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# Surf Tourism: Social Spatiality in El Tunco and El Sunzal, El Salvador

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*Abstract: When Salvadoran government officials signed the Peace Accords in 1992, the global surf community took note. For twelve years, civil war had ravaged the Central American country, leaving nearly 80,000 civilians dead or missing. Once the republic re-emerged as a popular surfing destination, miles of pristine beaches and near-vacant waves were no longer accessible only to the fearless. By the turn of the century, a beach town nicknamed El Tunco became a refuge where waves beckoned the war-weary. Between 1993 and 2009, El Salvador attracted an estimated 12.5 million tourists, many of them in search of surf. El Tunco's evolution into a wavetopia raises several issues that warrant attention. This paper examines how the global surf industry affects El Tunco's economic and cultural landscape. Grounds for the study concern tourism, property rights, capital investment, and the aftermath of neoliberal reforms. Ethnographic and field research conducted in August 2010 indicates property values in El Tunco have nearly tripled since 2005. Matters pertaining to land ownership and beach access also have aggravated social tensions. One central argument emerges: Surf tourism serves as a key sector in a depressed Salvadoran economy wherever waves are in demand. Published scholarly analyses dissecting the influence of the global surf industry on specific Central American countries are either undeveloped or nonexistent. The qualitative data presented should fuel discussions and promote more awareness among individuals who recognize surfing as a globalized lifestyle, sport and business.*

*Keywords: El Salvador, El Tunco, El Sunzal, Surf, Tourism, Neoliberalism, Property Rights, Civil War, Travel, Waves, Spatiality*

When Salvadoran government officials signed the United Nations-sponsored Peace Accords on January 16, 1992, members of the global surf community took note. For twelve years, civil war had ravaged the Central American country, leaving nearly 80,000 civilians dead or disappeared. Along El Salvador's 307-kilometer Pacific coastline, stretches of pristine beaches and vacant waves, which lured small groups of foreign surfers in the 1960s, remained off-limits, accessible only to risk takers determined to score a fleeting ride.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 37 kilometers southwest of the capital San Salvador, a small beach pueblo nicknamed "El Tunco" in the province of La Libertad became a refuge where waves beckoned and soothed the war-weary. Playa El Tunco and its surrounding area encompass approximately 100 square kilometers of land in the province of La Libertad.<sup>2</sup> Here, the Pacific Ocean's temperature ranges between 79 to 85 degrees Fahrenheit depending on the time of year. How the beach pueblo becomes a wavetopia depends on the production of space. French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre's description captures this intricate process:

...[C]ertain spaces were carved out of nature and made complete by being filled to a saturation point with beings and symbols, while other spaces were withdrawn from nature only to be kept empty as a way of symbolizing a transcendent reality at once absent and present.<sup>3</sup>

Considering El Salvador's land area (20,720 square kilometers) and population density (298.9 people per square kilometer in 2010), the fate of El Tunco as a space approaches a saturation point with beings and symbols.<sup>4</sup> There are at least 24 registered hostels and hotels that

<sup>1</sup>Tsui, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Provinces are also referred to as departments.

<sup>3</sup> Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 163.

<sup>4</sup> World Bank. Population density in El Salvador: <http://search.worldbank.org/all?qterm=el%20salvador%20population%20density#>. Accessed on July 6, 2011.



operate in the area. In economic terms, the touristic locale has two distinct competitive advantages, the first being proximity to Carretera del Litoral (the main highway) and Comalapa International Airport.<sup>5</sup> During El Tunco's peak season, the estimated tourist population can reach up to 300 visitors per day, most who hail from the United States, Canada, Australia, Israel and Brazil. El Tunco's second economic advantage involves wave quality and user-friendliness. The beach pueblo houses two "world-class" breaks that continue to attract media-based attention, as well as two lesser-known beach breaks that achieve "perfect conditions mostly in high tide."<sup>6</sup> The first, known as La Bocana, is heavily advertised as El Salvador's best, "most furious" left. Not intended for novices, its wave height can reach up to eight to twelve feet on the face during swell season.

