



PERFORMANCE, AGENCY AND CHANGE IN SURFING TOURIST SPACE

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Abstract: This study seeks to advance knowledge of the production and consumption of tourist space and its implications for tourism destinations. A social constructionist approach to grounded theory was employed to investigate surfing tourist space in Indonesia's Mentawai Islands. The construction and maintenance of a utopian surfing tourist space based on myth and dubbed 'Nirvana' was found to be a four-stage process that has simultaneously enchanted surfers and ignored indigenous experiences. Over the 10-year period of this study the agency implicit in embodied surfing tourists experiences of place has weakened Nirvanic myth and indigenous issues have come to light. The dilution of Nirvanic myth has also resulted in threats to Nirvana being realized with significant implications for the future of the industry. **Keywords:** social constructionism, surf tourism, myth, tourist space, performance, agency. Published by Elsevier Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Surf tourism takes place in thousands of coastal locations from Iceland to Antarctica (Ponting, 2009a). Crowded urban surf breaks in surfers' home countries drive demand for surf tourism to destinations offering high quality waves and uncrowded conditions (Dolnicar & Flucker, 2003; George, 2000; Hugues Dit Ciles, 2009; Ponting, 2008; Preston-Whyte, 2001, 2002). At least 38 specialized surf travel guidebooks cover 112 of 161 countries known to host surfing tourists (Martin & Assenov, 2011) from a global surfer population estimated to be between 20 (Lazarow & Nelson, 2007) to 25 million (Aguerre, 2009). The aim of this study is to develop a theoretically and empirically grounded explanation of how surf tourist space is socially constructed, threatened by the on-going negotiation of meanings in liminal surf tourist space, protected by the deployment of reality maintaining

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myths, performed, and resisted by surf tourists resulting in a more socially inclusive tourist phenomenon.

The production and consumption of tourist space involves constant negotiation and renegotiation, not only through discursive elements (Urry & Larsen, 2011) and culturally informed imaginaries (Salazar, 2010), but also through the lived experience and co-performances of tourists, tourism industry professionals and destination communities (Crouch, 2010; Mavric & Urry, 2012; Rakic & Chambers, 2012). Commercial surf tourist space, as a mediated space between the world of destination communities and the world of foreign tourists, is a liminal space ripe with potential for the inversion of standard understandings of the world and reimagining possibilities (Graburn, 1983; Jafari, 1987; Shields, 1991; Turner & Ash, 1975).

Based on a case study conducted in three field visit phases over a ten-year period this study explores how surf tourist space is produced and consumed in a four-stage process of social construction, threat, myth dissemination and resistance. Our analysis shows that over time the agency inherent in the re-negotiation and re-performance of this liminal space enabled commercially driven discourse to be resisted and reimagined despite the surf industry's best attempts to avoid this. These changes have undermined the symbolic elements of utopian surf tourist space with significant implications for the visitor experience and the profitability of the industry. Our study illustrates the analytical utility of understanding tourist destinations as socially constructed spaces of touristic production and consumption in terms of the 'dream' being sold to tourists, its ethico-political implications, and the potential for agency in tourists' performance of that space.

THE PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF TOURIST SPACE

The late twentieth century shift to service based economies and global information technology networks led to broad changes in spatial organization (Zukin, 1991). In response, geographers began to include society and culture in the analysis of space, and sociologists and anthropologists began to place increased importance upon space in social interactions and relationships (Agnew, Mercer, & Sopher, 1984; Ellen, 1988; Gregory, 1994; Gregory & Urry, 1985; Harvey, 1985, 1989; Ley, 1985; Sennett, 1977; Soja, 1989). Similarly, tourism destinations and attractions are increasingly being considered as 'tourist spaces' that are consumed symbolically as well as in the more traditional modes of products and services (Cunningham, 2006; Diekmann & Hannam, 2012; Edensor, 1998, 2000; Knudsen, Soper, & Metro-Roland, 2007; Ponting, 2009a, 2009b; Ponting, McDonald, & Wearing, 2005; Thurnell-Read, 2012; Wearing, Stevenson, & Young, 2010; Young, 1999a,b). Urry's (2002) characterization of touristic consumption as a 'tourist gaze' was criticized for failing to recognize that tourism is an embodied experience that involves all the senses, as well as emotional and cognitive processes (see for example Cloke & Perkins,

1998; Game, 1991; Mullins, 1991, 1994; Perkins & Thorns, 2001; Veijola & Jokinen, 1994). This criticism resulted in Urry taking a broader view, and characterizes what has become known as the 'performance turn' in tourism studies (Edensor, 2009; Haldrup & Larsen, 2010; Obrador-Pons, Travlou, & Crang, 2010; Rakic & Chambers, 2012; Urry & Larsen, 2011).

