions, while bearing in mind the academic literature published in surf tourism studies. Based on a literature review of journal articles and book chapters,



authors developed the existing theories that (1) surfers have a deep affiliation with nature (Anderson, 2014a; Caddick, Smith, and Phoenix, 2014; Taylor, 2007; Levin and Taylor, 2011; Lisahunter and Stoodley, 2021), and (2) this affiliation is at the source of environmental activism (Borne and Ponting, 2017; Wheaton, 2007, 2020). Taped-recorded interviews were transcribed from December 2020 to July 2021. Once transcription was over, the researchers created codes from the ideas conveyed and feelings expressed by the participants. From these codes, the researchers built larger themes that structured participants' line of reasoning. These themes revolved around surfers' interactions with nature, interests in sustainable surf tourism, and motivations for protest; all of which are discussed in the discussion section.

Results

Save Marbella Group: A protest for preserving local interests

- 10 *Save Marbella Group* (SMG) is a “loi 1901” non-profit organization. Its goal is to safeguard Marbella beach, surf break, cliff, and esplanade. The organization was officially registered in August 2017 to:

preserve the Marbella area in Biarritz, to participate in various forms of public consultation on topics that may concern the development project of the Marbella area, and more generally to indulge in all legal means, including legal action (Excerpt from SMG by-laws, 2017).

- 11 Having more than seven thousand supporters on Facebook, and hundreds of members paying their membership fees to the association at time of data collection, SMG was initiated by the stakeholders in the economic development and social life of Marbella. These stakeholders are the *Marbella Surf Club*, the *Débololo Snack Bar*, three for-profit surf schools, and two beach lifeguards. According to SMG board members, the waves of Marbella are a significant economic resource. The surf club and the schools generate revenues from surf lessons, while the snack bar and the beach lifeguards accommodate beach goers. Unlike other beaches in Biarritz, Marbella is the only place where surf lessons can be given at both high and low tide, hence the economic potential of its surroundings.
- 12 The activist group opposed a project approved in 2017 by the Biarritz city council. The project regarded the reinforcement of the cliff of Marbella, which has been subject to coastal erosion (see figure 1)⁵. Initially, the city council planned to riprap the bottom of the cliff. Beyond mitigating erosion, the shot rock would lay a foundation for a promenade that would connect Marbella beach with the beach of Côte des Basques, located half a mile farther North. It was believed by most members of the city council that the promenade would have improved the destination image of Biarritz. After conducting research, Marbella activists claimed this plan would upset the sediments of the beach and would make the Marbella surf break disappear. In other words, surf tourism activity would have no longer been possible. After a day of mass protest on September 1st, 2018, and extensive media coverage, members of the city council launched a public inquiry and set up a steering committee that included SMG board members.

Figure 1: Aerial picture by the Observatory of the Aquitaine Coast





Text added by the authors

Figure 2: Statement by *Save Marbella* activist group: « No to the promenade of drowning victims »



Banner hung at Marbella beach during the public inquiry on September 1st, 2018

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- 13 During the public inquiry, SMG board members advocated for an alternative project that favored the verticalization of the cliffs. After working with coastal engineers and with architects, board members argued the original plan would both inadequately address beach erosion and put visitors in danger. It was demonstrated that the promenade may have been under water at high tide (see figure 2). Instead, SMG proposed minimal intervention on the beach in favor of a promenade at the top of the cliff. This proposal received support from some members of the city council, including Guillaume Barucq (third deputy mayor in charge of the environment, quality of life and well-being) as well as Laurent Ortiz (municipal councilor in charge of board sports). The public inquiry endorsed the alternative proposal and recommended a steeper verticalization of the cliff to safeguard the beach and the surf break.⁶ Interestingly, even though SMG members claimed that their proposal helps to preserve the environment,



the interviews indicate that the political mobilization rather refers to protecting local interests.

Obviously, we are concerned by the development project. Marbella is a little bit like our place. We obviously share it with other people. Calling it our house is not really the right word, but we belong here. If your house is being destroyed, or your mom is being assaulted, you do care. Plus, it's a common good. (Interview with a surf school owner, July 22, 2020)

- 14 In other words, collective mobilization consists of preserving the local lifestyle. All participants mentioned their emotional attachment to this beach, and how they feel safe there:

When you look at Marbella, it is the only last place, or the last bastion for Biarritz families. Visitors don't come here much, it's a dead end. This is the only last place for residents. If Marbella was to become like the Côte des Basques, it would all be over. My children are growing up here. All day long, they hang out here, and I fear absolutely nothing, because everyone knows that they are my children. (Interview with a SMG board member, July 21, 2020)

