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Surf Tourism in Uncertain Times: Resident Perspectives on the Sustainability Implications of COVID-19

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Abstract: Surf tourism is the principal development driver in many coastal communities around the world. Surf tourism development brings economic opportunities to residents in coastal destinations, but has also been criticized for associations with gentrification, pollution, and inequity. While many have speculated that surfers represent a crisis-resistant tourist segment, this had not yet been empirically demonstrated, nor had the sustainability implications of their travel during crises been explored. Building on ethnographic observations and two interview phases with 25 resident surfers in Bocas del Toro, Panama, this is the first study to do both. The findings reveal that the pandemic exacerbated existing sustainability challenges by accelerating development near surf-breaks, fomenting tensions within the surf community (related to surf tourism business operations and the distribution of benefits) and facilitating residents to surf more frequently—exacerbating surf-resource crowding. Evidence also revealed, however, a potential shift in surfers' collective consciousness in the context of the pandemic, which reduced conflicts between visiting and resident surfers. This paper exposes the urgent need for stakeholders in surf communities, and particularly surf tourism business owners, to cooperate in order to preserve surf experiences that are vital to resident mental/physical health and well-being, as well as the attractiveness as a surf tourism destination.

Keywords: surf; surf tourism; pandemic; COVID-19; resident perspectives; sustainability; Panama



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1. Introduction

Many academics have called for the COVID-19-inspired pause in international travel to be utilized to usher in a paradigm shift towards more socially and environmentally just forms of tourism [1]. While researchers were calling for this, surfers were already navigating travel restrictions and looking for loopholes to visit coveted surf destinations around the world [2]. Studying resident perspectives on the sustainability implications of surf tourism during the pandemic, therefore, can help expose the sustainability challenges other industries, which are recovering more slowly, will soon face. Considering demand for outdoor activity and immersion in nature is likely to increase as the pandemic wanes [3–5], this research also lends insights into potential governance approaches to delivering sustainable nature-based tourism in the context of heightened demand.

Surf tourism occurs in 93 countries and surf-breaks are often found in biodiversity hotspots [6]. Prior to the pandemic, a population of 35 million surfers spent between \$32 and \$65 billion USD annually to surf abroad, making it a very large niche worth considering in coastal destinations dependent upon tourism visitation [2]. Surf tourism is also extremely crisis resistant [7], though it is rarely discussed as such. Surfers were some of the first to visit: Fukushima after the Tsunami and nuclear accident in 2011 [8]; Sri Lanka, after civil wars, a Tsunami and terrorist attacks [9]; Bali after terrorist bombings [10]; Nicaragua and El Salvador post-civil wars and other socio-political conflicts [11,12]; and Liberia post-civil war and Ebola outbreak [13].

Because they value uncrowded waves more highly than any other aspect of travel [14,15], some surfers may even view crises as opportunities to surf with few others around, which

may heighten demand during uncertain times for some segments of the market [2]. Surprisingly, however, there has been very little empirical research conducted on the social and environmental impacts of surfing tourism on host destination ecosystems and communities [16–18] and none during this pandemic, or any other crisis. For these reasons, the aim of this article is to analyze how COVID-19 has impacted resident surfers' sustainability concerns in Bocas del Toro, Panama. The goal being to better explicate why it is important to look beyond tourists' willingness to travel during crises and to prioritize more effectively understanding how travel during crises impacts local communities and ecosystems.

Scholarly approaches to tourism crises have most often utilized approaches for understanding demand responses [19]. Most research has focused on how particular crises impact tourist arrival and departure statistics in particular areas, many utilizing consumer behavior frameworks to focus on tourist's perspectives of perceived risks and how this influenced travel behaviors [20–23].

Many suggest understanding and attracting crisis-resistant tourists can deliver sustainable tourism revenues in times of crisis, which can provide some visitation stability and resiliency—serving as a bridge to realizing healthy tourism returns post-crisis [23–26]. Crisis-resistant tourists tend to be younger, travel abroad frequently, primarily use social media for travel information, are interested in adventurous activities and sports (i.e., mountain biking, horseback riding, and hiking), have high spending power and desire intense experiences in nature [24]. Aebli et al. [4] identified physical and mental well-being (mostly tied to immersion in uncrowded nature), social connectedness, personal growth, and relaxation as the main motivators for travelling during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From a strict economic perspective, crisis-resistant tourists' receptivity to travel in turbulent times can be seen positively. There are many risks, however, associated with travel during (and shortly following) crises for destination residents, which have not been researched often [20]. Nepal [5] cautioned that heightened demand after travel restrictions ease for nature-based tourism will require environmental and public health issues (associated with crowding) to be taken together, to prevent both resource degradation from over exploitation and the spread of virus. Research dedicated to host community perspectives of the sustainability of nature-based or adventure tourism, however, has been scant, and particularly so in the context of overlapping public health challenges.