The performance turn in tourist studies posits that the act of production is not separate from the act of consumption; that tourism spaces are in fact continuously co-performed and therefore co-produced by tourists (Adler, 1989; Cloke & Perkins, 1988; Mavric & Urry, 2012; Perkins & Thorns, 2001; Rojek & Urry, 1997; Urry, 1995). An early influence was Goffman's (1959) conceptualization of social life as a performance involving 'frontstage' settings, where impression management is of central concern, and 'backstage' settings where interactions that are more authentic take place. MacCannell (1976) introduced the concept to tourism studies by suggesting tourists search for authenticity lacking in their own lives by seeking it out in the lives of others. A view that was criticized as overly reductive, rendering social performances unreflexive and limiting possibilities for human agency (Edensor, 2012, p. 543). The commodification of adventure tourism is particularly relevant in this regard, because it enables tourists the opportunity to perform in front of an audience of guides, other tourists and video cameras (Cater & Cloke, 2007; Cloke & Perkins, 2002). Activities such as white-water rafting, mountain climbing, trekking and surfing enable tourists to pursue an embodied exploration of the self in empty wilderness settings. Wilderness settings present unique opportunities to challenge the forces of nature so that tourists can engage in ritual and performance, experience feelings of transcendence and add to the skills, repertoires and narratives of the self (McDonald, Ponting & Wearing, 2009).

Over the last forty years, surfing tourism has become a significant part of both the tourism and adventure tourism industries (Fluker, 2003). Underscoring its growing significance are the one hundred and fifty six pieces of research that were produced between 1997 and 2011 covering various aspects of surf tourism (Martin & Assenov, 2012). While the sustainability of surf tourism destinations (Hugues Dit Ciles, 2009; O'Brien & Ponting, in press; Ponting, 2009a, 2009b; Ponting et al., 2005; Wearing & Ponting, 2009) and surfing tourist space (Ponting, 2008; Preston-Whyte, 2001, 2002) have been the subject of previous research, explorations of agency in surf tourists' performance and embodied experiences have not. In the process of invoking the performance turn, rather than providing a complete phenomenological rendering of the performance of surf tourist space, we seek to show how these theoretical advancements can be used as a lens through which to frame new understandings of resistance to domination.

Understanding the potential agency that arises out of embodied performances requires that we understand the socially constructed space in which it occurs. Edensor (1998, p. 42) for example counter poses 'enclavic spaces' such as integrated resorts, theme parks and shopping malls with 'heterogeneous spaces', which are based on Foucault's

description of heterotopias: “the juxtaposing in a single real place (of) several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault, 1986, p. 25). On this basis Wearing (1998, p. 146) argues that contested, liminal tourist spaces can act as spaces of agency to resist domination. While Tuan (1975), Johnson (1992) and Cunningham (2006) posit that space is rooted in a specific physical place, we argue that commercially driven tourist spaces may manifest wherever the requisite symbolic elements are present, undermining unique locales and turning them into universal cultural spaces where exploitation and domination are more likely to occur (Zukin, 1991, p. 27). An important characteristic of universal cultural spaces is their disembeddedness. Giddens (1990) explains:

The advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between “absent” others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction...locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them. (pp. 18–19)

Geographers have referred to these kinds of disembedded tourist spaces as “free floating signifier[s]” (Hopkins, 1998, p. 65), or as “travelling representations” (Davis, 2005, p. 607) that may be overlaid on places possessing the requisite symbols. Numerous studies have noted this process in settings as diverse as remote Japanese islands (Cunningham, 2006), rural Canada (Hopkins, 1998), Australia (Young, 1999b), Scotland (Hughes, 1992), Lapland (Pretes, 1995), the Bikini Atoll (Davis, 2005), Pitcairn Island (Amoamo, 2013), and Shangri-La’s fleeting appearances in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and China (Bishop, 1989; Cater, 2001; Hutt, 1996). Previous studies acknowledge the historic basis of free floating, travelling, disembedded space and cite the role of the media and marketing in the production of place myth. However, previous studies have fallen short of analyzing the more dynamic processes by which specific tourist space is produced, threatened, defended, consumed, resisted, changed and ultimately destroyed. We address this gap in the literature by analyzing a disembedded tourist space situated in the Mentawai Islands of Indonesia. By focusing on the performance of surf tourists we are able locate surf tourists’ agency through embodied experiences. Through these embodied experiences, surf tourists resist and change the dominant discourse of surf tourist space, which has a tendency to marginalize destination communities in order to protect its mythological status.