The majority of surfers who stay in El Tunco must trek north along the cobblestone beach for about 700 meters before paddling out about twenty minutes to the point. On route to Sunzal, a long seawall separates the public beach from private property. The restricted area boasts a sprawling oceanfront resort. With a swift shake of his head, an on-site security guard employed 24/7 for Club Sunzal warns people that walking atop the wall to avoid piles of stones below is not allowed. When there is little swell, Sunzal is an ideal break for beginner- to intermediate-level surfers, particularly individuals who longboard. The remaining two waves -- El Sunzalito and La Bocanita -- are situated between El Sunzal and La Bocana; El Sunzalito, in particular, is where many first-timers try their hand at surfing, pumping money into the local economy when they rent a board for \$10 to \$15 per day and dole out cash for a \$10- to \$20-per-hour lesson.

Revenues generated from such transactions benefit the community economically -- at least, this is what twenty-two interviewees maintain when they discuss the direct impact waves have on their sources of revenue.<sup>7</sup> "Aquí, definitivamente / Here, definitely," says local surfer and cabina operator Jaime Ernesto Delgado Aguilar, also known as Papaya. "Aquí, El Tunco lo ha hecho crecer del surf. Si no hubiera surf, no existiría El Tunco. Simplemente. Ha sido sencilla. / Here, El Tunco has grown from surfing. If there were no surf, El Tunco would not exist. Simply put. It's been that simple." The waves themselves are what distinguish the beach pueblo from other tourism hotspots throughout El Salvador. Surf tourism conveniently arises as a subsector of the global surfing industry, and beach pueblos like El Tunco become celebrated wave suppliers. The more surfers there are, the greater the demand for waves. The greater the demand, the more likely an accessible place such as El Tunco becomes a site of exploration, incorporation, adaptation and exploitation. The value of a break is intrinsically tied to a surfer's skill level: The more skilled the surfer, the more valuable the break. How surfable the breaks are (that is, their surfability) makes them commodifiable.

On a humid afternoon when business is slow, Marvin Caceres echoes Papaya's sentiments. Caceres worked at Super Tunco, the town's main grocery store, located across the street from Papaya's second lodge, for more than a year.<sup>8</sup> Inside the small market, the price of a jar of imported peanut butter is steep: \$5 for about 4 ounces; a 2-liter of bottle of water (40 fluid ounces) goes for \$2.50, an imported Snickers, \$1.50. Clearly, prices and products are geared toward people with purchasing power, not impoverished residents who work in the informal sector, hawking pieces of 25-cent candy, \$2 handmade shell pulseras, and 10-cent small, plastic baggies of tap water to make ends meet.<sup>9</sup> The disparity between food prices and the minimum

<sup>5</sup> According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2010 Investment Policy Review: "El Salvador's most prominent current niche is surf tourism, which is mostly catered for by small-scale beach lodgings" (2010, 91).

<sup>6</sup> Playa El Sunzal: [www.elsalvadorsurfcamps.com/ubicacion.html](http://www.elsalvadorsurfcamps.com/ubicacion.html). Accessed July 8, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Courtesy of summer funding from the Tinker Foundation, a total of 34 interviews were conducted in August 2010 for a master's thesis.

<sup>8</sup> Per a personal e-mail exchange, as of July 2011, Caceres no longer works here.

<sup>9</sup> Pulseras are bracelets.



daily wage, less than \$7 a day, is a reminder how 'unequal the distribution of income is throughout the region.<sup>10</sup>

At 23 years of age, Caceres' overall take on surf tourism is either optimistic or enthusiastically fatalistic. He was born in El Tunco and notes he has seen "*muchos cambios / many changes*." Until approximately five years ago, he says:

...[N]o habían muchos hoteles, y hoy sí hay muchos. Y -- es bueno para el pueblito acá El Tunco porque es más -- más -- generen empleos y más turistas, y es más dinero para nuestro país, para sigue evolucionando en la economía. / [T]here were not many hotels, and today there are many. And -- it is good for El Tunco because -- more -- they generate jobs and more tourists, and more money for our country, so the economy continues to evolve.

