SANTA CRUZ
WORLD SURFING RESERVE
This book is dedicated to the Santa Cruz Surfing Museum and its many volunteers, who since 1986 have devoted themselves to honoring local surf history by collecting and displaying an engaging and educational array of videos, print media, surfboards, wetsuits and other artifacts. Housed in the Mark Abbott Memorial Lighthouse, overlooking the legendary waves of Steamer Lane, the museum preserves Santa Cruz’s rich surfing heritage for future generations.
A LIQUID PLAYGROUND
BY RICHARD SCHMIDT

Growing up in Santa Cruz as a surfer was an incredibly fortunate experience. I rode my first waves at the Rivermouth on an inflatable mat, along with my parents and three brothers. This was back before Body Boards, and some days there’d be so many surfers that the waves would roll in with a rhythmic beat, creating a sort of up-and-down atmosphere. In the years since, I’ve been fortunate enough to travel and surf around the world, but regardless of where I go, I always look forward to coming home. No matter who you are, Santa Cruz has a wave that will fit your ability. They may not break every day, but almost all of them can produce world-class swells when conditions come together.

The most consistent breaks are along the two major points: Steamer Lane and Pleasure Point. Many times I’ve searched for surf north and south of town only to find that the best waves around were right under my nose at the Lane. My friends and I affectionately call it Hoovers Point (as in the vacuum) because of the way it sucks up any swell—north, west, south, or any combination thereof. The innermost spot at the Lane, Cowell’s, is one of the world’s best beginner breaks, where waist-high waves will taper a quarter mile over a forgiving sand bottom. Up the point a bit, Indicators offers long, carveable walls for up-and-coming rippers to draw whatever lines they choose. The spinget right-hand at Peak, the stumpy little bowl with a wall at First Peak, the long, Trestles-like waves from Second Peak, and the longboard-friendly rollers of 38th Avenue (which can transform into a riffing barrel on a big south swell). Beyond that you’ll wonder, ‘What’s up with Capitola, especially on a pumping swell?’

The waves here don’t have as much power as the Lane, but they make up for it with the huge range of choices: the drop-shot rights at Peak, the snappy little bowl with a wall at First Peak, the long, Trestles-like waves from Second Peak, and the longboard-friendly rollers of 38th Avenue (which can transform into a rifling barrel on a big south swell). Beyond that you’ll wonder, ‘What’s up with Capitola, especially on a pumping swell?’

Across town, Pleasure Point also serves up a smorgasbord of options with an army of groovy crews from Sewer Peak to Capitola. The waves here don’t have as much power as the Lane, but they make up for it with the huge range of choices: the drop-shot rights at Peak, the long, Trestles-like waves from Second Peak, and the longboard-friendly rollers of 38th Avenue (which can transform into a rifling barrel on a big south swell). Beyond that you’ll wonder, ‘What’s up with Capitola, especially on a pumping swell?’

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From a geographic perspective, it’s almost as if nature designed the coast of Santa Cruz specifically for surfers to enjoy. While the prevailing wind blows from the northwest, most of the town’s beaches face south. This means that when spots north and south are blown ragged by the breeze, the waves in Santa Cruz, with its chop-controlling kelp, are often glassy or groomed by offshore winds.

As a surfer, father and devoted local, I’ve been lucky enough to travel and surf around the world. But regardless of where I go, I always look forward to coming home. It’s incredible to think of all the great surf spots scattered between Natural Bridges and New Brighton. No matter who you are, Santa Cruz has a wave that will fit your ability. They may not break every day, but almost all of them can produce world-class swells when conditions come together.

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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 Reserves 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 spots for decades and centuries to come.

WHAT IS A WORLD SURFING RESERVE?
Santa Cruz has earned the sheltered status of a World Surfing Reserve because of its diverse mix of surf breaks, its pervasive and deep-rooted surf culture, and its thriving but fragile coldwater habitat.

Most surfers who’ve spent any time in Santa Cruz agree that the quality, consistency and aesthetic appeal of its waves make it the best all-around surf town in the continental United States. The reserve’s seven miles of serrated coast features more than a dozen quality spots—from one of the West Coast’s best beginner breaks to a heaving deepwater peak where big-wave legends train. The wave array of points, reefs and beachbreaks suck in Pacific swells from all directions, and the prevailing winds blow favorably year-round.

