



Surfriders: Riding the Waves, Keeping Them Clean

By Trevor Buckley, Science Interchange Reporter

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Who wants to go to a beach and get sick because of bacteria-infested sewage spills, or sit in someone else's litter washed up on the sand? In the past year, many of California's beaches were closed multiple times because of pollution, and beaches face other problems, including erosion and basic ecosystem threats. One organization working to preserve oceans and beaches and to keep them clean is the Surfrider Foundation, from monitoring beaches to simply picking up trash.

Surfrider members, many of whom are surfers, are "dedicated to the protection and enjoyment of the world's oceans, waves and beaches for all people, through conservation, activism, research and education," as the organization's mission statement says. Founded in 1984, Surfrider is run entirely by volunteers. The nonprofit group has almost 60 chapters in the United States (plus several international affiliates) and about 30,000 members worldwide. Two chapters of Surfrider are active locally, in Marin and San Francisco.

The Marin chapter has its own water testing equipment for detecting bacteria, which Surfrider members can borrow to check local beaches for water conditions. Past epidemiological studies (conducted by the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project in Southern California) have shown that swimmers are more likely to get respiratory diseases and other illnesses from viruses and other disease-causing organisms in contaminated water, from storm runoff carried by sewage drains to the sea.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, most beach closures reported nationwide in 2001 were due to elevated bacterial levels. Recent numbers for Marin's beaches are not available, but the illnesses reported by the county health department from possible water-borne diseases have numbered only a handful over the last five years.

Another of the Marin chapter's main concerns is the preservation of the Bolinas Lagoon. The lagoon is filling in with sediment, and restoring it for environmental quality and recreational use could cost up to \$101 million, according to the Army Corps of Engineers, released a report of restoration options this summer.

The San Francisco chapter has four core programs. "Respect the Beach," an education program, sends Surfrider members into local schools to teach children about what they can do to help preserve the environment. Another program, the Blue Water Task Force, is a water-quality monitoring, education and advocacy program that measures the cleanliness of ocean water in the San Francisco Bay and along Marin county beaches.

San Francisco Surfrider also runs a program called Beachscape, where once every month, volunteers map where erosion is taking place on local beaches. The maps and data will provide a baseline for predicting and preventing future erosion.

The San Francisco chapter's fourth core program is a monthly beach cleanup that takes place at Ocean Beach, along the Great Highway in San Francisco. The beach cleanup events are a good way for members of the surrounding community to get involved with environmental restoration.

"Usually the second-to-last Sunday of every month we're up and down Ocean Beach cleaning up and just picking up trash, and that's open to everybody," said Christina Rohall, the secretary and treasurer of the San Francisco Surfrider chapter.

"People from all over the Bay Area and tourists from around the world visit Ocean Beach," said Mike Paquet, the environmental project director at Surfrider, who says that the entire Bay Area can have an impact on that beach.

Ocean Beach has always had a problem with trash, sometimes despite cleanup efforts by Surfrider and others, but that is not a measure of the success of their program, Paquet said. "The true value of our monthly beach cleanups are to make people aware of the problem and educate them to some of the problems facing Ocean Beach," he says, as well as bringing together people who have a common interest in environmental restoration.

During last month's Coastal Cleanup Day, over 36,000 volunteers joined together to pick up more than half a million pounds of trash—plus over 100,000 pounds of recyclable material from California's beaches. The annual event occurs every September, on the third weekend of the month, and is organized by the Ocean Conservancy and the California Coastal Commission.

Imagine what a difference it would make to pick up trash more regularly. Rohall says that she encourages anyone interested who cannot attend the monthly Surfrider events to do beach cleanups themselves on any beach they visit. "If you're out there, and, you see garbage, just pick it up," she said. "Every little bit that you pick up helps out, not only the beauty, but also the quality of the beach and just the quality of life basically."

RESOURCES

To find out about the yearly California coastal cleanup event: www.coastal.ca.gov/ or call 1-800-COAST-4U.

For a listing of COASTWEEKS events: www.coastal.ca.gov/publiced/pendx.html

State of the Beach for information on beach health: www.surfrider.org/stateofthebeach/index.htm

The Marin and San Francisco chapter web pages: www.surfrider.org/marin/ and www.sfsurfrider.org

For the next Surfrider Marin chapter meeting: www.surfrider.org/marin/2_meeting.htm or call chairperson Scott Tye at (415) 868-9445.