I ask Caceres if he is afraid everything is progressing too fast. Shooting down this assumption, he replies:

C: No, pienso es normal ahorita, porque antes, a pesar de hace cinco años que no había nada, y ahora es mucho mejor. / No, I think it is normal now, because before, despite five years ago, there was nothing, and now it is much better.

B: ¿Piensa que el turismo de surf es bueno para la comunidad? / Do you think surf tourism is good for the community?

C: Sí, es muy bueno. A parte que ellos traen nuevas formas de surfear. Los locales aprenden más las cosas, y aprendemos culturas de ellos y ellos aprenden cultura de nosotros. Es bueno compartir cultura. / Yes, very good. In addition, they bring new forms of surfing. The locals learn more things, and we learn their culture, and they learn our culture. It's good to share culture.

Ernesto Hernein Amaya is another local who says he has watched the playa undergo a rapid transformation. If there was no surf in El Tunco, he confesses: "Pues, no sé qué pasaría porque siempre está movido por turismo. / Well, I don't know what would happen because it's always driven by tourism." He runs a snack shop from a sheltered partition fronting the main strip outside of his modest home, selling bottles of soda (mainly Coca Cola products), produce and sought-after bread and donuts, which come from a bakery in the port of La Libertad. The 45-year-old describes the changes he has seen since the civil war. Back then, he says, there was "no más de un hotel pequeñito / no more than one tiny hotel." Instead, visitors camped on the beach:

Turismo extranjero no había antes de la guerra. Era muy raro cuando venía un extranjero a la playa. Solo había turismo nacional salvadoreño. Hoy, después de la guerra, sí está viniendo mucho turismo de todas las partes del mundo. / Foreign tourism was not around before the war. It was very rare when a foreigner came to the beach. There was only national Salvadoran tourism. Today, after the war, yes, tourism is coming from all parts of the world.

Despite noticeable mutations to the town's environmental surroundings, currently the majority of interviewees appear to welcome development -- if only for economic reasons. One particular voice resonates louder than some others, however. It belongs to Juana Adelia Amaya de Molina. Amaya de Molina, 55, has spent the majority of her life in El Tunco, with a 16-year stint in San Salvador at one juncture, and a five-year adventure in the United States at another.

<sup>10</sup> According to the U.S. Department of State's 2010 Country Report on Human Rights Practices in El Salvador, retail and service employees earn \$6.92 per day.



Although her vision for the future of the beach pueblo includes welcoming more tourists, she is not open to the idea of foreign landownership:

Pues, que te diré. Te voy a ser sincera y franca. Porque cuando yo comencé aquí en este lugar, puse mi negocio, y aquí no había nadie, ningún negocio. No había nadie que solo yo. Y hice muchos clientes de turistas que venían, muchos nacionales y extranjeros. Es bonito que vengan invertir del otro lado, pero tampoco nos favorece a nosotros. [...] Porque los negocios nosotros somos pequeños. Y viene alguien en grande, en grande al ponerse la par de nosotros -- es como digamos que llega un tiburón a la par de pescadito pequeño. Nos viene a comer. Eso -- eso es lo que nadie entiende. / Well, I will tell you. I'll be honest and frank. Because when I started here in the place, I put my business, and here there was nobody here, no business. There wasn't anyone but me. And I made a lot of tourist clients who came, many nationals and foreigners. It is nice that they come to invest on the other side, but neither does it favor us. [...] Because we are small businesses. And then someone bigger comes, bigger to dominate the pair of us -- we have a saying that a shark comes to the pair of small fish. It is going to eat us. That -- that is what nobody understands.

Amaya de Molina has reason to be hesitant (if not suspicious) of visitors who are looking to purchase land and open their own business. At the onset of the civil war, the restaurateur operated a taco cart, which eventually became El Tunco's first official restaurant.<sup>11</sup> She says, "Comencé el negocio en el ochenta con todos los surfedores -- pero con los nacionales. / I started the business in the eighties with all the surfers -- but with national ones." The location of Amaya de Molina's successful, small enterprise caught the eye of a Chilean expatriate. Before the war ended, Juana recollects: "Ese terreno fue mío. Trabajamos veinte años para comprar eso. / That land was ours. We worked twenty years to buy that."