Santa Cruz’s surf roots date back to 1885, when three Hawaiian princes rode hand-hewn redwood planks in waves breaking near the San Lorenzo Rivermouth—the first documented surf session on the American mainland. A small but devoted core of local surfers kept the sport alive through the first half of the 20th Century, but it wasn’t until surf fever swept from coast to coast in the 1960s that surfing became forever woven into the very fabric of the community. In the decades since, innovative Santa Cruz surfers and manufacturers—from wetsuit designers to surfboard shapers—have influenced wave riders worldwide.

Today, Santa Cruz is home to thousands of surfers, many of whom are devoted to protecting the coast from the ongoing threats of coastal developers and inland polluters. The success of these coastal stewards is evident to anyone who ventures near the coast here on a day when the sun is out, the wind is right, and a solid swell is running. From Natural Bridges to Capitola, the surf zone buzzes with hundreds of shortboarders and longboarders, groms and geozers, heroes and kooks—all vying for sets in the cool, green, kelp-rich sea.
A long time ago, in a decade far, far away, during a time called the Nineties, the City of Santa Cruz got wrapped up in a silly-sarcastic debate with the City of Huntington Beach over which town deserved the official title of Surf City. Huntington Beach had its arguments. Santa Cruz had its arguments. In the end, the SoCal town prevailed, but not due to a lack of strength on Santa Cruz’s side.

Anyone who knows anything understands that Huntington Beach has history on its side—from King Carlos to Chuck Dori to the Op Pro to Bert Simpson. But anyone who knows anything also knows that Santa Cruz has the turf on its side—and no small amount of history: from 19th Century Hawaiian princes to 21st Century vermin.

The surfing coast of Santa Cruz faces south, and the boundaries of the World Surfing Reserve (from Natural Bridges to Opal Cliffs) encompass about six miles of that coast as the seagull flies, and maybe a mile farther as the Prius drives. They are six or seven miles of that coast as the seagull flies, and maybe a mile farther as the Prius drives. In the end, the sun that arcs from Salinas to the green flash. It sits with its feet in the cool of the Pacific Ocean and its face in the sand that area from Salinas to the green flash. And almost exactly in the middle of the Santa Cruz World Surfing Reserve, at the mouth of the San Lorenzo River, is where a big piece of California surf history went down. On July 19, 1885, in the waves that broke at the east end of what is now called Main Beach, three Hawaiian princes were the first people in mainland America to see “surfboard swimming” or plans of wood.

The three princes—Jonah, David, and Edward—were the adopted sons of the Hawaiian monarchs, King David Kalakaua and his wife, Queen Consort Emma Julia Kapiʻōlani. They'd come to California to study at Saint Matthews Hall, a military school in San Mateo. Apparently homesick, they shaped redwood planks from a local lumber mill into rideable boards, thoroughly exposed to every burp and billow coming from the miraculous miles of fractal coastline, thoroughly exposed to every burp and billow coming from the miraculous miles of fractal coastline, thoroughly exposed to every burp and billow coming from the miraculous miles of fractal coastline. They planted redwood planks from a local lumber mill into rideable boards, thoroughly exposed to every burp and billow coming from the miraculous miles of fractal coastline.

The northwest winds which rake the rest of Central California much of the year hit south, southwest, west, northwest, and even north.

The three princes to 21st Century vermin.

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In Santa Cruz, the ‘50s were a colder shade of golden. The big, heavy hardwoods that went so well at Cowell’s were phased out by the balsa chips coming up from Southern California, and then by foam. Boards were down to 9 feet and 30 pounds—enough to support a man but light enough to allow women and kids to pick up the sport. The shorter, more maneuverable boards opened up new spots and new possibilities, from Mitchell’s Cove to the Wild Hook: long, peeling, high-performance waves that were perfect for the surfing and surfboards of the time.

Santa Cruz surfing is all about variety, and during the 1950s, local surfers like the Van Dyke brothers, Mike Winterburn, George Olson, and a happy few others were joined by southerners like Ricky Grigg and Peter Cole—who were in school at Stanford—and Pat Curren, Buzzy Trent and other future big-wave legends from down south who loved the muscular walls of Santa Cruz. Big days at Steamer Lane were considered a master’s degree before going to Hawaii for a PhD in the “heavies. ”

In 1959, Jack O’Neill laid one of the cornerstones of the surf industrial complex when he moved his family and his small but growing wetsuit business from San Francisco to Santa Cruz, where the weather was better and the surf friendlier. O’Neill’s original product was neoprene-lined bathing trunks he made to keep from freezing his balls off while bodysurfing Ocean Beach. Now in Santa Cruz, O’Neill moved into long Johns, short Johns and jackets. “I was just trying to support my family,” he would later say. O’Neill had good timing, because 1959 was the year Columbia Pictures’ Gidget looked back at the Golden Years around Malibu and effectively ended them, lighting the fuse of surf culture that would explode in the 1960s. While most of the surf culture boom of the ’60s was focused on Southern California—the Beach Boys, Jan and Dean, Malibu and even Huntington Beach—the surfing population also grew in Santa Cruz, and with it came shops, manufacturers, clubs and contests.