STUDY METHODS

This study employed grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) for use in exploratory qualitative theory building where an under-researched phenomenon requires new insight. It has subsequently been widely used to explore symbolic meanings of consumption (Cunningham, 2006; Daengbuppha, Hemmington, & Wilkes, 2006; Goulding, 2000; Johns & Gymiothy, 2002; Martin, 2007; Pettigrew, 2002). The approach

to grounded theory adopted in this study is based on a social constructionist revision of the positivist roots of the method (Bryant, 2002; Charmaz, 2005). This revision does not change the essence of data collection and analysis, which remains a cyclic, iterative process involving “data collection, coding and analysis through memoing, theoretical sampling and using the constant comparative method” (Glaser, 1998, p. 12). Instead a social constructionist epistemology and post-structuralist ontology underpin the assumptions of this research and reposition the researcher, “from ‘all-knowing analyst’ to ‘acknowledged participant’ in the production of always partial knowledges” (Clarke, 2003, p. 556). Strategies for the social constructionist researcher/participant to enhance validity and rigor in grounded theory research include acknowledging biases, prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field, the collection of multiple data sources, and inter-coder reliability (Jacelon & O’Dell, 2005). All of these strategies were built into the research design and are explained in the following sections.

In line with the epistemological and ontological assumptions of this study, it should be noted that the lead researcher is a relatively well-traveled surfing tourist with 30 years’ experience and a broader personal research agenda to support development *and* conservation in remote developing regions through sustainable surfing tourism. It was through the lead author’s experience as a surf tourist in the region that an instrumental case study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) of Indonesia’s Mentawai Islands, 130 kilometers off the west coast of Sumatra, was identified as the best possible location for data collection given the islands’ status as the most recent and fastest growing surfing tourism destination at the time the research was conceived (Ponting, 2001). The use of broad *a priori* research questions to guide data collection in the opening phases of grounded theory research is encouraged (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 41). After an initial literature review the two following research questions were developed. How has surfing tourist space been socially constructed? How has surfing tourist space been overlaid on the geographic and social domain of host communities?

Theoretical sampling, coding and constant comparison were conducted over three site visits to West Sumatra, Indonesia totaling eight months in the field from May to October 2003, July 2011 and March 2012. Data for the study were collected from analysis of entries in a charter boat guest book, overt participant observation and a ‘snowball’ sample of forty-two interviews across seven stakeholder groups. These included fifteen surfing tourists (eight boat based, seven land based), twelve surf tour operators, eight indigenous Mentawai, two surf media representatives, two Minangkabau (indigenous to mainland West Sumatra) surf tourism entrepreneurs, and one senior global surf corporation representative. Interviews were allowed to continue for as long as was required to cover all topic areas deemed necessary by the researcher and ranged from 20 to 90 minutes. Initial interviews were unstructured (though were conducted with the research questions in mind), in order to allow data categories and theory to take shape through the process of coding and constant comparison. Theoretical sampling directed

questioning to the fringes of the developing theory, resulting in a more guided style with the latter interviews (Charmaz, 2005; Duffy, Ferguson, & Watson, 2004; Elliott & Lazenbatt, 2005; Patton, 1990). Data were collected in line with the ethical standards of the University of Technology, Sydney (from where the research was initiated), and the names of research participants have been altered to ensure their anonymity. The sample of research participants was limited by the need for participants to possess English language skills sufficient to understand and respond to relatively complex concepts in interviews.

Overt participant observation of surfing tourists took place on-board charter boats, in surf resorts and in the water at surf breaks. In this way emerging themes in the data were subjected to constant comparison through unrecorded conversations with surfing tourists. Detailed reflective field notes of these encounters were recorded for later analysis. Theory was built through on-going iterations of theoretical sampling and constant comparison, memoing and coding. The qualitative data analysis software program NVivo was used to facilitate this process (Bringer, Johnston, & Brackenridge, 2004; Johnston, 2006). As interview transcripts were analyzed, emerging themes were assigned codes. Inter-coder reliability was employed between the authors, with the memoing and coding of data being cross checked as regularly as possible and agreed upon explanations for relationships between themes and categories of data were written down and checked in the subsequent round of sampling. The construction of detailed visual representations of the relationships between categories of data was carried out by hand and multiple iterations of this process led to the development of a theoretical model offering an interpretation of the production and consumption of tourist space. The following section outlines the results of the study, explains the theoretical model that emerged from it, and explores the changes that occurred over the ten-year study period with a focus on the expression of agency through the surf tourists' embodied experiences.