In their exploration of the social costs of tourism during COVID-19, Qui et al. [20] found that local residents in tourism receiving destinations reported being willing to pay to reduce the risk of negative tourism-generated pandemic effects (i.e., health risks, negative effects on social life, and having tourism during the pandemic lead to host guest conflict or hurt the reputation of the area). Most tourists, however, did not report being willing to pay additional costs for outbreak prevention and safety measures [23]. This mismatch demonstrates that mitigation of pandemic-related social costs falls on host communities, which can be seen as perpetuating the dynamics of unequal power distribution which impact areas around the world—Mowforth and Munt [27] have called these places the 'pleasure peripheries'.

While there is consensus that the COVID-19 pandemic has had disastrous social (including physical and mental health) and economic consequences in tourism-dependent destination communities specifically, the drop in tourism has been considered generally positive from an environmental standpoint [28,29]. From the economic side, in 2020, international tourism departures dropped 74%, representing a 1.3 trillion-dollar loss in export earnings, 11-fold worse than the 2009 fallout from the great financial crisis and contributing to loss of more than 100 million direct tourism jobs [30]. This economic shock is felt hardest in nations where employment and national income are most heavily reliant upon tourism, such as small-island developing states (SIDS), where tourism receipts represent more than half of the GDP in many contexts and this has facilitated many concomitant social (i.e., job loss, food insecurity, etc.) and public health issues.

From an environmental perspective, however, prior to the pandemic, globally, tourism was found to contribute 8% of GHG emissions and in need of reforms to reduce emissions

in accord with targets set in the Paris Agreement [31]. In that sense, GHG emissions have decreased greatly thus far during the pandemic, as global travel has halted or slowed in many contexts, and sensitive environments that have been plagued by over visitation have had opportunities to recover [28]. Individual community perspectives on tourism sustainability, however, are needed to understand how these global impacts manifest in embodied cases around the world, particularly whilst a paradigm-shifting pandemic continues to evolve.

Destination stakeholders will likely have different opinions and express different relative desires for hosting visitation during events such as a disease outbreak [20,32] and stakeholders need to be prepared for ensuring their own safety and the safety of visitors. That said, in areas where tourism dependency is high, and compliance with safety measures is possible, crisis-resistant tourism, if well understood, will likely be something desirable to attract [22,24,25]. Measuring and understanding perceived negative impacts of tourism in times of crisis was also argued to be important in terms of minimizing damage associated with negative perceptions [33].

Surf tourism in Bocas del Toro, Panama provides a lens through which to conduct an early review of these challenges—mainly because segments of the surf tourism market proved highly crisis resistant [7] and surfers here and elsewhere have likely been traveling more than most travelers during the pandemic and will continue to do so [2]. Findings suggest that marketing and attracting surf tourists during the pandemic were contentious and exacerbated tensions in the surf community between surfers who want to see surf tourism growth and those who perceive growth as having negative impacts on sustainability and individual well-being. Surf ethics, however, seem to have shifted in an amicable direction between visitors and residents in the pandemic period. Findings also show that development near surf-breaks increased during the pandemic, with immediate and potential future ecological consequences.

In short, the COVID-19 pause in travel was shorter lived in some areas and with some forms of tourism than others. Developers and individuals saw the pandemic as an opportunity to invest in hotels and second homes (with long-term rental potential), which may be setting up for future unchecked surf tourism growth and unequal distribution of benefits, rather than a transition towards more social and environmentally just forms. This work cautions that the post-pandemic demand for nature-based tourism will put pressure on places and potentially expose more people to pathogens. Tourism operators need to cooperate with one another and with municipalities to operate ethically and to limit and control growth to ensure healthy ecosystems that can provide valuable nature-based experiences.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Case Study Background

The contemporary tourism industry in the archipelago of Bocas del Toro (referred to herein as Bocas) did not commence in any considerable way until the USA invasion of Panama and removal of Manuel Noriega in 1989 (ending more than 20 years of successive dictatorships) and a 7.4 magnitude earthquake that impacted the islands in 1991 [34]. Nationally, tourism was leaned upon heavily in the economic plans and public relations campaign for the post-dictatorial democracy, which were accompanied by a suite of neoliberal policy reforms and incentives for foreign direct investment in property [35]. Bocas was isolated as an area of strategic tourism development interest. Property in the archipelago was cheap following the earthquake and many foreign lifestyle entrepreneurs and migrants bought it, built homes and started small tourism business [36]. The lifestyle migrant population from the USA and Europe increased 250% since 1990 and estimates suggest that 10 percent of the archipelago's population of 22,000 are now foreign born [37].

Many residents talk about Bocas in terms of life before and after tourism [34]. The United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands, International) left the archipelago in the early 1930s, leaving their predominantly Indigenous and Afro-Antillean workforce to revert

to subsistence agriculture and fisheries. The archipelago was, and still is, often viewed negatively by residents in other provinces and neglected by the national government [34]. When the first surfers from Panama City traveled to the archipelago in 1989, they even reported thinking that “those living in Bocas del Toro rode from island to island on the backs of turtles and played football with coconuts”, which is emblematic of the derogatory caricature [38]. Tourism has since grown quickly. In the early 1990s, there were only three hotels in Bocas, but today there are more than 100 registered hotels and hostels [39] and hundreds of informal lodging options listed on platforms such as [AirBnB.com](https://www.airbnb.com) (accessed on 22 June 2021).