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they emerged as arguably the best all-around crew of surfers in California—using the natural skatepark of their town’s many points to work on their aerial surfing into the 1990s, the Vermin led the charge at Mavericks, pushing the limits deeper and bigger. They were joined by a string of young watermen who couldn’t have been more smooth. Jay Moriarity was a longboarder, an Eastsider, and he didn’t even have a funny nickname. On a giant day at Mavericks in 1994, Jay paddled straight into the bowl, took off on the first wave that came his way, and launched himself into history, straight into the bowl, took off on the first wave that came his way, and launched himself into history, coming to symbolize the new breed of hard-charging crew of local women—including Jamilah Star, Jenny Useldinger and Savannah Shaughnessy—who are now riding a path blazed by the likes of Brenda Scott Rogers, Jane McKenzie and Karen Gallagher.

Going all the way back to those Hawaiian princes first to ride hand-carved redwood planks in front of well-dressed beachgoers, the Santa Cruz Surf Museum opened—the first of its kind in the U.S. mainland. That opening is symbolic, because today Santa Cruz stands as a world leader in several crucial facets of surf culture: big-wave bravery, small-wave trickery, surfboard innovation, and cold-water protection. It’s a greatness that Santa Cruz surfers have been upholding for more than a century now, and one that—their—and the world—have now dedicated themselves to forever preserving by declaring its shores a World Surfing Reserve.
Natural Bridges, or “NB’s” as it’s sometimes called, is as picturesque as a surf spot gets. Long fingers of flat, rocky reef bend northwest swells into well-shaped walls that range from playful to intimidating. On shore, birdwatchers compete with UC Santa Cruz Banana Slugs for towel space on the pristine white-sand beach. At higher tides, the inside section of the wave can produce a slurpy barrel that breaks over a shallow section of reef called the Tabletop, where faltering surfers often end up on dry rock faster than you can say “Westside pride.”

Type of wave: Righthand reef-point.
Bottom type: Rock reef with sand mixed in on the inside.
Best tide: Medium to full.
Wave conditions: From W to NW swells.
Wind conditions: Prefers little to no wind, stronger NW winds blow it out.
Wave height: 3 to 15 feet.
Surf type: Semi-challenging to reef grinder.
Surfing ability: Advanced.

The Santa Cruz World Surfing Reserve encompasses more than 20 surf spots, from soft user-friendly rollers to heaving black-diamond peaks. Here’s a look at five of the most legendary.
STEAMER LANE

Steamer Lane was named for the steamships that would thread their way through its offshore reefs during the 1880s. It has been Santa Cruz’s central surf spot for more than 70 years now, and is one of California’s most consistent spots, comprised of four different breaks. The Point is directly under the Lighthouse and is best on a summer south or southwest swell. Lost boards almost invariably bash into the rocks at the Lane, which is why the surf leash was invented here. The Slot is a right section on the inside of the Point, and is an excellent performance wave. Middle Peak is a two-way peak that breaks farther out on big swells, with a meaty left and softer right. It’s a shifty, powerful, challenging wave that many have used as a preparation for Hawaii and Mavericks. All of the big, disorganized energy washing in from Middle Peak rolls forward and re-forms into a long performance wall at Indicators. A perfect wave for modern, high-performance surfing, Indicators will also throw out a round barrel when it’s in the mood.

Type of wave: Right reef and point, with a left at Middle Peak.
Bottom type: Kelpy rock reef, with occasional sandbars as the seasons and tides ebb and flow.
Best tide: In general, a lower tide coming up is best, although usually surfable on most tides.
Wave conditions: From S to SW to W/NW/N swells; extremely consistent.
Wind conditions: Prevailing northwest wind blows offshore; east and south winds blow onshore.
Wave height: 1 to 15 feet plus.
Surf type: Gentle to thunderous.
Surfing ability: Intermediate to advanced.
On the inside of Lighthouse Point sits Cowell’s—one of the best beginner breaks in the world, possibly second only to Waikiki. It’s not uncommon to find as many as 200 people in the water on a nice day: locals, visitors, Banana Slugs, Vortens, Vals, surf schools, rippers, trippers, SUPers, grommets and surfagenarians. Cowell’s has been the incubator for Santa Cruz surfing since the 1920s. Its long, easy rollers were perfect for the unwieldy hardwood boards of the early 20th Century, and in the intervening decades many generations of Santa Cruz surfers have taken their first steps here before branching out to Steamer Lane, Pleasure Point, the Hook and beyond.