A SURFER'S DREAM

Analysis of entries in a surf charter boat guest book revealed that disparate age groups, backgrounds and nationalities all refer to a common, pre-existing 'dream'. While the notion of collective tourists' dreams is not unique to surf tourism (see Schellhorn & Perkins, 2004), surf tourists' dreams are very specific and surprisingly congruent across ages and nationalities. The following guest entry was typical:

I definitely got the best waves of my life! . . . we surfed world-class waves practically by ourselves. Thanks for a very memorable trip and making a dream of mine come true. (Rob, Surf Tourist, 2002)

The term 'Nirvana' was used repeatedly by participants to refer to a shared vision of a utopian surf tourist space and the term is adopted from here on to refer to this space as surf tourists subjectively experienced it. The processes that produce Nirvana are henceforth

referred to as Nirvanification. Previous studies have noted that the dream of Nirvana drives a multi-billion dollar tripartite marketing synergy between surf corporations, the surf media and the surf tourism industry (Ponting, 2001, 2009a; Ponting et al., 2005; *Surfer's Path*, 2002). Surf tour operator Paul explains:

It's a very real and very powerful force in almost every surfer. To ignore it would be almost suicidal; you should go into making something else. If you're in the surf business, it's an essential part of pretty much everyone's strategy. (Paul, Surf Tour Operator, 2003)

The print surf media began in the 1960's and was ultimately absorbed by mainstream sports/fashion publishing houses. This caused editorial content to more directly reflect the needs of advertisers that had their beginnings in the 60's and 70's and then grew into multi-billion dollar global corporations (Ponting, 2009a). The transition from cottage industry to global corporation was driven by the apotheosis of Nirvana in surf media and marketing. Urry and Larsen (2011, p. 4) highlighted the importance of the media in creating the anticipation of "intense pleasures" from tourism "constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist technologies such as film, TV, literature, magazines, CDs, DVDs and videos". The following surf media excerpt referring to the Mentawais affirms this.

Magazines and videos produce dream imagery of these islands [Mentawai] that can gnaw like a giant worm through the consciousness to join food, shelter and the desire to procreate as a fundamental human compulsion, an addiction to dwarf the most malevolent drug. (Green, 2002, p. 85)

Media driven repertoires of images and narratives not only form the basis of tourist attractions but also implicitly influence the interpretation of sites and cultures and the ways in which they are experienced, recorded and communicated by tourists (Jenkins, 2003; Knudsen et al., 2007; Ponting, 2009a; Young, 1999a, 1999b). Ford and Brown (2006, pp. 41–42) explain that surf media imagery taps into "the surfer's repository of past embodied surfing experience, knowledge of surfing culture and places... [and] engage the body and senses". The following excerpt from surf corporation marketer Mick describes his reaction to a photograph on his childhood bedroom wall of a surfer dropping in to a huge wave at Sunset Beach, Hawaii. It reveals surfers' invocation of their own past embodied experiences to engage in surfing fantasies triggered by Nirvanic imagery.

It was the last thing I saw at night and the first thing I saw when I woke up in the morning. I imagine-surfed that wave every possible way. I felt the drop, spray in my face as I was paddling in. I felt the wax under my feet, the lightness as I took the drop, when my rail connected at the bottom and doing the first driving turn to get out on the face because I was so freaked out by what was going to come over. (Mick, Surf Corporation Marketing, 2003)

On reaching adulthood, Mick felt compelled to surf Sunset Beach and reported feeling as though he'd surfed it all his life after so many imagined sessions there. Surf media imagery of the Mentawais was cited by

all surf tourists interviewed in this study as their primary tourism motivator. The following response was typical.

I watched a movie by Quiksilver called the Surfers of Fortune. I had no idea what the Mentawais were but I just knew I wanted to go where this movie was filmed. (Marco, Surf Tour Operator, 2003)

After the 1994 release of *Surfers of Fortune*, surf media scrutiny of the Mentawais intensified and a rapidly expanding surf charter fleet placed the best waves in the world in previously impossible levels of comfort and safety within reach of any surfer able to pay the price of admission. The surf media had unwittingly assumed the role of destination marketing and was instrumental in the production of a tourist space that saw a neglected, impoverished Indonesian regency discursively recast as the world's most coveted luxury surfing destination (Ponting, 2009a). The discourse of this space has also impacted the types of activities and conversations undertaken by surfing tourists and the embodied performance of surfing in and touring through the Mentawai Islands. The following section explores the social mechanics involved in this process of Nirvanification.

NIRVANIFICATION

The production and consumption of Nirvana in the Mentawai Islands comprises a four-phase dialectical process involving social construction, threats, protection and contestation. The first phase is the social construction of Nirvana that leverages four symbolic elements, described below. These act as anchors to temporarily secure Nirvanic space. The first symbolic element is perfect waves. Shared understandings of what a perfect wave looks like are socially constructed and communicated to surfers through the surf media (Ford & Brown, 2006; Ponting, 2009a; Preston-Whyte, 2002). Perfect waves are at the heart of surfing tourists' conception of Nirvana and were mentioned by each surfer participant. For example:

Most of it is chasing the Holy Grail, the chance of maybe getting insane waves... That hope of fuckin' just all time perfect insane waves. And when you find it, it's just like YEAH! Found it! (Matt, Surfing Tourist, 2003)

The second symbolic element is uncrowded conditions. Crowding has been the subject of academic discussion in the context of outdoor recreation generally (Manning, 1999) and in the specific context of surfing tourism in the Mentawais (Ponting et al., 2005), however, surfing tourists' own words are most effective in explaining the importance of uncrowded surfing conditions.