Details arrive in spurts, occasionally interrupting the sequence of events, and lingering disbelief still affects how Amaya de Molina relays her narrative of loss. The overall idea was to create an investment partnership, build a hotel and split profits fifty-fifty. The signed documents essentially turned over the deed of Amaya de Molina's land to the Chilean. Rather than return to the bank, he took the manipulated paperwork and "sold" the land to a loan center in exchange for a lump sum of cash. El Salvador's ambiguous land laws permitted the loan center to retain ownership, "y se fue del país / he left the country," Amaya de Molina contends. Before year's end, the restaurateur's land was gone. In a way, this type of loss keeps a national wound from healing correctly. Throughout the civil war, "...access to land was a central part of *campesinos'* vision of a more just world."<sup>12</sup> As political scientists Manus Midlarsky and Kenneth Roberts argue:

Models of revolutionary behavior in Central America are developed that rely initially on the distribution of landholdings. The scarcity of arable land -- as in El Salvador, with its high population density -- is suggested to result in high inequality, acute class polarization, and class-based redistributive revolutionary movements.<sup>13</sup>

Until the war ended, the legal relationship concerning land occupation played a secondary role to insurgents' political and moral claims. Elisabeth Jean Wood writes:

<sup>11</sup> Several interviewees as well as residents who declined my interview requests support Amaya de Molina's account of El Tunco's restaurant history.

<sup>12</sup> Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action*, 236.

<sup>13</sup> Midlarsky and Roberts, "Class, State and Revolution," 163.



Access to abandoned land also gave insurgent *campesinos* the autonomy to continue their insurgent activities as they no longer had to depend on landlords or local authorities for their (meager) livelihoods.<sup>14</sup>

Then the Peace Accords were signed, a move that brought legal claims to the forefront of El Salvador's national identity in 1992. The government of El Salvador agreed to distribute 166,000 hectares of land to some 15,000 former combatants of the armed forces, 7,500 former combatants of the FMLN, and 25,000 *tenedores*, or farmers directly displaced by the war.<sup>15</sup> Granted, the agreement pertained to the best farmland, not coastal property in the less volatile zone of La Libertad; however, it signified something far greater in socio-economic terms. In theory, dismantling oligarchic control by taking land away from the elite and redistributing it to the "lower" classes meant Salvadoreños were free (and expected) to pursue their own financial and material destinies. Thus, tourism emerged as a means of economic survival. If losing such coveted land to a random foreigner from Chile could happen in less than a year, however, no doubt the cracks in El Salvador's realm of property rights can become catastrophic holes. The people most likely to fall through them are Salvadoreños without legal recourse.

After witnessing Amaya de Molina's prolonged fight to reclaim her land and eventual defeat, a few of El Tunco's locals are leery of tourism as a catalyst for economic change. Even so, real estate transactions have become a means of generating income. This suggests El Salvador's definition of the land-owning elite is transforming as it incorporates a slowly expanding class of *los hermanos lejanos* of the Salvadoran Diaspora, critical figures in the narrative of national development. Plenty of coastal property is for sale along Costa del Bálsamo. According to Francisco, a local who grew up in the city but moved to El Tunco because he loves the ocean:

The normal rate is about \$3 for a square vara -- a vara is smaller than a meter. That's the average price. But here in El Tunco, for example, the people say it's getting crazy and putting \$300,000 pieces of land [for sale]. In El Zonte, too. But you go to the beach next to you, like Conchalio, and it's half or less. If, say, you want 1500 square meters, it could cost \$300,000.<sup>16</sup>

In El Tunco, one success story resides within a local who had sufficient capital to pay a coyote and enter the United States as *un mojado*.<sup>17</sup> Once he accumulated his wealth working abroad, he returned to El Tunco and purchased coastal property. These days, capitalistic triumph gleams from the shiny exterior and rims of his Hummer. The changes indicate an interesting and complex class structure that carries a history of important land-tenure relations.