- 15 At first, it appears the SMG resembles a NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) syndrome. Surfer residents opposed a proposed development plan for "their" beach, which would threaten the family atmosphere. In this regard, the gathering of 500 people organized by SMG on September 1, 2018, illustrates a form of social closure, since the protesters were essentially made up of residents and insiders. But this mobilization also indicates a mix of interests, where local preoccupations meet national intentions. SMG was supported by some national sport institutions, including the French Surfing National Association (*i.e.* Fédération Française de Surf), whose rallying argument was that Marbella is a surf break where competitors practice. Notwithstanding this fact, emotional features are interwoven with those interests, as respondents label themselves « the lovers of Marbella ». Emotions like love for the beach, protection, and appreciation of nature as a common good pervades their discourse. While attachment to nature can be interpreted as a reason for protest in the name of preserving local interests (Trom, 1999), their emotions seem nevertheless genuine, especially when informants express their anxiety about environmental degradation resulting from coastal engineering and mass tourism.

Paddle-Out For Your Planet: The ocean as a global common good

- 16 *Paddle-Out For Your Planet* (POFYP) is a grassroots movement made up of hundreds of surfers concerned with environmental preservation and sustainability. It was launched on October 6, 2018, in Biarritz as an offshoot of the People's Climate March movement. But instead of marching, these surfer activists paddle-out. Eleven paddle-outs took place between 2018 and 2019 in cities located in the French Basque Country, like Biarritz, Anglet, Bidart, Guéthary and Saint-Jean-de-Luz. The first paddle-out was held on the main beach of Biarritz (*i.e.* Grande plage) on October 9, 2018. The gathering was part of a cycling tour in France, arranged by the two pro-environmental and political organizations called *Alternatiba* and *Bizi* (Mouzon, 2015). According to a POFYP founding member, the first paddle-out was spontaneous, yet it paved the way for more protests. As the movement grew, a steering committee was established in November 2018 and included three male and six female surfers. Most steering committee members have lived in the French Basque Country, and have been engaged in local grassroots organizations, including *Surfrider Foundation Europe*, *Alternatiba*, *Bizi*, and *Water Family* for the past three years or more. During their environmental protests, POFYP members argue that surfers are citizens with political convictions, and



they should fight for reducing plastic waste, as plastic debris are all over the beach at the end of each tourist season:

I moved to Guéthary 13 years ago. I showed up in summer, and I would go to the beach, like most visitors. At first, I would see the nearby beaches groomed every day. But then, I realized that the beach raker does not clean up during winter. In summer, visitors tend to wake up late, and they do not see that the beach raker pick up some trash. But the raker does not pick up all the trash. When you live here all year-round, you notice that accumulated plastic debris over the summer become visible during winter. (Interview with a POFYP steering committee member, July 2, 2020)

- 17 As POFYP seeks to influence public opinion and local government representatives over ongoing environmental issues, they gathered support beyond the surfing public. At each paddle-out, non-surfers joined them on the beach and waved banners that carry political messages, like: “Ocean is Life, Time to Act”. At the 9th paddle-out on June 8, 2019, the gathering was joined by a drama group that performed a show on the beach (see figure 3).

Figure 3: The show *Asteroïdea* was held on June 8, 2019, on the Côte des Basques beach during the United Nations World Oceans Day



© Sabina Hourcade and Luci Francini. Frame grab from the documentary *Rame pour ta planète*, mark 32'.

- 18 At time of data collection, over 1000 individuals supported POFYP on social media and the largest public gathering brought 400 people together on August 24, 2019, in Guéthary – one day before the G7 summit in Biarritz. For over two years, POFYP inspired other surfing communities, and more than 60 paddle-outs were held in France, Portugal, and Morocco. In most instances, POFYP benefited from positive media coverage. Not only paddle-outs were covered by newspapers like *The Telegraph*, *Sud Ouest*, and *Le Point*, but also a documentary film was made. The documentary film was screened at many film festivals, including the *Surf & Skate Film Festival* of Paris and of Milan, as well as the *Surf at Lisbon Film Fest*.
- 19 Like other environmental activist groups (e.g. *Greenpeace*), POFYP’s protests are non-violent because interviewees believe this helps gain public sympathy and recruit more surfers. Although POFYP is not a registered organization, these activist surfers have participated in debates concerning environmental preservation, waste management, governance, and sustainable tourism. POFYP members further deliver solutions to policy-makers. They submit sustainable goals and alternatives to development projects in the form of proposals that are written in partnership with other surfer activist groups. For example, POFYP helped write the *Ocean Call* proposal that was handed to the French President Macron by *Surfrider Foundation Europe* during the G7 summit in August 2019. Since then, the paddle-outs are no longer organized, but protests continue as the collective movement is mobilizing against plans to build artificial wave pools (Falaix, 2018). In 2021, it helped to abort a wave pool project in Saint-Jean-de-Luz, as 60 000 people had signed an online petition urging the mayor and Boardriders, Inc. not to proceed.