It sounds greedy but the dream scenario is when you're out in perfect conditions just with your friends or as small a group as possible so you can get all the waves you want and don't have to share. (Tony, Surfing Tourist, 2003)

The third symbolic element is cushioned adventure. While surfing tourists enjoyed the adventure of being in the Mentawais they also acknowledged the cushioning effect of the tourism industry.

This is the easy way to do it, to go on this trip. Pay to play. Hold your hand. It's like we're in a little plastic bubble and everything is catered to us and we're taken around here and there. (Jeff, Surfing Tourist, 2003)

The fourth symbolic element is a pristine tropical environment. Surf tourist Sam distilled the natural environment in Nirvanic imagery down to three colors.

Little sandy atolls and coral reefs with beautiful fish, palm trees, warm beautiful water that changes color every ten minutes: green, blue and white. (Sam, Surfing Tourist, 2003)

The second phase of Nirvanification involves threats to the symbolic elements of Nirvana. The liminality of surf tourist space and constant re-negotiation of meanings renders it under constant threat (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Lefebvre, 1991; Urry, 1995) from embodied experiences of place that contradict Nirvanic discourse. For example, poor weather, substandard surf, overcrowding and exposure to local living conditions all threaten Nirvana. Surf magazine editor Tom explains the growing disconnection between the dream of Nirvana and contradictory embodied experiences.

The truth is that surf media has increasingly grown alienated from understanding how to represent the places themselves in a true light. A lot of these places aren't 'Nirvanic'. Like the Mentawais... if you're a Mentawaian person, its home but it's not fuckin' Nirvana. Surfers who do venture into the villages see that. Shit, they can smell it too. Outside their air-conditioned cabin, they can feel it. It chips away at their dream. (Tom, Surf Magazine Editor, 2004)

The third phase of Nirvanification involves protecting Nirvana through the deployment of a series of myths. It is normal for institutions to engage in legitimization practices that give a cognitive and moral basis for the power relationships they have created. 'Reality maintenance' helps protect the social world one inhabits from competing constructions of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In order for surf tourists to feel comfortable on a luxury surfing adventure within sight of people struggling to feed their families whose resources they are exploiting without compensation, two related myths were propagated. The first myth dictates that surfing tourism and Western culture have nothing to offer indigenous peoples living on the margins of developing nations, and that the correct behavior is to enjoy and utilize their resources but to avoid contact with them.

It's like our guide told us, I think it's really, you know, kind of for the best for the natives that we keep our distance. We don't need another Bali. We don't want these beautiful primitive people turning into drug addicts and hookers. (Marty, Surf Charter Tourist, 2003)

This works in tandem with a second myth that encourages the belief that Mentawai people, despite living with poverty and disease, are actually very happy with the status quo and should be considered lucky to be able to live a simple life, away from the curse of middle class affluence, consumerism and alienation.

I feel for the people here but it doesn't appear that they have it all that bad. Simple is good, ha! Less stress, I'm kind of jealous. (George, Surf Charter Tourist, 2003)

If they can be left alone to a certain extent and continue living the way they live, good luck to them. They haven't got a lot of money but they don't need a lot of money. . . . They live a simple life and I'm sure there are lots of stressed out businessmen who'd like to be in their shoes. (Eddy, Surf Tour Operator, 2003)

In order to protect Nirvana from the development of a competing land-based surf tourism industry, the surf charter industry established and nurtured the misconception that a tourist making landfall in the Mentawais was inviting a swift and painful death from cerebral malaria. It was observed in 2003 that virtually all charter-based surfing tourists refused to visit land on this basis.

[Our guide said] there's a fifty per cent chance of somebody staying on land getting malaria within the first three weeks. If there are four people there, then in three weeks two of them are going to contract it and possibly die. I'm definitely not going in there. (Damon, Surf Charter Tourist, 2003)

The malaria myth not only stymied the development of land-based tourism for fifteen years, but also shielded the vast majority of tourists from experiences outside of Nirvanic discourse. Based on Bourdieu's (1986, p. 137) work concerning the production of belief, d'Hauteserre (2005) argues that: (a) tourists are predisposed to believe the myth of tourist spaces, and (b) myth stifles resistance to economic and political power that underpins commodified tourist space. While Nirvanic myth did stifle resistance, it did not eliminate it.

