



HAL
open science

Editorial: Surf tourism in a post-pandemic world

Jérémy Lemarié, Lindsay Usher

► **To cite this version:**

Jérémy Lemarié, Lindsay Usher. Editorial: Surf tourism in a post-pandemic world. *Frontiers in Sustainable Tourism*, 2026, <10.3389/frsut.2026.1827620>. <hal-05586622>

HAL Id: hal-05586622

<https://hal.science/hal-05586622v1>

Submitted on 9 Apr 2026

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 - Attribution - International License



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Haywantee Ramkissoon,
British Academy of Management,
United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE
Jérémy Lemarié
✉ jeremy.lemarie@gmail.com

RECEIVED 10 March 2026
ACCEPTED 16 March 2026
PUBLISHED 09 April 2026

CITATION
Lemarié J and Usher LE (2026) Editorial:
Surf tourism in a post-pandemic world:
governance, wellbeing, and cultural
shifts. *Front. Sustain. Tour.* 5:1827620.
doi: 10.3389/frsut.2026.1827620

COPYRIGHT
© 2026 Lemarié and Usher. This is an
open-access article distributed under the
terms of the [Creative Commons
Attribution License \(CC BY\)](#). The use,
distribution or reproduction in other
forums is permitted, provided the
original author(s) and the copyright
owner(s) are credited and that the
original publication in this journal is
cited, in accordance with accepted
academic practice. No use, distribution
or reproduction is permitted which does
not comply with these terms.

Editorial: Surf tourism in a post-pandemic world: governance, wellbeing, and cultural shifts

Jérémy Lemarié^{1*} and Lindsay E. Usher²

¹Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne, Reims, France, ²Independent Researcher, Williamsburg, VA, United States

KEYWORDS

community, gender, governance, localism, surfing, sustainable, tourism, wellbeing

Editorial on the Research Topic

[Surf tourism in a post-pandemic world: governance, wellbeing, and cultural shifts](#)

Over the last two decades, surf tourism research has expanded significantly (Martin, 2022; Lemarié, 2022), reflecting both the globalization of surfing and the growing recognition of surf breaks as valuable tourism resources (Manero and Mach, 2023). Studies have shown that surf tourism is not only shaped by serious leisure motivations, but also by tensions between local and transnational identities, territoriality, crowding, and struggles over access to valuable coastal resources (Barbieri and Sotomayor, 2013; Beaumont and Brown, 2014; Buckley et al., 2017; Usher and Kerstetter, 2015). Scholarship on surf tourism governance has further demonstrated that surf destinations are contested socio-ecological and political spaces in which sustainability, regulation, development, and exclusion are continuously negotiated (Borne and Ponting, 2017; Hough-Snee and Eastman, 2017; Orchard et al., 2023; Walker, 2011).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 served as an abrupt rupture in tourism, generally speaking. Border closures, lockdowns, and changing mobility patterns disrupted surf travel while also redirecting attention to wildlife, local breaks, regional communities, and the uneven vulnerabilities of tourism-dependent coastal regions (Usher, 2022). At the same time, emerging evidence suggested that surf tourism remained highly resilient, raising questions about whether post-pandemic recovery would simply reproduce pre-existing growth models or create room for more sustainable and community-oriented futures (Mach and Ponting, 2021; Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2022). This Research Topic on surf tourism was developed in that context. This Research Topic explores surf tourism during and after the pandemic, and whether this moment of disruption can open space for different forms of governance, different social relations, and different understandings of value. The four contributing articles span diverse geographic contexts, from Norway to Panama, Mexico, and China. Taken together, the papers in this Research Topic highlight the intricate relationships between human wellbeing, place attachment, identity, and governance. The authors suggest collectively that surf tourism after COVID-19 should not be understood simply through the lens of recovery. Rather, they show that the field is increasingly defined by three interrelated dynamics: (1) the centrality of surfing to wellbeing

and identity, (2) the vulnerability of surf ecosystems and destination communities, and the (3) importance of governance and inclusion in shaping future pathways.

Wellbeing, place attachment, and the surfer experience

The profound physical and psychological benefits of surfing, often linked to sensory immersion in “blue spaces,” are well-documented in the literature (Anderson, 2022; Britton and Foley, 2021; Falaix et al., 2021; lisahunter and Stoodley, 2021; Wheaton and Olive, 2024). COVID-19 amplified these benefits for many surfers (Usher, 2024) and the paper by Elmahdy et al. investigates the positive experiences of cold-water surfers in Jæren, Norway before and during the pandemic. Their research demonstrates that surfing provides deep personal benefits, including flow states (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), connection to nature, and vital social integration. Interestingly, pandemic-era travel restrictions and the shift to remote work reinforced local surfing habits there. With international surf travel constrained, local breaks became places for safe socialization and mental health maintenance, proving the resilience of local surf communities during global crises. However, it is important to bear in mind that the wellbeing derived from surfing is not geographically universal, as it is inextricably linked to specific cultural frameworks and ecosystems.