Discussion

Disgust and fear in contrast with admiration and peace

20 The data collected show that SMG and POFYP are two surfer activist groups that have different interests. While SMG is involved in preserving the local lifestyle and Marbella surf break, POFYP is more concerned with plastic waste and sustainability. The former organized gatherings and discussed with the city council while the latter did paddle-outs and submitted solutions to government representatives. Despite these different goals and protests, each group seems to have similar affects that triggered political action. It often starts with disgust and fear of pollution.

Environmentally speaking, the original development project would have been horrifying. Building the riprap would lead oil leakages of heavy trucks on the beach. (Interview with a SMG board member, July 21, 2020)

When I go surfing at dawn, I can see plastic debris carried by the wind piling up on the beach and on the sand dune. If I try to clean up and pick up a plastic bottle, it falls apart and turns into pieces. This bottle was on the beach for years. This is terrifying. (Interview with a POFYP steering committee member, July 23, 2020)

21 Notwithstanding individuals belonging to each activist group do not fight for the same cause, they are all disturbed by pollution on the beach and in the ocean. During interviews, participants explicitly associated pollution with negative emotions such as nervousness, irritability, and anxiety. These contrast sharply with the sentiments they communicate on surfing, like peace, serenity, and calmness. According to the participants, a range of primal emotions are experienced while riding or waiting for a wave. These include happiness, plenitude, awe, and comfort, which all echo with findings from previous research (Anderson, 2014b). Interviewees explicitly or implicitly indicated that they feel positively connected to the ocean.

When I go surfing, I face nature. I become aware of how little I am compared to the elements, which makes me humble and patient. I feel like meditating. Even if I do not catch waves at all, I enjoy being in the water because I have the impression that time stops and that I do not think about anything anymore (Interview with a member of the POFYP steering committee, August 1, 2020)

22 During interviews, participants further mentioned that surfing sharpens their senses, as they gain awareness of their surroundings. This discourse resonates with anthropological and ontological interpretations of leisure sports, which suggest that surfing develops one's ability to better understand the mechanics of tides, swells, winds, waves, the ocean floor, and the composition of the ocean (Anderson, 2014b; Andrieu, 2017; Caddick, Smith, and Phoenix, 2014; Le Breton, 1996; Levin and Taylor, 2011; Lisahunter and Stoodley, 2021; Falaix, 2014; Taylor, 2007; Wheaton, 2020). Within this body of English and French literature, surfers' emotional connection with the ocean is based on an appreciation of ocean dynamics and contemplation of marine animals while going out surfing. Scholars further referred to the *oceanic feeling* – a concept borrowed from Freud (1962) – to demonstrate surfers' deep connection with nature (Falaix, 2012b; Maillot, 2006; Mariani, 2008; Lawler, 2011, p. 69; Sayeux, 2008; Stranger, 2011, p. 123).

23 According to Freud, a person must tap into its childhood memories to establish a spiritual connection with nature. While half of the participants of this research mentioned their childhood experiences when they talk about their connection with nature, the other half rather said that recent surfing experiences have been more influential. Consequently, the data collected suggests this oceanic feeling may originate in adulthood as well. This resonates with Romain Rolland's theory (Fisher, 1988, p. 9;



Hulin, 2014, p. 24). Rolland was the first to conceptualize the oceanic feeling, and unlike Freud, he argued the emotions felt during an activity are at the origin of an ecological awareness, whether this person is a child or an adult (Lemarié, 2016, p. 298). Consequently, Rolland's understanding of the oceanic feeling echoes more with the concept of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) – which has been discussed at length in the English literature on surf studies (Anderson 2014a; McDonald, Wearing and Ponting, 2009; Stranger, 2011; Taylor, 2007).

- 24 Even though it can be argued that being a surfer raises environmental awareness, it is important to bear in mind that not every surfer is environmentally conscious (Springwald and al. 2019). Admittedly, contradictions lay at the heart of their practice. Most surfboards are made of polyurethane or epoxy, and wetsuits are mainly built from neoprene. It has only been a decade since more sustainable materials came to be produced, such as limestone neoprene. In that regard, surfing exposes the contradictions of contemporary modes of production and consumption of leisure sport.