While studies show that surfing tourism accounts for one-quarter of all visitation to neighboring Costa Rica [40], Surfing tourism has not been empirically researched in Panama. Surf tourism, however, represents a large niche and is a substantial economic driver in Bocas [41]. There are seven surf schools and/or board rental places, two board shapers, five dedicated surf transport businesses, one all-inclusive surf resort with boat charter services, many hotels catered to surfers (increasingly developing closer to surf-breaks), surfing is listed as an activity on mostly all hotel operator’s activity pages and there is a non-governmental organization dedicated to surf and volunteer service. Surfing occurs at various locations on three of the eight inhabited islands (see Figure 1) as well as on the mainland on the Ngöbe-Bugle Comarca. Most of the surf visitation occurs between mid-December and mid-March, which is also the high season for tourism generally. In that sense, surfing in Bocas does not provide off-peak visitation stability as it was found to do in Europe [42,43] and the USA [44].

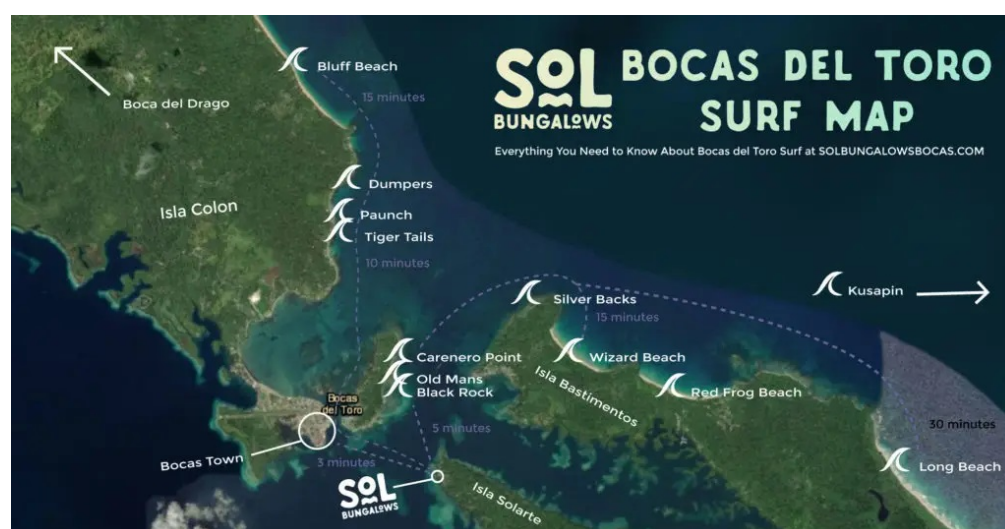


Figure 1. Bocas del Toro surf map.

The local resident surf community is very diverse, with many locals identifying as Afro-Antillean, Indigenous (Ngöbe), and/or LatinX and many others who are lifestyle migrants drawn principally for surfing from Europe, South America, and the US. These lifestyle migrants live in the archipelago both seasonally and year-round. While other research on lifestyle migration to Bocas mentions briefly that surfing is a motivating factor [36], it is likely the main draw for one-quarter, or more, of the area’s lifestyle migrant entrepreneurs. Understanding the sustainability impacts of the surf tourism deserves dedicated attention because it impacts the quality of life of many residents and changes can impact destination image and attractiveness [45].

This research is prescient, particularly considering surfers were the some of the first tourists to visit the area after the initial countrywide COVID-19 shutdown (March 2020). Surfers continue to be lured through direct advertising and continue visiting and booking vacations despite continued uncertainty and constantly changing travel restrictions

(including providing a negative PCR tests to enter and adherence to curfew laws) that have deterred many other tourist segments. Analyzing how residents perceived the sustainability implications of surf tourism during the COVID-19 crisis thus far lends important insights for other areas hoping to attract crisis-resistant tourists, or considering how to manage this segment for ensuring socially and environmentally just outcomes.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

This manuscript relies on two research phases, both of which combined ethnographic observations with stakeholder semi-structured interviews to validate and strengthen findings [46–48]. The first inquiry into the resident perceptions of the sustainability impacts of surf tourism took place prior to the pandemic. Employing what other surf researchers have called ‘wet ethnography’ [49], the author utilized the embodied experiences of participating as a surfer in the area first through surf trips to Bocas in 2008 and 2013 and subsequently after moving to Bocas del Toro in January 2017 to work as an Environmental Policy professor for a US-based non-profit study abroad organization. Research notes from surfing during each experience were kept in order to utilize my positionality as both a surf tourist and a local resident surfer prior to the pandemic.

