MALIBU
WORLD SURFING RESERVE
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The Last, Best Place In Southern California.

Call it what you will—Malibu rules. I’m from Santa Cruz originally and I’m not supposed to love L.A., but Malibu is hard to argue with. I spend a lot of time paddling around at First Point at Surfrider Beach, and every time I take to the water and look up into all those empty, desert hills and that relentless blue sky, then look down and see leopard sharks and stingrays gliding through kelp as thick and healthy as the hair on George Clooney’s head, I feel the same way I feel when I am fishing the Lamar River in north Yellowstone: Somebody deserves a medal for not screwing this place up.

In Yellowstone it’s Theodore Roosevelt. Carve his head into Mount Rushmore! It’s already there? Carve it again! Around Malibu, the list of those who have fought to protect it go back as far as May Knight Rindge in the early 1900s. She inherited all of Rancho Malibu and a fortune from her husband Frederick Rindge. She could have cashed out and lived like a queen, but instead, she went forward with her husband’s wish to preserve the land as a private domain to be enjoyed only by family and friends. Mrs. Rindge invested a great deal of that wealth in court in an attempt to block public access, ultimately taking the case to the United States Supreme Court. Yes, it’s your private property, the Supreme Court ruled. No, the public doesn’t really have a right to trespass with a highway. But, tough beans. Eminent domain. Get up with the Native Americans. More recently, Malibu has had a lot of backers public and private—from Barbra Streisand to Ozzie Silna to Jefferson “Zuma Jay” Wagner—who have had the respect and foresight to fight off the creep of urban and suburban gack, those “avenues of horror,” as Víctor Gruen put it in 1954, “flanked by the greatest collection of vulgarity—billboards, motels, gas stations, shanties, car lots, miscellaneous industrial equipment, hot dog stands, wrapole stores—ever collected by mankind.”

Oxnard to the northwest, the San Fernando Valley to the north, Santa Monica/Venice to the east—Malibu is beset on three sides by traffic, population density, delays, billboards, and vulgarity. Surfing at Malibu and looking east, you can see the edge of a landscape swarming with the legions of the unjazzed: 20 million souls crammed to 2,500 people per square mile, all the way to Mexico. The population density of Malibu is 260 people per square mile, and it feels that way. It feels good.

Malibu has protectors but it needs all the help it can get. The World Surfing Reserve is another step toward man not tearing asunder what creation so nicely put together.
World Surfing Reserves (WSR) is an effort to identify and preserve the world’s most outstanding surf zones and their surrounding habitats. Drawing upon models established by UNESCO’s World Heritage Program and National Surfing Reserve Australia, WSR’s board of international experts forges partnerships with local surfers and environmentalists to select, enshrine, and help protect valuable and historic surf spots. Each WSR goes through four phases: nomination, selection, enshrinement, and management. Eligibility is based on a strict set of criteria: quality and consistency of the waves within the surf zone; the area’s environmental richness and fragility; the spot’s broader significance to surf culture and history; and local community support. Once a site has been selected and prioritized, the WSR board helps locals form a council to draft a management plan that will enable them to act as ongoing stewards of the reserve. World Surfing Reserves is first and foremost a public-awareness program—a way to communicate the essential value of a surf break to its local community and the rest of the world. Each WSR is also designed to provide locals with a well-publicized tool they can use to protect their favorite surf spot for decades and centuries to come.
Malibu has been selected as the first World Surfing Reserve because of the stellar quality of its waves, the seminal role it played in the birth of modern surf culture, the rich biological characteristics of its besieged inland wetlands, and the protective galaxy of locals caught in its gravitational field.

The waves at Malibu represent California pointbreak surf at its finest. For decades, dating back to the 1920s, surfers worldwide regarded its long, peeling righthand walls as the very definition of a “perfect” wave. Soon after the sport of kings puddle-jumped from Hawaii to the West Coast, Malibu became Ground Zero for California’s mushrooming surf culture. “Malibu is the exact spot on earth where ancient surfing became modern surfing,” Paul Gross once wrote. Gidget, the book and movie that helped lure hordes of newcomers to the sport, was set here. The shapers who designed the first high-performance surfboards (Bob Simmons, Joe Quigg, and Matt Kivlin, among others) conceived their revolutionary prototypes here. Miki Dora, the mid-century icon who still stands as surfing’s preeminent anti-establishment hero, learned to walk the nose here.

Surfrider Beach at Malibu and the surrounding area is part of a complex ecosystem that includes the Malibu Creek watershed and Malibu Lagoon—the sediment from which created the point that sculpts Malibu’s machine-like waves. The entire area—from the surfline to the lagoon to the creek’s inland reaches—is rich in flora and fauna. Dolphins romp in the surf. Pickleweed blossoms in the brackish wetlands. Black-necked stilts feed in the mudflats. Endangered southern steelhead spawn in the lagoon. Chaparral and sage scrub thrives upstream.