Ritualized protests

- 25 In addition to pointing out surfers' relationship to the environment, data suggests that their protests stage a dualism of life and death. In advocating non-violence and in referring to emotions, surfers develop positive symbolic representations of their fight. Even though SMG's and POFYP's protests are different, both activist groups ritualized their gatherings to win support of local government representatives and the public. For example, a gathering was organized by SMG on September 1st, 2018, after the municipality of Biarritz refused to reconsider the original development plan. The event brought 500 people together, including non-surfers, residents, the President of the French Surfing National Association, and members of the city councils who supported an alternative plan. According to a SMG board member, this "Marbella is not dead" event embodied a turning point.

Our objective was to save the beach. In discussing with the city council, we argued that building a promenade on top of the cliff, rather than at the bottom would be more appropriate. The mayor said it was impossible. Then, after the protest "Marbella is not dead", everything became possible. The city council ordered a public inquiry to learn about alternative projects that will be proposed by the local surfers and residents. (Interview with a SMG board member, July 27, 2020)

- 26 Not only the motto "Marbella is not dead" refers to the punk culture (Robène, Roux et Serre, 2019), it also suggests that the original development plan would have destroyed Marbella beach, Marbella surf break, and its local culture. In opposition, the protest for public inquiry demonstrated that participatory democracy brings life to alternative projects that can be less invasive. In offering an alternative project, the Marbella movement stimulated participatory democracy (Arnstein, 1969; Epstein and Donzelot, 2006; Feidel and Le Jeloux, 2018). As SMG board members attended meetings organized by local government representatives, they offered an alternative development project that was eventually accepted.

Figure 4: The « Marbella is not dead » protest on September 1st, 2018 in Biarritz





© Photo: VTel Drone

- 27 As for POFYP, it is worth noting that paddling out is usually associated with funeral or post-funeral ceremonies. Paddle-outs may date from the 1920s in Hawai'i, when surfers in Waikīkī beach commemorated the deaths of their beloved ones (Aguirre, 2010). In some cases, ashes were poured into the water along with other symbolic objects, such as a wreath (*i.e. lei*). In referring to this ceremony, the organizers of POFYP declare that our planet is in agony due to plastic pollution and the impacts of human activity as a whole:

Paddle-outs carry a very important meaning in the world of surfing. It is often used for funerals after the death of a surfer. This is tragic, but it is a way to come together in harmony. This form of protest makes sense to many because it is a noble way to advocate for cleaner oceans. (Interview with a member of the POFYP steering committee, July 7, 2020)

- 28 Circle formation is recurrent in funeral rituals, including during paddle-outs. According to Gibson and Frost (2018), the circle shape reinforces the intergenerational filiation between the world of the dead and that of the living. It is a comforting space for grieving and mourning, and it stresses the passing of individuals, generation after generation. In a different way, POFYP paddle-outs look like a human chain in a straight line, or in a C-shape. This set-up symbolically embodies a protective dam and a line of defense against the environmental threats that are affecting the oceans.
- 29 Protests organized by POFYP and SMG resonate with the theory of rituals and emotional energy applied to social movements (Goodwin, and Jasper, 2006, p. 628). These activist surfer-based groups used a set of items and storylines to trigger collective emotions that everyone can relate to, such as death, life, and hope (Traïni and Siméant, 2009, p. 13). These emotions participated in shaping both groups and in creating emotional communities that led to nonviolent protest (Sommier, 2020, p. 222).

Figure 5: A C-shape line by POFYP, on August 2019, 24





© Sabina Hourcade and Luci Francini. Frame grab from the documentary *Rame pour ta planète*, mark 46'.

30 One unexpected outcome of this research is that not all participants enjoyed protesting. About half of them mentioned that they felt compelled to raise public awareness to release their anxiety. As they felt uncomfortable with protesting, they gave responsibilities to those who either had a better understanding of politics or who appreciated being politically engaged. Admittedly, the most active participants reported they had been previously introduced to social movements by primary social groups, such as their parents, their friends, or their peers. Especially, SMG board members and POFYP steering committee members expressed political knowledge and cultural capital inherited from their parents (Bourdieu, 1976). In other words, research shows that the most active protesters have a primary experience in political activism or to administration in general. In the case of SMG for example, surf school owners appointed board members who were experts in administration of justice and affairs. Two of them hold a PhD, respectively in economics and in environmental law. Further, some of the most committed interviewees claim to come from a politically oriented background:

I am politically minded thanks to my father and his political engagement. In my family, we do have a tradition, where we enroll in non-profit organizations. So, it feels natural to me to take an active part in the movement. (Interview with a SMG member, on July 24, 2020)

31 People who protest refer as much to emotions as to political expertise. That is to say that not only surfers managed to gather emotional communities, but they also rallied politically motivated citizens. This fact expands research demonstrating that a subcategory of surfers mobilizes public opinion in support of universal causes, including women's equality (Comer, 2010, 2019; Schumacher, 2017), race (Walker, 2011), and the reintegration of minorities into society (Morgan, 2010).