The fourth phase of Nirvanification is the development of alternative discourses, of which there are many. Most, however, are "nihilated" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 12) by Nirvanic myth. We will focus on those that challenge the Nirvanic myths discussed previously. Surf tour operators Brad and Paul articulated an alternative discourse to the twin myths of benevolent avoidance and simple happy locals.

You'll hear stakeholders saying that the Mentawai people are happy paddling around in their canoes, happy with what they've got. That's bullshit. (Brad, Surf Tour Operator, 2003)

People in the villages near the surf breaks don't much like that they're dying from tuberculosis and malaria and can't get supplies and good education for their kids and millionaires are playing on their beaches and all they get is the trash dumped in the coconut trees or washed up on the beaches. (Paul, Surf Tour Operator, 2003)

Dede, an indigenous Mentawaian who, through a bilateral aid program received a tertiary education, noted the loss of governance taking place in the Mentawais as foreign interests buy up land, speculating on tourism-related profits.

In the Mentawai, they lose their land, they lose their governance. . . they just become a watcher waiting for the tourist, waving their hands. . . How much goes to the Mentawaian? . . . The local people, they lose their land, they lose their rights because they do not know the trick of business. (Dede, Mentawaian Participant, 2003)

The malaria myth was obvious to land based tourists, local guides and tour operators running or attempting to establish land based surf tourism operations in the Mentawais in 2003. They understood the political nature of the myth yet were unable to penetrate it to change the discourse of Nirvana and its influence over the performance of tourists.

A lot of people's attitudes about malaria are ill conceived, misjudged and hyped-up... [it] is not something that boat operators are going to discourage. Why would they ever discourage that viewpoint? That singular vision is going to keep the market in their pocket. (Kelly, Surf Tour Operator, 2003)
They have this scared with malaria... I even hear that captains said to the guests "don't ever go to the land, even one minute". This is crazy. I think this is a tactic or strategy help people to still choose with the boat. (Achmal, Minangkabau Participant)

Ironically, the same islands have long supported a jungle trekking industry as John, who is both a jungle trek guide and a surf guide, explains.

I not really understand why surfers so scared... When the tourist trekking group, when I tell them to take malaria pill because we go to the island they are fine. Yeah, they don't worry at all to be in the jungle. (John, Mentawaiian Participant, 2003)

Given the value of Nirvana it is logical that those profiting from its primacy engage in reality maintenance activities. Despite their efforts, alternative discourses resulting from embodied experience have occasionally survived discursive surveillance and nihilation attempts to go on to influence Nirvanic discourse.

PERFORMANCE, AGENCY & CHANGE

Due to the impermanence of tourist space, which is constantly re-produced, re-performed and re-negotiated, agency exists and change is possible (Mavric & Urry, 2012; Thrift, 1999). Over the ten-year period of this study, significant changes to Nirvanic discourse and space have occurred that demonstrate this agency. In 2003, none of the boat based surf tourists interviewed had an informed idea about local communities in the Mentawai. At the time the fledging humanitarian aid and non-profit organization SurfAid International was struggling to make an impact in the global surfing community. In 1999, a surf tourist/physician went ashore in the Mentawais to offer medical services to a village. His impromptu clinic was inundated by hundreds of people, sick and dying from preventable diseases and treatable injuries. The emotional and cognitive processing demanded by this embodied experience was powerful enough to transcend Nirvanic discourse and its reality maintenance myths, from which SurfAid International was born (Dr Dave Jenkins, Personal Communication, July 2011). By 2011, SurfAid International had an annual operational budget of just over USD \$4 million (SurfAid International, 2012) and its fundraising, promotion and education efforts have been highly successful. Because of SurfAid's efforts, most surfing tourists now know that a local population with health

and poverty concerns exists in the Mentawai. Rather than benevolently disengaging from local communities for fear of corrupting their happy, simple existence, surf tourists increasingly seek interactions with local communities and want to be part of solutions to the issues they face.

I donate to Surf Aid because I know that that money goes to the local people. I started to donate to Surf Aid a few years ago when I became aware of the issues with the locals here, when they started coming up to the boats selling stuff. After that, I started to look in to it. You're sold on this idea of the perfect trip, but I was unaware, ignorant, that just a kilometer away from this perfect wave there are people struggling. (Marty, Surf Tourist, 2011)

While commercially produced surf videos make it easy to ignore or rationalize the luxury/poverty divide, surf tourists are increasingly having embodied, tactile experiences co-performed with local communities in the liminal space of surf tourism that require emotional and cognitive processing. Despite Nirvanic myth encouraging tourists to disengage, change in the performance of surf tourism is taking place.