**Type of wave:** Soft, user-friendly rights.

**Bottom type:** Sand with some rock reef.

**Best tide:** In general, the lower the tide the better.

**Wave conditions:** From SW to W/NW/N swells; normally needs larger swells to break.

**Wind conditions:** Mostly protected from prevailing northwest wind; east and south winds blow onshore.

**Wave height:** 1 to 6 feet.

**Surf type:** Gentle.

**Surfing ability:** Beginner heaven.
PLEASURE POINT

Pleasure Point concentrates a variety of breaks over a third of a mile of kelpy rock reef. A consistent wave that is open to swell from just about any direction, the point offers something for everyone. At the top, Rockview/Suicides is a right breaking off rocks into a sandy cove. Sewer Peak is the Black Diamond spot—a fast body tight and a gnarly left off the main, powerful peak. Sewer Peak isn’t the longest wave along Pleasure Point, but it’s the most challenging and also the most competitive. First Peak is a longer, high-performance wave with a tight takeoff area and a mix of aggressive shortboarders and performance longboarders. Second Peak is a longboarder’s paradise and also a good place for intermediate surfers to work on their skills without getting in everyone’s way. On big days there is a Third Peak, and on the biggest days it is possible to ride a wave from outside First Peak all the way through to the wave known as Insides or 38th Avenue. On small days, 38th Avenue is a gentle beginner wave, but on bigger days, it transforms into a high-performance shortboard haven.

Type of wave: Right point and reef breaks.
Bottom type: Kelpy rock reef, with sandbars that come and go.
Best tide: Medium tides are generally best, although usually surfable at most tides.
Wave conditions: From SW to W/NW/NW on the nose, consistent.
Wind conditions: The northwest winds blow side-offshore, although strong NW stacks can blow out the top of the point. Thick kelp outside the breaks provide significant wind protection.
Wave height: 1 to 15 feet.
Surf Type: Easy to semi-gnarly and everything between.
Surfing ability: Beginners to superstars.
Back in the ’50s, or maybe it was the ’60s, this spot at the end of 41st Avenue became known as the Wild Hook. Some say that name came from the fast, curling waves that were a challenge to the longboards of the day. Others say the name came from the thick kelp that would “hook” the deep skegs of the time. Regardless, what modern surfers now know as the Hook is the top of a point that runs all the way down to Capitola. That entire point is divided into the Hook, Shark’s Cove, Privates and Trest. The Hook itself has three breaks: First Peak, Second Peak and Third Peak. What was a beloved longboard wave in the 1960s is now a beloved performance wave for 21st Century shortboarders, but longboarders like it, too. Alaia flyers crave the place, because without fins, they don’t have to worry about all the kelp.

*Type of wave:* Right reef and point.
*Bottom type:* Rocky reef, with sandbars that come and go.
*Best tide:* In general medium tides are best; low tides cause skegs to catch kelp, and high tides swamp it out.
*Wind conditions:* The Hook is more protected from the wind than Pleasure Point. The northeast winds coming out of the Santa Cruz Mountains How offshore. South winds wreck the place.
*Wave height:* 0.5 to 12 feet.
*Surf type:* Playful to challenging.
*Surfing ability:* Intermediate to advanced.
Straddling the northern edge of Monterey Bay, a little more than an hour’s drive south of San Francisco, the Santa Cruz World Surfing Reserve lies within the coastal waters of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. Covering 276 miles of shoreline and 6,094 square miles of ocean (larger than Yellowstone National Park), this federally protected area extends, on average, 30 miles from shore. At its deepest point, the sanctuary plummets down 12,713 feet, or more than two miles. It is our nation’s biggest marine sanctuary.

The Surfing Reserve encompasses about seven of the sanctuary’s 276 miles of coastline, including world-renowned right-hand point breaks Steamer Lane and Pleasure Point. In all, some two dozen surf spots—point, reef, and beachbreaks, both famous and lesser known—fall within the reserve’s boundaries. South-facing, Santa Cruz is well-protected from Central California’s prevailing northwest winds while also open to any swell direction except extreme north. Most of its beaches are overseen by California State Parks, the City of Santa Cruz, and Santa Cruz County.

At Steamer Lane, surfers run past barking sea lions as they hustle toward the gladiator-like proving grounds where wave energy converges with abruptly sloping bedrock reefs. Here, world-class peaks are born. Often compared to those of the North Shore, these waves owe their existence to a fortuitous confluence of geology and oceanographic processes.

