

Surfers fight to stop coastal highway project in Peru

May 7 2015, by Caterina Notargiovanni



Surfers in April confronted riot police guarding trucks dumping rocks on La Pampilla Beach, known around the world for its waves

Gnarly scenes have been unfolding at Peru's famed La Pampilla beach, where riot police have clashed with surfers fighting to stop a coastal highway project they say will ruin their world-class waves.

The beach, a magnet for international [surfers](#) that has been the training ground of several world champions, is a narrow stretch of rocky Pacific coast abutted by the Costa Verde highway.

Each year, some 18,000 foreign surfers make the trip there to ride its legendary [waves](#), which can reach up to two meters (6.5 feet) high.

But surfers say a project by the Lima city government to expand the highway, one of the capital's main arteries, will break up their waves with a retaining wall supporting the road's new third lane.

The situation escalated last week when the city plopped large rocks down in the middle of the beach.

When a group of surfers defiantly tried to ride the waves anyway, riot police waded into the ocean—boots, uniforms, helmets and all—to stop them, carting some of them off in nothing but their swimsuits as they tried to cling to their boards.

"This is a disaster for world surfing," said Karin Sierralta, the executive director of Peru's National Board Sports Federation and vice president of the International Surfing Federation.

"This beach is the cradle of Peruvian surfing, of South American surfing, which was born here in 1942. If you compare it with football, it's like they're tearing down the biggest stadium in the country," he told AFP.

"If this project continues, no one will be able to surf here anymore."

'Mediocre, imperfect little waves'

The surfers began their protest last November, forcing Lima's then-

mayor Susana Villaran and her left-wing government to abandon the project, which seeks to increase the amount of traffic the highway can handle by 30 percent, to 26,000 vehicles a day.



Surfers say the enlargement of a coastal road steals several metres from the shore of the famed La Pampilla Beach in Lima

But in January, a new mayor, Luis Castaneda of the conservative

National Solidarity party, took office and relaunched the project.

That has united dozens of surfers in protest.

"The project is going to ruin the waves because they'll bounce off the retaining wall and break up," said protester Roberto Meza, who runs the Olas Peru surfing school and won the Pan-American longboard championships in 2006.

"The waves won't have the same formation for high-level competition. They'll go from being excellent to mediocre, imperfect little waves."

The city government is also under fire from national authorities.

The navy fined it for putting rocks on the beach, and Mayor Castaneda has been summoned to explain himself to Congress.

Livio Ciriani, one of the surfers hauled from the beach by police, fought back tears as he talked about the standoff.

"I can't take it anymore. It hurts my soul that they can be so apathetic and destroy this beach," said Ciriani, who has been surfing there for 45 years.

"I ask the whole world to help us."



Lima authorities say the rocks it has placed on the beach are a temporary measure taken because of tidal wave warnings

Disagreement on details

La Pampilla's waves were the school where several world champions from Peru learned to surf, including Felipe Pomar, Sofia Mulanovich, Magoo de la Rosa and Piccolo Clemente.

Mulanovich, who won the world title in 2004, wrote on Facebook: "Excuse my language but they are such sons of XXX, thoughtless and brutish! It makes me so mad to see how they destroy our natural playing fields."

The city says the rocks it placed on the beach are a temporary measure taken because of tidal wave warnings.

"We're interested in the surfers and their activity, but we have to find a middle ground that permits us to carry out this project," said Francisco Gavia, a city official.

"Studies indicate we need to reinforce this part of the highway to avoid a major collapse."

The surfers say the first big waves will wipe out the third lane anyway.

The city's project manager, Jose Justiniano, said they don't seem to understand the details of the project.

"We believe there is a lack of technical knowledge in these protests. The third lane is not being built on the [beach](#) zone, but in the regulation road area," he said.

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