After reflecting on these immersive experiences, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability issues, semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents that I recruited during surf-session to incorporate more, and diverse voices [50]. During January and February 2019 (high season for surf tourism), five surf business owners, three government officials, fourteen local surfers, and three NGO employees were asked their opinions on the sustainability impacts of surf tourism in Bocas and how surf tourism growth impacts their quality of life as well as their role (if any) in contributing to the sustainability of surfing and surf tourism. They were also asked what state land local policies and international pressures assist or detract from surf tourism sustainability. These interviews were recorded and transcribed and grounded theory was utilized to create themes related to surf tourism sustainability for discussion [51]. Interviews lasted between 4 and 47 min and anonymity was promised to all informants. I will only use broad signifiers (i.e., business owner, retiree or resident) and will not include gender, race, or ethnic identifiers to ensure anonymity is protected.

COVID-19 hit while the manuscript based on the above data was being compiled, so the decision was made to repeat the above data collection, within the context of the pandemic. Notes were kept during surfing bans and surfing sessions throughout the lockdown and the same stakeholders were approached in January 2021 (the most recent surf tourism season during the pandemic) in the water, or carpark and asked to provide an open-ended response to one question: “How in your view has COVID-19 impacted the surf tourism sustainability conversation that we had previously?” From that question, conversations were allowed to flow in any direction that the informant guided them. Responses varied from a few sentences to thirty-minute conversations and all but three informants (who left Bocas at some stage during the pandemic) from the previous phase were included in this phase. These responses were not recorded because they took place in opportunistic settings (including in the water during surf sessions), but notes were kept each day that included paraphrased quotes from memory. These notes were coded in relation to the sustainability themes isolated previously to assist in creating a discussion related to how COVID-19 may have exacerbated or alleviated sustainability concerns or posed any new or different opportunities and/or challenges.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Surfers as Environmental Stewards

When resident surfers were asked to discuss the sustainability of surf tourism prior to the pandemic, most, if not all, mentioned the role surfers that have played in preserving nearshore and coastal ecosystems. These narratives hinged on important environmental movements they believe to have catalyzed. The first instance related to what many respon-

dents suggested was a surfer-driven effort to remove the ad hoc solid waste dump facility from the beach located at the site named Dumpers on Figure 1 in 2009. A surf business owner said:

In the late 2000s, there was hardly anyone here surfing, which was incredible. We kept finding good waves and looking further for more on boats and stuff The wave we call Dumpers now is because all the trash in town was collected and just dumped at the end of the road there on the beach—it wasn't buried or anything. Some of us still surfed it by boat, but it was gross honestly. Surfers eventually got together and convinced the government to clean that up and promised it would be good for not only surf tourism but all tourism. It is actually kind of funny that visiting surfers think it's called Dumpers because the wave is dumpy or heavy. They have no clue that there was literally medical waste on the beach where they are surfing.

This event was mentioned often in interviews as a watershed environmental event that led to surfing at “Dumpers” as well as Bluff beach, which is a very popular surf site for experienced surfers and bodyboarders. There are now many private residences (many offered for rent as well) and hotels on Bluff beach and near Dumpers and more are under construction. Many of these establishments cater to the surf crowd, but they are not solely surf settlements and businesses. Many other ecotourists visit these areas now for hiking and sea turtle gazing, and this development was surely enabled by the removal of the beach dumpsite and the extension of the road.

Many also discussed how surfers have kept up on the trash issue and organize frequent beach clean-ups, as well as spearheaded a successful campaign to ban plastic bags and straws on the islands—the first province in Panama to do so. During COVID-19, however, many surfers argued that “COVID trash”, and particularly masks, are upsetting many hard-fought gains at reducing solid waste pollution. One local surfer said:

We just got plastic bags and straws banned and we were beginning to see benefits, but now there are masks turning up on the side of the road and in the water. It's not terrible here, but you still hate to see it and it bums you out. We surf to forget about the pandemic for a bit each day and that kind of trash has a way of reminding you.

Two respondents also mentioned the boat moorings that were placed at the two main surf breaks (Paunch and Carenero) as evidence of surfer's contribution to sustainability. One surf-business owner said:

Only surfers have installed proper boat moorings that keep anyone from dropping anchor or doing any damage to reefs. The moorings in the protected area are impractical and no one uses them and key snorkel reefs are a free for all, but surfers got that part right. We are aren't great at a lot of things, but are pretty good at protecting our breaks.

Research on surf tourism in other reef-dependent destinations, such as the Mentawai Islands in Indonesia, found that surf business operators often dropped anchors on reefs with disastrous ecological impacts [52]. This is why many private organizations trying to incentivize sustainable surf tourism include provisions for specific protections on coral reefs, including installing proper moorings [53], and non-profit environmental organizations are pushing to include surf-reefs in robust and specialized protected areas that ensure anchor damage is limited or stopped all together [6,54]. In Bocas, while some expressed concerns that surfers do walk over reefs to enter and exit the water at some breaks, most seemed to take pride in the moorings being utilized and preventing anchor damage on the highest-traffic surf sites.