The community surrounding Malibu and the surf break is active and engaged, comprised of recreational and professional surfers, surf clubs, environmental groups, and other community organizations. The break is a source of pride and identity for locals, and the beach there serves as a de facto town hall for residents and visitors alike.
Hammered into place, the two surfers stripped down to their trunks, unloaded their boards, picked their way across the rocky beach, hit the water, and stroked two miles up toward a big sandy cobblestone-lined point. The point itself was formed by an ancient geologic section again, then move into a zone just down from the creek mouth, where the point bends almost due east. An impressive if somewhat temperamental wave so far, here it wraps itself into the cove (better known as “First Point”) and becomes the foundational Malibu wave of legend—the curl unspooling for two hundred yards along a neat line so precise and well-tapered that it looks surveyed. At Malibu, the point itself is a small, intimate, well-designed surfing theater. Its waves are generally two to four feet, and all but married to the north wind. Nothing else so far has presented itself with such a squared-up and slightly elevated view of the incoming waves. The Santa Monica Mountains slope down to the highway, and in the mornings, as offshore winds move northbound travelers have a beautiful sight, but also I could watch and see how the boards just buried in the curl, and first of all it was just through the canyons and across the beach, the long levels like sharing. Malibu Pier frames the setting to the southeast, and the beach has been connected to Malibu Lagoon, a few hundred yards to the north, by a long sandy cove.

Reid and Blake had brought, and it was left to postwar surfers to ride an ever-expanding selection of breaks. Great adventure could be had with just an hour or two’s worth of travel.

In the fall of 1927, Tom Blake and Sam Reid, both Santa Monica Hillsbomans, lead their boards into the rambler seat of Blake’s Essex roadster and drove a few miles north to look for what was rumored to be a good wave on a private tract of land known as the Rancho Malibu. Everyone in Southern California at that time wanted access to Malibu. The Rancho itself, originally a 13,300-acre Spanish land grant, was owned by May Knight Rindge, and the imperious “Queen of Malibu.” For the better part of the 1920s or ’30s, but it was made to order for postwar surfers who first wanted to ride on a higher, faster line, and then wanted to swing up and down across that line.

Bob Simmons, Joe Quigg, Matt Kivlin—the hot California shapers all made their boards with Malibu in mind. “Malibu was the test track,” recalled boardmaker Dale Velzy. “I’d paddle out and see a guy on one of my boards just barrel in the curl, and first of all it was just a beautiful sight, but also I could watch and see how the board was working. ‘Look at that rail, it’s really biting in;’” that kind of thing.”

Malibu wasn’t so much a surfing location as it was a small, intimate, well-designed surfing theater.
In 1952, after putting his business on hold for a year to live in Hawaii, Velzy opened his second shop. By 1954, Woodcraft was a family tradition, and Velzy earned enough money as a backyard boardmaker that he could in fact flourish—without formal organizations. For surfers, brief public nudity and forms of mild social rebellion—much of the surfer stylebook was drafted at Santa Monica Mountains between yourself and the rest of the world was to put the sport’s performance standard was now being set backpedaled. In a complete turnaround from the 1930s, surfers no longer showed any interest in organizing the sport through clubs or competitions. Wave-riding, along with endless association with fellow surfers, could stand up—without formal organizations. Surfing was now an activity that could be had for better and worse. by the end of the decade, he had become the show. Surfers got attention by riding the point like Sinatra finger-popping a solo. Weber pounded it out like everybody was doing. nonconformity, of course, had a fault, and there was a new cachet in not doing what was expected. nonconformity was now a hallmark of modern surfing ever since Tom Blake, who sailed as far from the shores of convention as Dora or Tracy. blake, though, was a surfing proselytizer who wanted everyone to enjoy what he experienced. Through their Malibu mantis pointage, surfers were no longer bound by the confines of respectability. in the summer of 1956, using driftwood and palm fronds, Tracy built a 12-by-12-foot shack halfway up first Point, just to have a shaded place to drink beer in the afternoon. Not long after it was completed, it was turned into a sort of interior with empty wine bottles and pennants, and became a headquarters. in the summer of 1956, using driftwood and palm fronds, Tracy built a 12-by-12-foot shack halfway up first Point, just to have a shaded place to drink beer in the afternoon. Not long after it was completed, it was turned into a sort of interior with empty wine bottles and pennants, and became a headquarters. This was a new kind of surfing eccentricities. Wave-riding was great, Tracy thought, but the important thing was the beach ambience. For the rest of the fifteen years that Velzy turned grayer and his feet moved faster.

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Dora + Malibu = a TragiC lovE STory

Miki Dora never felt connected to Malibu. He was just a beachhead...as could be equally comical. For the Malibu morning surf check, build up out of his car in Venice white, or a smoking jacket, or a black leather Rain trenchoat. Finishing a ride, a surf walk back up the point having had his head by the fire, the firing the wave died over the sand and rocks. "Nothing dofthat," below Malibu surfer Bob Cooper recalled. "You treated this weapon with respect. You put it under your arm or on your head."

