

Discovery of surf breaks creates economic growth

March 14 2017



Satellite image and nighttime lights in the 50km surrounding Yallingup, Western Australia, in 1992. Credit: Sam Wills

University of Sydney research reveals high quality surf breaks boost economic growth in nearby areas - and by how much.

Researchers analysed satellite images of night-time lights as a 'proxy' for economic growth. They found that a surfing community's discovery of a high-quality break can raise growth by 2.2 percentage points a year.

The study of more than 5000 surf break locations in 146 countries spans data between 1992 and 2013, with a concentration toward breaks in Australia and the United States.

"We conducted four sets of experiments, and they all confirm that good waves significantly increase growth, particularly after recent discoveries and during El Niño years," said Dr Sam Wills, of the University of Sydney's School of Economics.

While it's well understood that natural features like rivers and fertile soil matter for [economic growth](#), this provides some of the first evidence that natural amenities are also important.

Researchers investigated data in two locations where surf breaks were removed and found that nearby economies shrink when this occurs. A break at Jardim do Mar, Portugal, was removed through the construction of a coastal road, while another at Mundaka, Spain, disappeared after a river mouth was dredged.

The paper suggests policymakers can use surf breaks as a way to create jobs and reduce poverty, especially in developing countries. To do this they can promote public and private investment needed to enjoy surf breaks, while protecting their environmental quality.

"Discovering a high-quality break - or battery-heated wetsuits that made cold-water breaks more accessible - increased growth in the surrounding areas," said Dr Wills. "But destroying a break reduced growth, even if it was replaced by a new road or a dredged river."

Dr Wills - who enjoys surfing in his spare time - will present the findings at the International Surfing Symposium conference at the Gold Coast this week, in the lead-up to the Quicksilver Pro - the first stop on the 2017 surfing World Championship Tour.

"I had the idea for the paper straight after I submitted my PhD thesis," he said.

"It was November and I needed to get out of Oxford, so I looked for somewhere warm and sunny with good waves. I settled on Taghazout in Morocco, thinking it would be quiet. Flying in at sunset over the desert I noticed that everything was dark, except for one little spot that was lit up like Pitt Street: Taghazout.

"Once I arrived I realised that this previously sleepy little fishing village had been overrun by surfers, and so I wanted to figure out whether it was systematically happening around the world."

Top 10 Fastest Growing Surf Breaks from 1992-2013:

Australia

10. Express Point, VIC
9. Smiths Beach, WA
8. Smiths Reef, WA
7. Mouse Traps, WA
6. Supertubes, WA
5. Yallingup, WA
4. Palestines, WA
3. Rabbits, WA
2. Isolators, WA
1. Yallingup (shorebreak), WA

The World

10. Rabbits, Australia (WA)
9. Isolators, Australia (WA)
8. Yallingup, Australia (WA)

7. Playa Guiones, Costa Rica
6. Playa Lagosta
5. Omaha, New Zealand
4. Dark Reef, Vietnam
3. Shabandar, Malaysia
2. Yacila, Peru
1. Nosara, Costa Rica

Provided by University of Sydney

Citation: Discovery of surf breaks creates economic growth (2017, March 14) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-03-discovery-surf-economic-growth.html>

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