Conclusion

32 Within the context of the tourism transition in the French Basque Country, this paper examined political environmentalism through two surfer activist groups. The first is *Save Marbella Group* (SMG), a non-profit organization working on coastal engineering and environmental preservation in relation to seasonal tourism development in Biarritz. The second is *Paddle-out For Your Planet* (POFYP), a broader universalist movement aiming at reducing plastic waste. The former protests against a redevelopment project that regards one small area (*i.e.* Marbella cliff, beach, and surf break), while the latter takes part in the People's Climate March movement. Given that the rational goal of these two movements is different, research indicates emotions at the source of environmental activism. A wide majority of participants reported that surfing gave them pleasure. Pristine nature, waves and the beach create a place of physical and cultural accomplishment that surfer activists vow to protect from invasive coastal engineering, plastic waste, and seasonal surf tourism.



33 In both cases, the strongest emotions that helped build an activist group were disgust of pollution, fear of irreversible change, and anger towards public representatives. Negative emotions were expressed by anxiety, but not by helplessness or abandonment. Instead, participants use their anger to react and initiate participative democracy processes. While not all participants enjoy protesting, they nevertheless did so, as they aspire to protect their positive emotional bond with the ocean. Beyond protesting, this paper further showed that activist surfers offer alternatives to projects that call for a paradigm shift in governance (Blondiaux and Traïni, 2018; Falaix and Corneloup, 2017). Protesters believe that public representatives do not properly consider citizens' concerns. As participants point out distrust of traditional forms of public governance, they demand to be further involved in decision-making processes.

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Notes

1 A surf break is an area where a swell hits the ocean floor and collapses on itself, thus forming a wave.

2 *Surfrider Foundation* and *Surfrider Foundation Europe* are two different organizations. They are both non-profit and share common goals, but the former was founded in the U.S. in 1984 as 501(c)(3) organization, while the latter was created in France in 1990 as a "loi 1901" organization.



3 The names of these two activist groups have been translated from French. Their original titles are *Collectif Sauvons Marbella* (CSM) and *Rame pour ta planète* (RPTP).



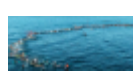
4 In line with the sociology of emotions, this paper contends that life stories of career activists are adequate to identify the source of political engagement.

5 Observatory of the Aquitaine Coast, *Agglomération Côte Basque-Adour: évaluation de l'aléa érosion côtière en 2023 et 2043 dans le cadre de la stratégie locale de gestion de la bande côtière*. Final report : BRGM/RP-63780-FR, December 2014, 131 p. <http://infoterre.brgm.fr/rapports//RP-63780-FR.pdf>

6 Special Administrative Document n°64-2019-085, published on November 4, 2019, by the *Direction Départementale des Territoires et de la Mer des Pyrénées-Atlantiques* (DDTM).

List of illustrations

	Title	Figure 1: Aerial picture by the Observatory of the Aquitaine Coast
	Caption	Text added by the authors
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/geocarrefour/docannexe/image/18491/img-1.jpg
	File	image/jpeg, 723k
	Title	Figure 2: Statement by <i>Save Marbella</i> activist group: « No to the promenade of drowning victims »
	Caption	Banner hung at Marbella beach during the public inquiry on September 1st, 2018
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/geocarrefour/docannexe/image/18491/img-2.png
	File	image/png, 719k

	Title	Figure 3: The show <i>Asteroidea</i> was held on June 8, 2019, on the <i>Côte des Basques</i> beach during the United Nations World Oceans Day
	Credits	© Sabina Hourcade and Luci Francini. Frame grab from the documentary <i>Rame pour ta planète</i> , mark 32'.
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/geocarrefour/docannexe/image/18491/img-3.png
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	Title	Figure 4: The « Marbella is not dead » protest on September 1st, 2018 in Biarritz
	Credits	© Photo: VTel Drone
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	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/geocarrefour/docannexe/image/18491/img-5.png
	File	image/png, 569k

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