

Save our waves: Surfing pumps \$2.71 billion into the Australian economy and boosts well-being

August 3 2024, by Ana Manero



Both surfer and scientist, author Ana Manero volunteers for Surfing Mums.
Credit: Ana Manero

Ever since Polynesian pioneers took to the ocean on wooden rafts, people have been hooked on riding waves. Today, surfing is one of the world's [fastest-growing sports](#) and one of the latest additions to the

Olympic games.

Surfing is especially valuable to Australia. My [new research](#) shows surf-related expenditure contributes nearly A\$3 billion to the Australian economy every year. And the [mental health benefits](#) to Australian surfers are in the order of \$6 billion a year.

Yet many surf breaks are subject to coastal erosion, water pollution and other threats. The surfing event in Tahiti for this year's Olympics is a case in point: it involved drilling into delicate coral reef to build a new judging tower.

It's vital to recognize and measure the true benefits of surfing in dollar terms, so decision-makers realize it makes sense to invest in protecting Australia's surf breaks.

The economics of surfing

Waves are essentially free. All you need is a surfboard and you're set. Well, you might want to grab yourself a leg rope and a wetsuit too.

If you have a wave virtually at your doorstep, it's likely you're paying a real estate [premium](#). Otherwise, you're probably spending your weekends chasing waves up and down the coast. You may even have your family in tow. The costs soon add up.

Using an [online survey](#) of 569 Australian surfers, my team and I explored the [influence](#) of recreational surfing on the economy and people's well-being. We found the average Australian surfer spends more than \$3,700 a year, within Australia, on surfing-related purchases. Half goes on equipment, while the rest is spent on domestic travel. A further \$1,975 is spent on international travel.

There are [an estimated](#) 727,000 Australian adult surfers, which brings the total spend to \$2.71 billion every year being pumped into the domestic economy. If we factor in flow-on effects, such as business-to-business spending, the overall contribution of recreational surfing comes to \$4.88 billion.

Economic impacts can inform government priorities and public decisions affecting coastal management. For example, the [2023 Margaret River Pro](#) drew \$8 million and 3,500 visitors to the region. These figures, as well as local and international support, encouraged the organizers to renew the contest until 2028.

Mental health and well-being

Besides direct [economic impacts](#), surfing contributes to participants' well-being in multiple ways.

In [our survey](#), more than 94% of respondents reported improvements in their physical and mental health, as well as their ability to deal with stress and difficulty in their lives.

More than 75% of surfers reported an improvement in their sense of belonging to a community and ability to foster positive relationships.

One way to measure well-being in economic terms is by comparing workplace productivity and health care costs between groups. Previous research has quantified the [benefits of being in nature](#) to mental health, using data from national parks visits. When applying this approach to [surfing](#), the researchers found gains in surfers' mental health worth \$7,650 per person per year—or \$5.6 billion across Australia's surfers.

Deadly but delicate

The first-time inclusion of surfing in the 2020–21 Tokyo Olympics was hailed as a landmark recognition of the sport's cultural significance. A year later, surfing was admitted as a permanent Olympic sport.

But built infrastructure, such as ports and sea walls, human-induced climate change, [coastal erosion](#) and [water pollution](#) are [endangering](#) waves around the world.

The tiny village of Teahupo'o, in Tahiti, is home to one of the world's "heaviest" waves. But some residents [feared](#) the Olympics would irreversibly damage their pristine environment. In response, visitor numbers were capped and construction minimized.

The world-renowned wave of Mundaka, in Spain's Basque Country, disappeared in 2005 as a result of dredging activity in the nearby rivermouth. The wave eventually came back, but the area had already suffered a slowdown in economic [growth](#), including the cancellation of a professional contest.

In Australia, three surf breaks [were lost](#) to construction of Perth's Ocean Reef marina in 2022. Local residents' calls for an artificial reef are now being considered.

Protection for a precious resource

Australia is blessed with more than 1,440 surf breaks and a surf-loving culture.

But if we want those waves to exist for future generations, we must look after them now.

A good starting point could be to include surf breaks in the [Australia State of the Environment Report](#). The review already evaluates pressures on recreational fishing, snorkeling and scuba diving—but not surfing,

despite it attracting [more participants](#) than the other three sports combined.

Form a legal standpoint, only a few of our waves are protected: the iconic Bells Beach in Victoria comes under the Heritage Act 2027. A dozen of "surfing reserves" in New South Wales are safeguarded by the Crown Lands Act 1989. In [Queensland](#), coastal protection policies are being developed for the Noosa and Gold Coast World Surfing Reserves.

Across the [world](#), more countries are adopting protections for surfing's recreational and environmental values. In Brazil, the waves at [Doce River Mouth](#) were recently granted special protection, as a new bill acknowledged the ocean as a living being with intrinsic rights.

The goal to better understand and protect the value of surf breaks is in line with the 2021–30 [Oceans Decade](#), a United Nations initiative to leverage scientific knowledge for ocean sustainability.

It's often said "only a surfer knows the feeling" of riding a wave, but research quantifying the benefits of [surfing](#) can help [decision-makers](#) appreciate the need to preserve a truly irreplaceable resource.

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