The last thing mentioned regarding surfers acting as environmental stewards involved a protest led by surfers to stop the construction of a pier that was being built in the water near the surf-break called Paunch on Isla Colon, one of the most consistent breaks and where most informants in this study surf most often. Many felt the pier would harm the integrity of the wave, increase crowding, and be dangerous given the prevailing currents. They say they drew a line in the sand, quite literally:

Lots of development is happening on land around Paunch and there really isn't anything we can do about it, but once they started drilling into the reef, an environmental protest erupted. We committed to stopping the encroachment into the water by any means possible.

Past research dedicated to understanding the direct connection between surfers and pro-environmental behaviors found that while surfers want to appear environmentally sensible and desire continued access to clean oceans to surf in, that they do not often walk the talk [55,56]. While research has found that surfers report being willing to pay more for sustainable surf tourism [2,57], it is not clear that surfers research sustainable tourism providers [2], nor that they participate in environmental organizations, or that they are politically active [12]. These results, however, do demonstrate the ways in which surfer residents participate in practical efforts to keep surfing spaces clean, fight in water development near surf breaks, and work to ensure access to surf resources.

3.2. Overcrowding, Overdevelopment and Sacrifice Zones

Most surfers expressed many issues that align with making the environment more attractive and conducive to surfing. Most surfers reported being concerned about rapid development and a proliferation of surf business as well as their combined effects on crowding and environmental degradation. One surf business owner offered this illustrative quote:

I hate to sound sensible, but if foreigners hadn't moved here and started businesses and bars and promoted tourism etc., none of this damaging development on the coast would have happened and the waves would not be so crowded. We have to share the blame . . . Sucks, but I'm a part of the problem as well so I'm not pointing fingers.

It was quite common for migrant surfers to talk about how they were drawn to Bocas for the surf, which makes it hard to blame others for the same motivations. They recognize, however, that popularity brings more people and infrastructure in developing countries [58,59]. Additionally, concerning the property mentioned in the last section, in relation to disputed pier construction, residents suggested that during the pandemic, the resort owners installed drainage that is being piped directly into the surf zone. They also argued that the road built for the property access has been facilitating run-off directly into the surf—especially so during heavy rain events, which are frequent. One surfer said, “It felt like I was surfing in mud because they cleared all of those trees to put in that steep road.” This common sentiment echoed findings from other surf studies, which discuss how surf popularity can inspire development that can directly reduce the quality of surf-breaks by blocking favorable winds or sand flows and also through subsequent infrastructure put in place to protect coastal properties from rising seas [16,43,60]. Surfers talked extensively about many uncertainties associated with development surrounding surf breaks as this local resident quote suggests:

I don't think people understand how delicate surf-breaks are. People just keep building and building around them like it will have no impact. I thought it was illegal to build on the ocean side of the road, period. But now there is a trendy restaurant-bar and a house right there on the beach and people are clearing more land. And the pandemic just seems to have accelerated land purchases and construction, rather than slowed it. Things that have been sitting for sale for years are getting gobbled up right now.

The connections between the pandemic fueling land purchases and development in low- to-middle-income countries has not yet been empirically demonstrated, but this does appear to be the case in Bocas and deserves dedicated attention. While many interviews discussed increased land purchasing and development around surf-breaks before the pandemic, most of the informants in this study reported being shocked at how much was being bought and built during the pandemic. One surfer said that she felt people realized that “life is short so why not opt to live somewhere beautiful and surf, rather than some stuffy apartment in some big gross city somewhere.” One surfer who was building a house and plans to post it on AirBnB.com said that he thinks surfers will want to come for longer

periods of time and thinks houses with kitchens will become more popular as rentals. Regardless of the motivation, the construction and land clearing are visceral for surfers, and they reported feeling effects in water quality and enjoyment due to construction noise.

Connected to development, crowding was also brought up many times during both data collection phases. This echoes a great deal of research in surf studies suggesting that surfing resources have recreational carrying capacities and the quality of surfing experiences are eroded and devalued when visitation exceeds this threshold [14,61,62]. In Bocas, two interesting resource use responses emerged—sacrifice zones and increasing pressure to surf areas further from tourist centers. Sacrifice zones, in the context of surf tourism locally, were referred to as areas where crowding is basically accepted as the new normal and something for residents to deal with as a reality. One resident issued a common complaint:

Most of the surf boat drivers know the deal, you take the tourists to Paunch or Crowdenero (actually called Carenero). They aren't secrets anymore. We just have to deal with them being crowded. It sucks because these are the only two consistent waves that we have—people might say otherwise, but it is just not true. It looks on paper like there are all these waves here and most of the waves getting all the press rarely break. So, people come here thinking they are going to surf this barrel or that wave they see in surf videos or Instagram, but in reality, they are going to surf Paunch and Carenero mostly, with the rest of us.