### Perks and Perils of Privatization

"If land records were to receive as much attention from quantitative scholars as census records," writes political scientist Robert P. Swierenga, "our knowledge of rural landholding and tenancy would be considerably advanced."<sup>18</sup> The same goes for the coastal zones in the department of La Libertad. In this specific case, it is useful to continue classifying El Tunco as a rural space within

<sup>14</sup> Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action*, 236.

<sup>15</sup> World Bank, 197. Further research is necessary to determine how much of this distributed land was located along or near the Pacific Coast. Attempts to locate pre-war land tenure and post-war land distribution of the entire country were unsuccessful.

<sup>16</sup> The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's *A Dictionary of Units of Measurement* indicates: "The length of the varas varie[s], but in Spanish Latin America it [is] generally about 33 inches or a little longer."

<sup>17</sup> *Mojado/a* is slang for wet back, or one who crosses the border *sin papeles* (without papers). This individual was unavailable for an interview.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Edelman and Seglison, "Land Inequality," 453.



a densely populated nation rather than as a mere extension of an urban sphere. An underlying concern involves beach access. The closer the terrestrial acquisitions are to the Pacific Ocean, the more likely entrepreneurs compromise the right of entry to waves. When property fronts the water, they often privatize access points altogether. Privatization requires substantial capital, which means those who benefit most are the local and foreign elite, dominant powers who govern space. In the words of Lefebvre: "Dominated space is usually closed, sterilized, emptied out. The concept attains its full meaning only when it is contrasted with the opposite and inseparable concept of *appropriation*."<sup>19</sup>

Most surfers -- powered by an idealistic belief that riding waves is a freedom, not a privilege -- represent the unalienable notion of access. They utilize aquatic space without permission. Such behavior only reinforces surfing's rebellious persona, forever at odds with its natural-law-abiding counterpart. "A situation of this kind," writes Lefebvre, "exemplifies a spatial practice which, though still immediate, is close, in concrete terms, to the work of art."<sup>20</sup> When surfing persists as a spatial practice, the ocean becomes a canvas of bipolar energy. The surfboard is a technological tool used to create, and each surfed wave produces an "appropriated space [that] resembles a work of art." Until death do they part, dominated and appropriated space are a volatile, married concept trapped in the same theoretical household. Lefebvre contends:

...ideally, at least, they ought to be combined. But history -- which is to say the history of accumulation -- is also the history of their separation and mutual antagonism.<sup>21</sup>

The roots of this conceptual marriage's dysfunction reach down into dominated space's ongoing affair with the privatization of property. Lefebvre writes: "Private space is distinct from, but always connected with, public space." Self-inspired motives aside, surfing is a way in which people participate in a public space. To deny access suggests public space has been abolished in favor of private property. "Not that appropriation disappears, for it cannot," Lefebvre maintains, "both practice and theory continue to proclaim its importance and demand its restitution."<sup>22</sup>

One way to understand the philosophical sociologist's claims is to assess a paradigm of spatiality next door to El Tunco. In El Sunzal, the ramifications of privatizing beach access linger. When wealthy foreigners and Salvadoreños, a.k.a. the land-owning elite, purchase exclusive access to the beach, they set a pay-to-play precedent. The overall perk is that they get the waves all to themselves. By implementing armed security, they militarize their dominated space and effectively thwart appropriation, emerging, once again, as the victor in the battle of co-dependent yet antagonistic concepts. Assumedly, the next step -- perilous on all fronts -- is to establish imaginary boundaries within the ocean to "protect" touristic assets. At this stage, ocean privatization in El Salvador seems unlikely and far-fetched to economist Manuel Cruz, who has worked five years as an official sectorialista (sectoralist official) for the Ministerio de Economía. "Creo que la playa es de todos. Eso no puede 'tax.' / I think the beach is everyone's. That you cannot tax," he says. With support from the Ministerio de Economía, in June 2010 the 50-year-old began working alongside a small group of residents in El Tunco to communicate infrastructural needs to the government. Cruz says officials are aware of the development-related obstacles the town faces. "Lo que pasa es la velocidad que lleva el desarrollo de proyecto no es igual a la velocidad con que el gobierno pueda responder con sus recursos. / What happens is the speed leading the development of the project is not equal to the speed with which the government can respond with its resources."