Despite those tighter moments, Dora's outlook was intentionally, even apocalyptically grim. He wouldn't come into full bloom for another five years, when he perfectly rode surf media's opening wave to become the sport's first and greatest athletes. But by the late 190s it was already an article of faith with Dora that surfing, and Southern California, and the world in general, were all being dominated by a vast and conspiratorial range of forces, and that Malibu—"my perfect wave," site of "my cherished days," as Dora put it in a noncombative moment of reflection—had been the first place to fall.
sagebrush, and the giant coreopsis are just few examples of coastal oaks, California buckwheat, black sage, and California dry summers—supports several plant communities.

Mediterranean climate–mild, wet winters and warm, dry summers—supports several plant communities. Its numerous plants and animals depend on the Malibu Lagoon. The surf break is located at the mouth of Malibu Creek, one of the second largest watersheds in Santa Monica Bay. While development and other actions have increased the number of beachgoers, thanks to the counties, tracts of nearby land controlled by the conservation-minded interests mentioned above.

Malibu and all its beauty was formed from the sediment flowing out of the Malibu Creek watershed during periods of heavy runoff. The influx of new sediment replaces sediment eroded due to wave action and coastal currents, helping to maintain the smooth bottom contour of the break. Kelp forests to the west and south provide homes for garibaldi (California’s state fish), green moray eels, horn sharks, octopus, lobsters, and numerous other species, many with commercial importance. Kelp also acts as a wind-wave blocker, smoothing out the water’s surface to help maintain the incredible shape of Malibu’s waves.

The Malibu Lagoon provides vital habitat for more than 100 species of birds, including several endangered and threatened species. Like more than 50 percent of California’s historical coastal wetlands that have been filled or drained, Malibu Lagoon’s remaining 30 acres are a fraction of what it once was. This extensive loss makes what remains of the lagoon even more valuable as wildlife habitat. A sand island in the lagoon provides area where steelhead trout (California’s state fish) spawn. Kelp also acts as a wind-wave blocker, smoothing out the water’s surface to help maintain the incredible shape of Malibu’s waves.

The faMouS MalIbu SurfrIder beach is a south–facing, cobble–and–sand pointbreak roughly seven miles east of the city of Malibu. The natural beauty of the area is well–documented. It sits at the base of Eco–acres Malibu Creek State Park (part of the 190,000–acre Santa Monica National Recreation Area), and the 20–acre Malibu Lagoon State Beach, which includes the historic, recently restored Malibu Pier. These are part of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, a state agency that acquires land in the Santa Monica Mountains to preserve as open space for recreation and wildlife protection.

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If Surfers Won’t Save the World, who will? Obama? The G20? The United Nations? Is there some other global network of alert, persistent, environmentally aware individuals who are similarly trained in the art of navigating variables, overcoming adversity, and appreciating the rarities of perfection? Who else will do the work? Who else will uphold the vision?

It’s pretty ironic. Surfing is all about getting away from the constraints of society, of breaking free and committing to the rule of natural law—the physics of wave form, the glide. Surfers are conversant with the wild, in touch with the natural world at a time when the natural world is increasingly remote from most people on the planet.

and yet here we are, using words like “criteria” and “nomination” and “enshrinement” and “stewardship.” Creating a chain of World Surfing Reserves may not in itself save the world, but it’s a step in that direction. By acknowledging the worth of a wave and its environs, we open communication between disparate parties that might not otherwise become engaged. And once communication begins, who knows where it will lead?

A WSR says that the global community hereby values this place, right here, and intends to hold it sacred for as long as the waves break and the tides cycle. A WSR increases the chances of environmental synergy, integrating the principles of preservation, sustainability, stewardship, and cultural celebration. It permanently erects a surf spot with an intrinsic (and globally acknowledged) importance that locals already understand but may not be able to articulate.

The WSR says that these people—representing a global community of like-minded individuals—hereby value this place, right here, and intend to hold it sacred for as long as the waves break and the tides cycle. In other words, each local monument is a symbol for the greater monument that is the worldwide network of World Surfing Reserves, dedicated forward for the benefit of present and future generations.

Over time threats will come, one by one, to all of the world’s great surf spots, and over time, again and again, they will be compromised. And in the end, the enshrinements we make now may be the deciding factor that saves a beach or a surf spot or a park … or just a jewel of the natural world.

World Surfing Reserves is about surfers saving the world, one wave at a time. And while it may not guarantee that a beach or a wave will be saved, it does forever commemorate the global surfing community’s demand that it must be.

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For more information on World Surfing Reserves and to support the WSR initiative, please visit worldsurfingreserves.org or contact Save The Waves Coalition at info@savethewaves.org.

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