Reimagining surf tourism governance

The pandemic was also a moment where scholars reassessed the dual threats of climate change and hyper-commercialization of surf breaks. Past literature has frequently examined the way localism serves as a complex form of community territoriality and sustainability (Mach and Ponting, 2021; Towner and Lemarié, 2020; Usher, 2017) and Ruttenberg and Brosius provide an interesting theoretical intervention within these debates. In line with their previous work, they argue that critical surf scholarship has too often flattened surf destination management into a standard critique of neoliberal governmentality (Ruttenberg and Brosius, 2017). By applying a “diverse ecologies” framework, the authors introduce the concept of *communal governmentality*. Using the indigenous community of Barra de la Cruz, Mexico as a case study, they demonstrate how local communities can successfully resist neocolonial and neoliberal encroachment. Through communal assemblies, cooperative enterprises, and locally enforced regulations on land ownership and coastal development, Barra de la Cruz exemplifies a way in which surf tourism can be governed through self-determined, emancipatory models rather than top-down capitalist extraction.

Another related contribution in this Research Topic is by Mach et al., who foreground the place-based and ecological foundations of surf tourism governance. In their article, the authors show that place attachment in Bocas del Toro is strongly linked to surf-related wellbeing, while also demonstrating that these

positive experiences are under threat from sea level rise, coastal development, declining reef health, and overcrowding. This paper is especially important because it pushes surf tourism research beyond narrow direct-expenditure frameworks and toward a fuller recognition of “surfing ecosystems” as vulnerable socio-ecological assemblages that produce both economic and non-market value (Manero, 2023). In doing so, it aligns with wider calls for local sustainability governance in surf destinations and for a more holistic understanding of the unique characteristics being preserved when communities seek to protect surf breaks (Machado et al., 2018).

Identity, gender, and cultural transformation

Surf tourism not only impacts ecosystems, it also deeply impacts social and cultural landscapes. Culturally appropriated from a Hawaiian tradition by a male-dominated elite class and forced into Western concepts of commodified sports (Lemarié, 2024; Moser, 2020; Walker, 2008), surfing is increasingly becoming a site of demographic diversity, as marginalized and underrepresented groups challenge entrenched patronizing surfing experiences (Comer, 2010). Wengel provides a compelling study of female surfers in Hainan, China. While the other authors in this Research Topic are well-known in surf tourism studies, Wengel has recently investigated the field from a different angle in Hainan, China (Guibert and Taunay, 2013). Hainan is a developing surf destination that experienced domestic tourism growth when international borders closed during the pandemic. There, women surfers explain the extent to which surfing acts as a powerful catalyst for personal transformation, empowerment, and rebellion against traditional societal gender norms. Wengel also notes the friction caused by rapid post-pandemic commercialization, highlighting the tension between the democratizing aspects of expanding surf culture and the superficial commodification of the sport. This contribution broadens ongoing debates by demonstrating that sustainable surf tourism should continue to consider social and cultural transformation alongside environmental and political changes. More inclusive and diverse futures also depend on who gets to belong, whose experiences are valued, and the way rapidly expanding surf destinations negotiate social change.

Author contributions

JL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LU: Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