Furthermore, coastal development that favors restricted beach access via land privatization does not create a "better" reality for all Salvadoreños, nor is it progress. To individuals who insist

<sup>19</sup> Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 165.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



otherwise, "...what [they take] for progress [is] merely a growth in the productive forces, which, so far from solving so-called 'social' and 'political' problems, [is] bound to exacerbate them."<sup>23</sup> This is apparent in El Sunzal. Social tensions percolate beneath the cordial surface of the sleepy surf town. At the turn of the 21st century when development was still relatively sparse here, visitors could drive their vehicles over unpaved terrain, park at the beach, and "surf sin problemas / surf without problems," several interviewees claim. That freedom eroded when Salvadoreño developer and entrepreneur Alfonso Álvarez, 2010 president of Federación Salvadoreña de Surf, purchased a significant stretch of jungle along the coast. He and fellow developer Ernesto Moreno joined forces to build Casa de Mar, which "sits perched on a slope with direct access to the Sunzal beaches just north of La Libertad."<sup>24</sup> The duo also collaborated with two extranjeros who had settled in El Sunzal and owned property adjacent to Casa de Mar. All parties agreed it would be in their best interest to limit access to the ocean and protect their investments from any potential crime activity. They constructed a salmon-colored wall along the perimeter of their hotel, as well as an enormous gate at the end of the once-public road that led both foreign and national surfers to the popular break Sunzal.<sup>25</sup> From 8 a.m. until 6 p.m., Casa de Mar's gate remained open. At sunset, armed security patrolled the area surrounding the locked barrier. Beachgoers would have to "hablar con el dueño de hotel para no tener problemas / talk to the owner of the hotel to avoid problems," says Sunzal local Lilian Esmeralda López Corvera. López Corvera worked for Alvarez for four years and is one of El Salvador's most recognized female competitive surfers.

There were kinks in Alvarez's plan, however. The gate's hours of operation prevented hotel guests from entering grounds in the evening and accessing the break before sunrise, when surfing conditions generally are optimal. Adds López Corvera:

Los gringos que se quedan aquí, bueno, todos se fueron al Tunco porque tenían [algo que hacer], y a las seis de la tarde, nadie podía regresar de las playas. Y a las ocho de la mañana estaba abierto el portón, y nadie podía surfear a las cinco de la mañana. / The gringos who were staying here, well, they all went to El Tunco because they had something to do, and at six in the evening, no one could return from the beaches. And at eight in the morning the gate was open, and no one could surf at five in the morning.

B: ¿Cuándo quieren las olas porque están buenas en esta hora? / When they want the waves because they are good at this time?

LC: Sí, y cuando no hay gente. / Yes, and when there are no people.

Measures to privatize beach access did not sit well with local Salvadoreños either. As López Corvera walks along the mosquito-infested path toward Sunzal, she points to where the gate once existed before a group of people banded together "a while ago" and (with the mayor's approval) allegedly used a tractor to destroy it. This is just one way in which Salvadoreños contest the privatization phenomenon. No one knows who brought down the barrier, López Corvera maintains. What concerns her is that wealthy entrepreneurs seem more eager than ever to cater to affluent foreigners. Yet unlike El Tunco, López Corvera says the majority of El Sunzal's visitors are Salvadoreños, and most cannot afford a night's stay in an oceanfront resort like Alvarez and Moreno's.

<sup>23</sup> Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 82.

<sup>24</sup> Gateway El Salvador. Casa de Mar Hotel & Villas at Sunzal El Salvador: [http://gatewayelsalvador.com/gateway\\_el\\_salvador\\_hotels\\_casa\\_de\\_mar.html](http://gatewayelsalvador.com/gateway_el_salvador_hotels_casa_de_mar.html). Accessed July 20, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Although the exact time remains uncertain, it is likely these events transpired sometime around 2003 when Casa de Mar opened.