I didn't know anything about local communities before my first trip in 2006. In the videos about the place I saw nothing at all about the local communities, so I was surprised to see how many people live in the middle of nowhere. And, to get to hang out and talk—well, at least exchange hand gestures with them—buy some pretty cool carvings from them, that was pretty sick... since those first meetings I've made myself more aware of the local people by looking for information online. (Dave, Surf Tourist, 2012)

Surf tourists' embodied experiences of place are driving a growing awareness of local space and this is beginning to alter perceptions and expectations of Nirvana. The following excerpt illustrates that experiences of local culture are now beginning to find a place in surf tourism discourse and to alter what is expected in the performance of surf tourism.

Good uncrowded waves. That's always number one on the agenda. Number two you want a nice location, somewhere that looks good. And, also it's good to rub shoulders with the locals too. (Marty, Surf Tourist, 2011)
We got to see these tiny little shaman doing their traditional dancing. At the end they invited us to get up and perform with them, so we were dancing around with these wizened little old guys, you know, having a laugh with them. We heard a bit about their lives, their struggles. It really makes you think, you know... After the waves that was the coolest part of this trip. (Jim, Surf Tourist, 2011)

Tourists' embodied experiences of local space and new forms of co-performance with local people are causing them to question the social justice issues of a profitable Nirvanic discourse that had written local people out of its narrative.

I've got a bone to pick with the big surf companies. They've spent so much time and energy and money in these areas with their pro surfers on boats, and from what I can see they've done very little to help these people. OK if they've made a video, it's these people's back yard, how much of the proceeds from that video went towards these guys? How about setting up a trust to help people rather than waiting for a tsunami to make a donation. (John, Surf Tourist, 2012)

Surf corporations complicit in the Nirvanification of the Mentawai are aware of the shifting discourse and are re-positioning their messaging

about their role in the islands. For example, surf corporations Billa-bong and Quiksilver have become major SurfAid donors. Through its non-profit foundation, Quiksilver produces media that directly threatens Nirvanic discourse and myth, documenting and publicizing the predicament of Mentawai villages destroyed by a tsunami in October 2010 and challenging surfers to engage with relief efforts.

In 2003, only one foreign owned land based accommodation was in operation in the Mentawai Islands, another was on the drawing board. Initially investment in land-based accommodation was almost totally stifled by the malaria myth deployed by the charter boat industry to protect Nirvana from competition from land-based accommodation. However, over time, tourists' embodied experiences making landfall without dying began to undermine, and ultimately nihilated, the malaria myth.

To get people to come out we offered cheap prices in 2006 and we lost money. But nobody got sick with malaria. We have on our website that no one has ever got malaria. As people took a chance had an experience and didn't die like they were supposed to, the myth gradually died out, it was pretty widely debunked by 2008. (Adam, Surf Resort Owner, 2012)

In 2013 there are more surf tourist beds on land than on charter boats including 9 resorts and as many locally run homestay operations. An effective doubling of crowds has developed around the breaks that have the most land-based accommodation. Crowds in the water in excess of 40 people, and another 50–60 waiting nearby were directly observed at several breaks in 2011 and 2012.

Ok this is not funny. There are confirmed at least 60 surfers staying on the beach at Ebay some say 70. The ferry left with another 15 last night. There are another 100 or more beds in the Surf Resorts. Couple of charter boats. The crowds today could be spectacular. Fifty-five out at Rifles last time it broke. Paradise lost? (Charter Boat Captain Facebook Post August 1st 2012)
Today there were nine boats and the resort guests, so somewhere between 90 and a hundred surfers. And, it only takes one boatload of dickheads and the vibe is gone and its dog eat dog. Let's do the numbers. There's about 40 people out right now, there's only a couple of good waves coming through every half an hour, and there's two hours left before dark. (Chris, Surf Guide, 2011)

The increased crowds come with an increase in solid waste that has begun to compromise the second and third symbolic elements of Nirvana.

From the movies I imagined it would be pristine. But everywhere we've gone there has been lots of boats in the water and shit floating in the water. Literally, shit. As well as rubbish, egg shells, bananas, kitchen waste. (Nick, Surf Tourist, 2012)

In response, Nirvana has begun to shift to the furthest reaches of the Mentawai chain where the crowds are thinner and solid waste is less apparent.

If you only got as far as the popular spots like Maccas and HTs all you'd see would be crowds of idiots and rubbish in the water. It's already just like Bali you know. But on this trip we went further away and I did get to see that pristine Nirvana I've been looking for. The clear water, how you see it in the movies, it's still there. It's just a little further away. (Dave, Surf Tourist, 2012)

Surf tourists' embodied experiences in the liminal space of the Mentawai have resulted in a reimagining of meanings and the development of new performances. This has led to a growing awareness of local concerns and the environmental impacts of surf tourism. This has come at the expense of Nirvanic myth, which is now struggling to retain a foothold in the Mentawais. In the absence of effective regulation of the industry to sure up the quality of the recreational experience and protect the natural environment, the Mentawais will have a surf tourism industry, but Nirvana will transition to the next surfers' dreamscape.