- Aguiar-Quintana, T., Román, C., and Gubisch, P. M. M. (2022). The post-COVID-19 tourism recovery led by crisis-resistant tourists: surf tourism preferences in the Canary Islands. *Tour. Manag. Perspect.* 44:101041. doi: 10.1016/j.tmp.2022.101041
- Anderson, J. (2022). "Surfing: the what, where, how and why of wild surfing," in *The Routledge Handbook of Ocean Space*, eds. K. Peters, J. Anderson, A. Davies, and P. Steinberg (London: Routledge), 311–322. doi: 10.4324/9781315111643-29
- Barbieri, C., and Sotomayor, S. (2013). Surf travel behavior and destination preferences: an application of the serious leisure inventory and measure. *Tour. Manag.* 35, 111–121. doi: 10.1016/j.tourman.2012.06.005
- Beaumont, E., and Brown, D. (2014). "It's not something I'm proud of but it's ... just how I feel": local surfer perspectives of localism. *Leis. Stud.* 35, 278–295. doi: 10.1080/02614367.2014.962586
- Borne, G., and Ponting, J. (Eds.). (2017). *Sustainable Surfing*. London: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9781315680231
- Britton, E., and Foley, R. (2021). Sensing water: uncovering health and well-being in the sea and surf. *J. Sport Soc. Issues* 45, 60–87. doi: 10.1177/0193723520928597
- Buckley, R. C., Guitart, D., and Shakeela, A. (2017). Contested surf tourism resources in the Maldives. *Ann. Tour. Res.* 64, 185–199. doi: 10.1016/j.annals.2017.03.005
- Comer, K. (2010). *Surfer Girls in the New World Order*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. doi: 10.1515/9780822393153
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Falaix, L., Lemarié, J., and Lafargue, J. (2021). Activist surfing-based groups in the tourism transition: localism and universalism in the French Basque Country. *Géocarrefour* 95:18491. doi: 10.4000/geocarrefour.18491
- Guibert, C., and Taunay, B. (2013). From political pressure to cultural constraints: the prime dissemination of surfing in Hainan. *J. China Tour. Res.* 9, 365–380. doi: 10.1080/19388160.2013.812903
- Hough-Snee, D. Z., and Eastman, A. S. (2017). "Consolidation, creativity, and (de)colonization in the state of modern surfing," in *The Critical Surf Studies Reader*, eds. D. Z. Hough-Snee and A. S. Eastman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 84–108. doi: 10.2307/j.ctv111jh9f.9
- Lemarié, J. (2022). "Surf tourism," in *Encyclopedia of Tourism Management and Marketing*, ed. D. Buhalis (Cheltenham, United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing), 299–302. doi: 10.4337/9781800377486.surf.tourism
- Lemarié, J. (2024). Strategic destination branding in Hawai'i: American imperialism and myth-making using Barthes' semiotic theory. *Téoros* 43. Available online at: <http://journals.openedition.org/teoros/12763> (Accessed March 24, 2026).
- Lisahunter, and Stoodley, L. (2021). Bluespace, senses, wellbeing, and surfing: prototype cyborg theory-methods. *J. Sport Soc. Issues* 45, 88–112. doi: 10.1177/0193723520928593
- Mach, L., and Ponting, J. (2021). Establishing a pre-COVID-19 baseline for surf tourism: trip expenditure and attitudes, behaviors and willingness to pay for sustainability. *Ann. Tour. Res. Empir. Insights* 2:100011. doi: 10.1016/j.annale.2021.100011
- Machado, V., Carrasco, P., Contreiras, J. P., Duarte, A. P., and Gouveia, D. (2018). Governing locally for sustainability: public and private organizations' perspective in surf tourism at Aljezur, Costa Vicentina, Portugal. *Tour. Plan. Dev.* 15, 692–704. doi: 10.1080/21568316.2017.1415958
- Manero, A. (2023). A case for protecting the value of "surfing ecosystems". *NPJ Ocean Sustain.* 2:6. doi: 10.1038/s44183-023-00014-w
- Manero, A., and Mach, L. (2023). Valuing surfing ecosystems: an environmental economics and natural resources management perspective. *Tour. Geogr.* 25, 1602–1629. doi: 10.1080/14616688.2023.2261909
- Martin, S. A. (2022). From shades of grey to Web of Science: a systematic review of surf tourism research in international journals (2011–2020). *J. Sport Tour.* 26, 125–146. doi: 10.1080/14775085.2022.2037453
- Moser, C. (2020). The Hawaii Promotion Committee and the appropriation of surfing. *J. Sport Hist.* 47, 155–173. doi: 10.1525/phr.2020.89.4.500
- Orchard, S., Reiblich, J., and dos Santos, M. D. (2023). A global review of legal protection mechanisms for the management of surf breaks. *Ocean Coastal Manag.* 238:106573. doi: 10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2023.106573
- Ruttenberg, T., and Brosius, J. P. (2017). "Decolonizing sustainable surf tourism," in *The Critical Surf Studies Reader*, eds. D. Z. Hough-Snee and A. S. Eastman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 109–134. doi: 10.2307/j.ctv111jh9f.10
- Towner, N., and Lemarié, J. (2020). Localism at New Zealand surfing destinations: Durkheim and the social structure of communities. *J. Sport Tour.* 24, 93–110. doi: 10.1080/14775085.2020.1777186
- Usher, L. E. (2017). "Sustaining the local: localism and sustainability," in *Sustainable Surfing*, eds. G. Borne and J. Ponting (London: Routledge), 147–164. doi: 10.4324/9781315680231-10
- Usher, L. E. (2022). Hosts and guests: Surfers' experiences of travel and tourism in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Tour. Marine Envr.* 17, 103–111. doi: 10.3727/154427322X16532053914713
- Usher, L. E. (2024). "Without [surfing], it's kind of like Groundhog Day, but the ... Twilight Zone version": a phenomenological study of surfers' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Leisure/Loisir* 48, 527–563. doi: 10.1080/14927713.2023.2224370
- Usher, L. E., and Kerstetter, D. (2015). "Surfistas locales": transnationalism and the construction of surfer identity in Nicaragua. *J. Sport Soc. Issues* 39, 455–479. doi: 10.1177/0193723515570674
- Walker, I. H. (2008). Hui Nalu, beachboys, and the surfing boarder-lands of Hawai'i. *Contemp. Pac.* 20, 89–113. doi: 10.1353/cp.2008.0026
- Walker, I. H. (2011). *Waves of Resistance: Surfing and History in Twentieth Century Hawai'i*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press. doi: 10.21313/hawaii/9780824834623.001.0001
- Wheaton, B., and Olive, R. (2024). "Lifestyle sports, blue space and mental health. Examining the case of surf therapy," in *The Routledge handbook on Spaces of Mental Health and Wellbeing*, eds. C. P. Boyd, L. E. Boyle, S. L. Bell, E. Högström, J. Evans, A. Paul, et al. (London: Routledge), 157–168. doi: 10.4324/9781003345725-14