The inner continental shelf near the reserve consists of flat sandy areas, faults, barrier fields, and complex bedrock ridges, the amalgamation of which provides the foundation for prolific marine ecosystems. Each spring when the northwest winds blow, nutrient-rich waters rise up out of submarine canyons, nourishing lush growths of marine algae and surface plankton blooms. These provide sustenance for many invertebrates and fish, a key food source for cetaceans (whales, dolphins, porpoises), pinnipeds (seals and sea lions), and sea otters. Numerous species of sharks also inhabit the region, including blue, mako, and white sharks reaching more than 20 feet in length.

Santa Cruz is also home to the nation’s largest kelp forest, 33 marine mammal species, 94 whale species, 345 species of fishes, 31 species of invertebrates, and more than 450 algae species. An estimated 20,000 gray whales pass by Santa Cruz each December during their annual migration from Arctic feeding grounds to their calving grounds off the Baja peninsula. Blue, humpback, and killer whales are also frequently spotted off the coast. A total of seven species of whales are found in local coastal waters, including the less frequently seen minke, beaked, and fin whales.

Within the city limits, 39 miles of watercourses, creeks, and wetlands support diverse natural habitats, transport storm water, and protect water quality. Local flora and wildlife depend on no less than twelve habitat types for their subsistence. These range from aquatic to salt tolerant habitats, providing a rich tapestry of life for all species that call the Santa Cruz World Surfing Reserve home.
mounds to freshwater wetland, and from grassland to woodland to forest. Santa Cruz's mild Mediterranean climate and geography support such diverse vegetation as pickleweed, willow, eucalyptus, pine, black cottonwood, coastal oak, big leaf maple, redwood, and Douglas fir. Maintaining the vegetation not only has a significant positive effect on reducing the potential for landslides and floods, but also is crucial to the survival of local wildlife. Examples include gray foxes, mallard ducks, snakes, egrets, coho salmon, steelhead, and monarch butterflies in the lower watershed, and brush rabbits, salamanders, squirrels, hawks, and deer in the upper watershed.

Spanish for "Holy Cross," Santa Cruz is flanked by mountains bearing its name. Well known for the raw beauty of its windswept beaches, sandstone cliffs, and chaparral-covered slopes, Santa Cruz is just as breathtaking above water as it is below. But that beauty is in a perpetual state of flux—the coastline's edge. Today, only a single bridge remains.

Natural Bridges State Beach, along the western end of the reserve, was named for three bridges that once stood along the promontory at the beach's southern edge. The irregular pattern of the shallow sea floor to the west of the bedrock ridge is a field of boulders hypothesized to be resistant bedrock concretions eroded from the Santa Cruz Mudstone that crops out west of Mitchell Cove. The change in water depth over this channel causes the gaps between Steamer Lane's second and third peaks. The vertical exaggeration is 5x.

Oblique view to the northwest toward Point Santa Cruz. The southwest-trending bedrock ridge is composed of sandstone of the Purisima Formation, which crops out in Point Santa Cruz. The ridge runs more than 4 km (2.4 mi) offshore and forms reefs that focus the waves that break southeast of point Santa Cruz at Steamer Lane. The irregular pattern of the shallow sea floor to the west of the bedrock ridge is a field of boulders hypothesized to be resistant bedrock concretions eroded from the Santa Cruz Mudstone that crops out west of Mitchell Cove. The sinuous channel that cuts across the bedrock ridge appears to have formed by erosion, possibly during a period of lower sea level; the abrupt change in water depth over this channel causes the gaps between Steamer Lane's second and third peaks. The vertical exaggeration is 5x. Approximate distance across the bottom of the image is 1.0 km (0.6 mi).
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, 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 that is fully embraced at the local, national, and global levels—where it becomes an asset not merely for surfers and beach-lovers, but for the bioregional community of which it is a part—improves the quality of life of the whole.

The bubble provided by the WSR designation should act as a semi-permeable membrane, enabling sustainable activities while resisting the intrusion of the grosser monoliths of unchecked development, such as landfills, breakwaters and mining operations. The mere existence of the WSR will act as a tactical wedge that inserts itself into every future discussion concerning the destiny of the reserve area. A WSR increases the chances of environmental synergy, integrating the principles of preservation, sustainability, stewardship, and cultural celebration. It permanently sets a surf spot with an intrinsic (and globally acknowledged) importance that locals already understand but may not be able to articulate.

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.
World Surfing Reserves

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

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