Prior to the pandemic, this was becoming a commonly cited image problem for the archipelago. Carenero has even been referred to as one of the most crowded waves in the world [63], which has become concerning to many locals. This led residents to feel like they had to constantly “reeducate new groups of tourists” about the locals and to be respectful in ways consistent with other studies [64,65]. In New Zealand, Towner and Lemarie [66] found that localism tended to be more aggressive closer to population centers, which our results corroborate in Bocas. Informants, however, did express concern over increased visitation to surf-breaks that require longer boat rides to access.

Other than the congestion and crowding at sacrifice zones, locals expressed concerns than once secret spots were becoming sold as commodities. In Bocas, this was discussed as especially worrisome because one site facing added pressures is in a sensitive marine protected area and the other is located on the mainland within the borders of a Ngobe Indigenous *Comarca* (land governed autonomously within the rules of the tribal governance structure). During lockdowns, when surfing was prohibited (March–June 2020), some expressed concerns that tourism operators were taking more people to these unmonitored remote places, so they could surf during the lockdowns. One informant said, “I just hope surfers don’t take the plague out to the Indigenous community.”

3.3. Community Tensions and the Possible Emergence of a New Surf Ethic

Other than the potential spread of the virus and potential environmental issues from surfing unmonitored in a marine protected area, most locals not involved in the surf tourism business expressed feeling that their zone was being “sold out” and that it was changing the destination in negative ways. One quote from a retiree was illustrative of the sentiment:

I understand people need to make a living, but making a living off of surfing requires you to pimp out the sport and the place where you live. I get why people do it, you surf, you want make money doing it, blah blah. But they are actively ruining what we have here and then they look around like they don't know what's going on. Particularly during the pandemic with surf businesses advertising that its uncrowded and safe and offering deals to visit. It exposes what they have been doing for years as selfish and damaging to the image of the place. If the crowds keep getting worse and more development comes, I am getting out of here.

This comment really exposed a great deal of tension within the local surf community, which is emblematic of a greater tension in surf culture between commercialization/professionalization and a countercultural/soul surfer element [67,68]. Many retirees and older lifestyle migrants, some of whom have businesses (though not surf related), argue that having a surf tourism business is unethical and the root of the problem with crowding and overdevelopment. This tension appeared to flare up in the context of the pandemic and conflicts with surf business owners seemed to take precedent over direct conflict with visiting surfers, which is a new finding.

An ethnographic study from Costa Rica revealed that tensions related to wave resource crowding lead to localism, or the forced efforts to restrict ‘outsiders’ from accessing wave resources, which exists on a spectrum from mild to heavy. That study showed that resident foreigners tended to be most aggressive against visiting tourists and blamed visitors for not showing respect [64]. Pre-pandemic, I would argue, this was the dominant tension as well in Bocas. However, during the pandemic, blame seemed to be cast on surf business owners who ‘pulled out all the stops’ to coerce surfers to visit and patronize their businesses. Much of this tension was discussed in the context of surf-charter operators, which this quote from a resident conveys:

This guy has 20 k followers and is blasting the interwebs with photos of how good and empty the waves are. He’s calling it COVIDtopia—guaranteeing waves when the reports look good and offering two-for-one deals. Then they come and he wants to drop 10 surfers off at the break at one time. They ran this guy out of Carenero so he keeps coming to Paunch. I am shocked some of the more senior locals haven’t ran him out of here yet as well, but I think it’s because something about the pandemic has caused the tourists to be super polite and respectful. They seem to acknowledge that dropping 10 guys off is shitty and they don’t paddle-battle or act entitled, but its bad form by the business owner. As long as he gets his, that’s all that matters to guys like that.

Other studies dealing with surf lifestyle entrepreneurs cast them in a positive light, highlighting their ingenuity and ability to create new, profitable enterprises that benefit from their participation in a cohesive surf community [42,69], without discussing the development tensions this can create in surf communities. Even more nuanced analysis of surf entrepreneurs demonstrated that different orientations to growth (i.e., some surf entrepreneurs valued economic growth above other lifestyle benefits and vice versa) did not really discuss the implications of surf business growth for residents [70]. Some surf entrepreneurs in Bocas reported the need to make money so that they could travel in the low season to their favorite surfing destinations like they always do, fueling a desire to attract tourists during the pandemic. While demonstrating their position as core surfers who run businesses, it also reveals how surf tourism profits can leak out of destinations where crowding results from the revenue imperative.

This research reveals a tension between surfers who believe that profiting from surf tourism is a positive avenue for themselves and the area (through employment and through drawing in tourists who spend money on other things), while others see this behavior as the root of destination destruction. It was not surf businesses per se that came under attack, however. Some argued that there are proper ways to have and run surf businesses. Many seemed fine with people offering lessons because people taking lessons “do not get in the way and they come for short periods of time and spend money.” Most seemed to have issues with taking large groups of surfers to already crowded local spots or to Indigenous communities and protected areas.

