

A modest proposal for addressing inclusion and equity in the Cape Fear Chapter of Surfrider



17th C Engraving of Hawaiian Women and Men Surfing
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5f/Surf-Swimming%2C_Sandwich_Islands.jpg

From Brad Turner and Maia Dery

WHAT, WHY, HOW, WHEN, WHO?



Photo by Lesley Gourley
Isaiah Arnold (one of Brad's trainees) styling in CB in June of 2020

What

Prospective name of the position:

Ambassador for Surf History Inclusion and Equity

Why

Reasons for the position, an introduction:

- 1) To address the predominant perception of surfing and beaches as bastions of able-bodied whiteness, maleness, and heteronormativity (the idea that being straight is better than being otherwise) by working to increase access among local populations who are underrepresented in the local beach-going and surfing communities
- 2) To develop this position in ways that facilitate and encourage Surfrider members' learning as we seek to understand and disrupt the historic and contemporary trends resulting in the

fact that surfing and beaches have too often not been welcoming spaces for people of color and others who fall outside the dominant (aka "normal") social paradigm

- 3) To model and document successes and failures as this position develops in ways that allow other chapters to learn from our example and continue to develop Surfrider's efforts at diversifying our lineups, membership, and leadership in and out of the water.
- 4) To use our documentation (storytelling, video, photography, other art projects) to inspire other chapters of Surfrider to take on this important work of the heart and make our waves and beaches more accessible and welcoming to all who are drawn to them

No one paying attention can deny that, in the area served by the Cape Fear Chapter of Surfrider, surfing is a predominantly white, male sport.

We are not alone.

Historical roots of the problem/opportunity

Before American culture got ahold of the pastime, surfing was an activity embedded in a culture that encouraged and rewarded wave-sliders who were female and male, old and young. In other words, in pre-modern Hawaii, Grandma surfed too. In Isaiah Walker's history of Hawaiian surfing he writes that "surfing was an egalitarian sport" and "although several men, gods, and chiefs surfed, female surfers were far more popular in Hawaiian histories" (Walker 16-7).

If modern surf culture owes its shape to the mainland Americans who learned to surf in Hawaii and then spread the love of the sport, it's easy to figure out where the white, male exclusivity established itself in a sport that didn't start out that way. The Calvinists who are largely responsible for the "diminishing role of women in the surf" in 19th Century Hawaii dictated that Hawaiian women "should not box, wrestle, or surf." (Walker, 39) Presumably, the white Calvinist ladies didn't need to be told to avoid this sort of fun.

In the early 20th C. South Carolina native and Hawaiian transplant Alexander Hume Ford promoted surfing while actively pursuing a sexist, white supremacist, and segregationist agenda both within the sport of surfing and the larger development of Hawaii as a destination for beach-going. In the same way that we modern surfers inherited a fondness for cross-stepping and cutbacks, and hibiscus flowers on our seat covers and clothes we still carry (and sometimes mindlessly replicate and reinforce) the legacy of 19th and 20th Century American surf culture's prejudices. (Laderman)

As for us here in the Cape Fear region, we have our own historical legacy to contend with. Historian David Cecelski has documented the active (if not dominant) role played by enslaved, then free African Americans on the Southeastern N.C. coast between around 1800 and 1898 when Reconstruction effectively ended in North Carolina and black North Carolinians began to be driven from the waterfronts. (Cecelski, 2001). Even in the segregationist, Jim Crow South,

some of our black North Carolinian forebears maintained and established connections to our beloved beaches. The history of the Freeman family, landowners in Seabreeze and Carolina Beach, on either side of the Cape Fear River, is emblematic of many black American's experience in the 20th Century. Driven to segregated, black beaches as white real estate developers began to build on and desire coastal land, the Freemans (and the many black people they served in their hospitality businesses) were the victims of legal and illegal assaults on their coastal and waterfront access. Tactics ranging from discriminatory and unfair application of zoning laws (one standard for whites, another for blacks), to police intimidation (black motorists were often cited for "trespassing" for driving through Carolina Beach to get to the Freeman's land), to citizen threats (arson, guns fired in the air) made the Freemans life first difficult, then impossible. While I could not locate exact figures for how much waterfront property is currently owned by black North Carolinians, we know it's near none.