The hypothetical consequences for towns that are left with enclaves of privatized surfing are as follows: Over time, the number of public, "free" avenues to access the ocean will decrease, and the amount of pay-to-park lots (already existent in El Tunco) and privatized beaches will increase. Eventually, visiting the ocean may cost too much for the low- to no-income masses, presuming it does not already. Imposed parking fees create an additional financial burden. Either that or access will disappear completely. In the end, the surrounding area of El Tunco's beach-access landscape could end up looking similar to the United States' coastal terrain:

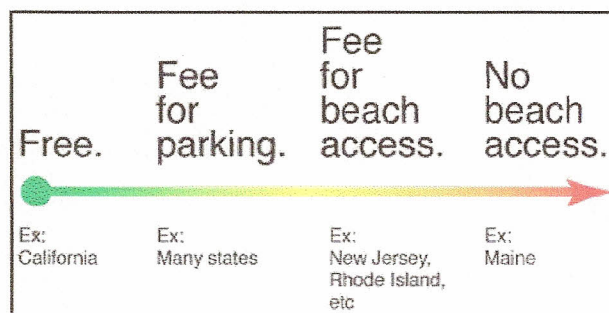


Figure 1.1: This model representing various degrees of beach access in the United States could characterize El Salvador's coastal landscape in years to come. Image courtesy of an article from The Surfrider Foundation featured on The Inertia.com.

## Conclusion

The amount of information about El Salvador's surfcape that remains undisclosed seems as immense as the ocean itself. One thing is certain: The future is unwritten, uncertain yet potentially promising for Salvadoreños who recognize surfing as a business. The land grab for coastal property near quality surf breaks poses three major threats, however. The first is environmental destruction due to tourism and manufacturing. El Salvador's track record in preserving its natural environment in comparison to other Central American countries (namely Costa Rica) is suspect and requires more in-depth analysis.<sup>26</sup> All appropriate governmental agencies must continue to foster and implement a model of eco-minded tourism despite challenging economic conditions and big-business resistance. If they fail to do this, the country's wave resources will suffer.

The second threat involves property laws that privilege the elite. When coastal development runs amok, beach laws become totally inadequate -- as the case of El Sunzal demonstrates. Lefebvre's insight is the intellectual balm for chapped discussions about spatiality in surfing. On-the-ground research shows that privatizing access points to popular breaks aggravates social tensions and perpetuates problems that maintain rather than change stratified landscapes. On multiple accounts, tourism serves as a culprit. Yet the historical theme remains the same: It is a recycled version of land-tenure and class-relation issues that were pertinent during the civil war and even earlier, going back to the extension of haciendas at the expense of small farmers in the late nineteenth century. El Salvador has an opportunity to learn from its past conflicts and combine public beach access with expanding tourism. Governmental support, improved property rights, and endorsement from la Corporación Salvadoreña de Turismo are essential.

<sup>26</sup> According to *Lonely Planet: central america on a shoestring*: In 2004, "With the highest level of environmental damage in the Americas, El Salvador [ran] the risk of losing its beauty. [...] High population density remains the principle obstacle to the regeneration of ecosystems. [...] The most visible problem is trash. ... Industrial development and construction are currents threats to the environment" (2004, 274).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Brie Iatarola:** Brie Iatarola graduated from Arizona State University summa cum laude with honors and has a degree in journalism. She learned to surf while she was an undergraduate exchange student at the Universidad de Costa Rica. After ditching the desert to work as an assistant news editor in San Diego, California, she quit her job two years later and moved to Panama. There, she competed in contests sponsored by the Asociación Latinoamericana de Surfistas Profesionales. Witnessing the economic and cultural effects of the global surf industry in Central America eventually inspired her to return to graduate school. She holds a master's degree in Latin American Studies from the University of California, San Diego, and is currently pursuing her doctorate in Communication.