It seemed that local residents were particularly aggravated by the marketing during the pandemic and the efforts to use the crisis as a selling point, similar to what has been contextualized in studies on last-chance tourism—tourism fueled by the logic that tourists need to act to participate in an experience before it is gone [71]. Locally, this takes the form of businesses advertising directly to consumers that they should come visit during the pandemic because the “waves will never be this uncrowded again”. This is clearly evidence that surfer entrepreneurs who are embedded in the culture would recognize innovative

opportunities and be uniquely suited to exploit these novel avenues [69]. Utilizing a time of crisis for personal profits through surf tourism, however, seemed to expose latent tensions. One quote from a local surfer was emblematic:

Surfers are selfish. I hate to admit, but when I first heard they were shutting down Panama, my first thought was, at least we will be able to surf without tourists for once. Little did I know, they would be patrolling with police boats making sure we didn't surf and then people found ways to convince tourists to come as soon as they were able. And locals would surf ten-hours per day. In short, the silver lining was a nice thought, but not a reality. The surf was a crowded as ever.

Some local surfers were also angry that surf businesses were marketing the mini-summer season as an ideal time to visit because the waves are good, and crowds are small. One surfer offered an illustrative quote in relation to that specifically, which was echoed by at least three other surfers:

We kind of all know surfing is growing here and that's the way it is. Every winter is busier than the one before. But it was quietly understood that you don't talk about the small summer window that we get here. It's always kinda been the time for locals who keep around when everyone else leaves. Surf businesses are getting desperate and using the vulnerable time to break the code. And I think people are accepting of it because we feel bad that tourism has been battered during the Pandemic.

Despite concerns about crowding, the theme of visitors being respectful, however, emerged often in the pandemic era interviews, which was not a common finding from studies dedicated to resident perspectives of surf tourism prior. A local surfer offered this emblematic quote:

The tourists coming in talk about how terrible the pandemic has been where they live and are just so happy to be in a beautiful place surfing and enjoying life. It's cool to hear them say this and that they don't want any problems just want to show respect and have a good time. COVID-19 has been bad here too in many ways, but the respect people are showing gives me hope that surfers are seeing things differently. Maybe people will start showing the respect they expect at their home-breaks.

This prevalent finding might be revealing, as others have noted, that the pandemic is creating the conditions for a shift in global consciousness, which will stimulate growing numbers of people, businesses and governments to develop and adopt new ways of thinking, behaving and operating that are more closely tied to sustainable development goals [72]. Since many have argued that surf tourism needs management to be an effective driver of sustainable development, perhaps changing ethics in the COVID-19 era can lay a foundation for governance collaborations to ensure equitable use of surfing resources and protection of surfing environments from overuse and damage brought on by increased tourism development [43,73]. Furthermore, many added more positive interpretations of seeing polite visiting surfers during the pandemic:

Right now, there are really no other tourists here than surfers which isn't surprising because all the restrictions needed to come in and there is a curfew, and nothing is open. But seeing surfers navigate it all to get here for our waves helps to remind us that tourism will come back one day and with it, some sense of normalcy. I'm actually glad they are here, which I have never said before. The problem seems to be us locals have too much time and are surfing too much. You know, people who usually work a lot and surf when they can, are just camped out at the beach surfing three times a day. That seems to be causing more crowding than the visitors, but the vibe is good. I think the pandemic has helped everyone realize that surfing is essential to us, but there are bigger things to worry about than fighting over waves.

The quote demonstrates the most common and perhaps most important sentiment from the pandemic phase of this research. Having been forced by law to stop surfing, many locals realized how important it was to them. Studies are already showing that immersion in blue-green spaces improved the mental and physical well-being of people

during lockdowns and doctors are even proscribing immersion in nature to alleviate a growing number of health conditions [74,75]. Research has demonstrated that surfing and its associated immersion in ‘blue spaces’ has positive impacts on well-being [76,77] as well as having therapeutic benefits for combat veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress syndrome [78]. As much as a third of COVID-19 survivors may develop PTSD [79] and those who avoided contracting the virus will likely have experienced trauma. It is likely that many surfers (and aspiring surfers) will turn to the sea for therapeutic benefits. Research also demonstrates the importance of surf-trips to surfers, so many will likely seek out what are viewed in surf culture as enhanced benefits from surfing abroad in pristine environments with a few friends [52,58,68].

Considering such studies, it is perhaps not surprising that tourists jumped through many hurdles to arrive and that residents in Bocas took extreme measures to continue surfing during the pandemic. One resident from the US left on a humanitarian flight and another jumped on a sailboat to go anywhere that surfing was allowed. Some surfers took turns looking out for one another and sending signals when the authorities were coming to get out of the water during shutdowns. Others abided by the law, but felt like not being able to surf was the part of the pandemic that was crushing their spirit and eroding their mental and physically well-being. Being able to surf again without fear of punishment had many local surfers looking at the activity differently and considering what it is about surfing in Bocas that is important to conserve. Most local surfers seem to desire a healthy surf tourism industry, as a crisis resistant and complimentary form of local ecotourism, but most do not want it to become the dominant form and want some limits on surf use and development.