With the creation of this position, we hope to begin a new culture of learning, understanding, generously sharing the history of surfing among our membership. It is our belief that a historical grounding is crucial to crafting a vision that has a genuine chance of inspiring and effecting a change in our organizational culture. American writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin wrote

White man, hear me! History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.

How:

Responsibilities of this position:

Discussion facilitation

In order to rewrite our future, we must understand how we came to our present. For this reason, we believe one important part of the responsibilities for this role should include leading a surf history and culture discussion group for local chapter members and, potentially, the community at large. Although the exact scope and schedule is to be decided, something along the lines of a monthly book or film discussion group seems doable.

Access, Inclusion, and Equity

We of Surfrider are part of an organization devoted to, among other crucial priorities, "full and fair access to beaches." That devotion, that dedication, and that mission exists in the context of

a national history in which the U.S. has systematically removed or discouraged African Americans' access to public outdoor recreation in general and beaches in particular. Some of the exclusion has been through mechanisms Surfrider is already acquainted with because they are still in use, prohibitive fees, removal of access points, etc. And some of the exclusionary techniques ranging from arson to beatings to terrorism (as in the Chicago Race riots of 1918, recently described in the [Surfrider blog](#)).

Recently, the national organization has released two communications that indicate a renewed commitment to inclusion. This renewed commitment came in the wake of the national reckoning with race that came in response to a series of the brutal murders. The killings of of Amhaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd left all organizations with the clarity that Ibram Kendi indicates was our choice all along— we can choose to be complicit in the system that has successfully driven black Americans from, among other things, access to waterfronts, or we can choose to be anti-racist.

The Public Trust Doctrine, upon which much of Surfrider's access is justified, was and still is flagrantly violated when it comes to beach access. The exclusion of African Americans from being included in "the public" is not new but it is newly apparent that it is well within our organizational mission to work to rectify it, particularly in an area with a history like that of the Cape Fear Region.

As the Surfrider website states, meeting the goals of our mission means "new or increased public access opportunities should be provided." And that "the public should be afforded full and fair access to beaches, which are public trust resources" We are specifically tasked with acting where "there exists a cultural value of active visitation to the beach as part of traditional, historical and/or customary practices." These practices, interrupted by historical trends of sexism and racism listed in the brief histories above, are a clear call to action.

People who know the ocean have the chance to love it and, as we know so well, to benefit from it. Looking back on the time when his family owned a sizable chunk of waterfront property, Billy Freeman reminisced that the waterfront "had a therapeutic effect on us as a people." (Kahrl, 2012) In addition to the trends and legacies that affect all surfing spaces, we in the coastal American South live in an area where one of the insidious effects of our history is the fact that there are far too few African Americans in the waves and, as a result, in Surfrider. As Ibram X. Kendi writes, "one either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist." We have the racial inequities all too common in mainstream environmental organizations and the lifestyle sports that often inspire us to join them. We also have the power to address those problems with compassion, humility, creativity, and the love of the ocean that inspires us all and does not discriminate against any of us.

For these reasons, one of the responsibilities of this position will be to learn about and suggest chapter responses to issues negatively impacting access of underrepresented populations. By way of example, these responses might include

- Organizing anti-racism training for our board members
- Developing relationships and coordinating with scholars and activists who are already engaged in understanding and addressing these challenges in the Cape Fear region and beyond
- Organizing volunteers who wish to teach ocean safety and surf lessons children from downtown Wilmington and the surrounding areas to receive training in the use of therapeutic approaches (for non-clinicians) to trauma common in biopic children.
- Organizing women's surf instruction
- Actively contributing to Life Rolls On, Surfer's Healing, and other organizations with the expertise to lead surf events for the differently abled
- Staging a Welcome to the Waves event for PRIDE

When

We propose that this position be taken up at the next board meeting. If approved, we are willing to begin work on these initiatives immediately, given the constraints of the ongoing COVID pandemic.

Who

Brad Turner (East Coast coordinator of Inkwell Surf and Black Girl Surf) and Maia Dery volunteer to grow this position in collaboration with one another and the board of the Cape Fear Chapter. We also promise to coordinate documentation and have already found volunteers willing to contribute to this larger storytelling effort.

References

Cecelski, David, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina*, University of North Carolina Press, 2001

Kahrl, Andrew, *This Land Was Ours: How Black Beaches Became White Wealth in the Coastal South*, University of North Carolina Press, 2016

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