CONCLUSION

Conceptually and theoretically this study sought to contribute to a greater understanding of the production and consumption of tourist space. It outlined a theory describing the process of evolution observed over the 10 year period of the study in the Mentawai Islands that was referred to as Nirvanification. Nirvanification is a dialectical process involving four distinct phases including 'social construction', 'threats', 'protection' and 'contestation'.

To begin with the Mentawai Islands were constructed through the surf media, which was predicated on the presence of four symbolic elements—perfect waves, uncrowded conditions, cushioned adventure and a pristine tropical environment—the intersection of which represent an idealized surfer's dream. These symbols were then threatened by both the surfers embodied experiences and the actual surfing conditions not living up to the ideal. In the third phase the surf tourism industry responded to these threats by seeking to protect its investment by deploying a series of myths (e.g. Malaria), which essentially justified the unequal power relations they had created by not including locals in their industry. Lastly, embodied experiences of place and local space led to the creation of alternative discourses that challenged the industry's myths as well as acknowledging the living conditions of the locals, which led to opportunities for them to become involved in surf tourism. These embodied experiences led to, over the ten-year span of this study, fundamental shifts in Nirvanic discourse, and the social construction of Nirvana itself. The betrayal of Nirvanic myth and an undermining of the second and third symbolic elements of Nirvana in the Mentawai are causing Nirvana to begin to shift, geographically, to places better able to supply the four symbolic elements.

The myths the surfing tourism industry relied upon were always fragile and open to contestation because the tourist space they had constructed was not based on long-term relationships with the physical place. It was instead based on a commercially driven discourse and this led to a space that was generic, placeless and universal. Giddens' notion of disembeddness illustrated that Nirvana was only ever anchored in place as long as it's symbolic elements were never seriously

contested. Therefore if Nirvana is co-performed by tourists and locals in a dialectic process of production and consumption, embodied experiences of place and people that transcend symbolic representations have the power to transform the performance of Nirvana to reflect new understandings and meanings.

Our theory indicates that the agency implicit in embodied experience can lead to a change in a commercially driven, socially constructed tourist space, even against the will of those who would attempt to nihilate alternative discourses. In the Mentawais, while this has led to a betrayal of the dream of Nirvana, it has also led to the inclusion of local communities into the conversation about the future of surf tourism. It was through direct embodied experience that knowledge beyond the symbolic elements and myths of Nirvana was able to permeate through the Nirvanic discourse, so those who were discursively marginalized are now being brought into the center of the surfing tourism experience. On a practical level, this translates into improved prospects for local people to enter into the surf tourism economy providing new employment opportunities and the potential for a better life. It suggests a shift in the surf tourism discourse in the Mentawais, from one based on the maintenance of a Nirvanic reality to a new and more enlightened discourse that takes account of social justice issues related to the activities of those who currently profit from the industry.

This study suggests there is analytical utility in understanding tourist destinations as socially constructed spaces of touristic production and consumption in terms of the 'dream' being sold to tourists and its ethico-political implications. Nirvanification is not unique to surfing tourism, nor is the selling of luxurious dreams overlaid on places blighted by poverty and disease. Based on the analysis conducted in this study it is possible to see the Nirvanification of other tourist destinations around the world, and there is significant political utility in understanding that agency resides in tourists' embodied experiences and performances. These implications also highlight the limitations of this study given its focus on surf tourism and a relatively small sample of research participants. The broader conceptual themes of the study require further research on other forms of tourism in other geographic places in order to find out if the findings of this study can be generalized to others.

In the final analysis it is encouraging that addressing issues of social justice does not preclude issues of a commercial nature—the surfer's dream of Nirvana can also function as a means of engagement with local people and poverty reduction. It appears that despite the concerns of those who fight to control the image of Nirvana, many tourists are able to conceive of a touristic paradise in which local populations are known to be struggling, as long as their actions as tourists in that space are thought to be a part of the solution to those issues rather than exacerbating them. Indeed, this appears to resolve much of the moral discomfort that was apparent in some of the interviews conducted in

2003. As such the nature of the embodied experiences that lead to shifts in discourse and tourist space might usefully be investigated in similar cases. The overcrowding currently undermining Nirvana in the Mentawais, in the absence of management, will likely lead to a high volume, low yield model that will impact tourist satisfaction, the demography of visiting surfers, and potentially profit margins for existing resorts. It may however, also lower the barriers to entry for local entrepreneurs. An exploration of the implications of this de-Nirvanification process across economic, social-cultural and environmental parameters might also form the basis of future research. **A**

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