Many fear that the type of surf tourism that occurred during the pandemic will continue in the short run following the pandemic, and the following quote indicates why some are concerned about this despite how polite visitors have been:

Yes, visiting surfers have been respectful. They stay away from people, wear masks, and don't party like they used to. I don't think anyone has much negative to say about them. Less people are talking about the reality though. They are only visiting high-end all-inclusive surf resorts or staying in foreign owned apartments and just going to the grocery store. Basically, the waves stay crowded, but hardly anyone benefits. Bocas is already basically a big grocery story. I don't see that changing with how tourism looks today.

4. Conclusions

This longitudinal ethnographic study revealed many important findings about resident perspective on surf tourism sustainability and the effect of COVID-19 on these perceptions. Surfers demonstrated the different ways they have contributed to environmental protection and how surfing is an important economic driver for the region and particularly so during the pandemic. Some, however, are concerned with benefit distribution, considering the impacts of the pandemic on demand (i.e., discounted all-inclusive and long-term rental apartments).

In one sense, the roots of most sustainability concerns (i.e., uncontrolled development and crowding) were revealed before the pandemic and surfers seemed powerless to curb on-land development around surf-breaks. The pandemic appeared to spur a buying frenzy in Bocas and many are concerned about the impacts this will have and how this development will impact surf-breaks. Further, a great deal of media coverage in the US specifically demonstrated how the pandemic nudged city dwellers to move out of urban areas to places with more access to nature and outdoor activities. This work demonstrates that this impetus has also fueled land and property purchases abroad, particularly in areas with access to surf breaks.

One direction that will be important to research in this space is how surfers buying second homes abroad will impact surf destinations and particularly how long-term rentals to surfers will impact crowding, the local economy, and resident well-being. Particularly,

some countries, including Panama, are initiating digital nomad visas to try and attract high-income foreigners who work from home for long-term stays, thinking this form of tourism will become more popular post-pandemic. The desirability of this form of tourism needs dedicated attention, rather than continuing to perpetuate the assumption that catering to new market niches is desirable, regardless of the costs, or distribution of the benefits. While it is too late to establish clear regulations on informal rental platforms to curb pandemic purchasing, establishing them now could slow it down as a great deal of speculative development hinges upon rental income potential.

The pandemic was also shown to exacerbate existing tensions between resident surfers and surf tourism entrepreneurs, particularly those exploiting the pandemic for economic gains. This finding adds much needed nuance to previous research on surf tourism lifestyle entrepreneurs [42,70], particularly by problematizing the notion of a homogenous and cooperative local surf community. Many past attempts to utilize privatization policies with government support [80,81] and surf business cooperation efforts in the Mentawai's have failed in the past due to similar surf resident tensions [17,52]. However, the potential increase in the surf population, the surf migrant population, and surf travelers post-pandemic [2] lend greater urgency to establishing destination management organizations capable of promoting sustainability outcomes that preserve the integrity of surf-breaks, the surrounding ecosystems and a quality (high value) surfing experience.

The importance of surfing was also exposed, and new ethics were argued to be forming between how surf tourists and resident surfers interact. The findings suggest that surfers will travel during a pandemic and that last-chance marketing works, but it is often not popular in resident surf communities and is seen as exploitative. While research on surf tourism management is recognizing how the growth of the surf tourism population and fixed (if not declining due to climate change) quantity of surf resources require managerial approaches to ensure the perpetuation of quality surfing experiences in the future [73,82], few studies isolate the need for this to be driven by surf tourism entrepreneurs developing collective choice rules among one another. Seeing as surf operators are the main link between surf tourists and local communities [53,83], the findings herein support a concerted effort to experiment with and research options for surf tourism operators to coordinate management with one another and preferably in association with local government officials. Surf protected areas might be an overarching framework for establishing such an approach, but to date, it does not appear that existing surfing reserves include approaches to manage or control surf resource use behavior [6,54,84].

The key takeaways, however, hinge on the findings that surfers travel in uncertain times. While many ecosystems got much needed ecological rest during the pandemic-related tourism hiatus [28], many surf ecosystems have not, and the seeds have been planted for added pressures. This research demonstrates the urgency for cooperative governance approaches hinging on surf tourism operator cooperation to protect coveted surf experiences for many surf-dependent tourism communities. These findings are relevant well beyond surf tourism, however, as other forms of nature-based tourism (i.e., visiting national parks, climbing, and trekking) have likely, or will soon face, similar challenges. This research shows that it is not enough to just look at visitation statistics during crises, we must look at how crises change demand (i.e., increasing demand for nature post-lockdowns) and how meeting new market niches, or accelerating demand for nature-based tourism will impact local communities and ecosystems. If nature is being prescribed as a cure for pandemic-induced ailments, it is important to ensure there are healthy natural ecosystems to immerse in around the world.

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