

Black Balls: Another View From the Water

By Louis Mason, Encinitas

Ed note: Keeping the water safe often means separating the various modes of ocean use. Many agencies use a flag system to designate surfing and swimming areas. One of these flags, the “black ball” is often the subject of contention depending on when and where it is used. Louis Mason, a long time volunteer with the Del Mar Lifeguard Association, offers his views.

Let's face it, there is no winning when you have to put up the black ball flag. The only positive side to putting up the ball is that you will only offend fifty percent of the vulgar masses. It has become the age-old dilemma to anyone who surfs, sponges, body surfs, kayaks, and yes...even kneeboards. Who deserves to be in the water the most at any given time of any given day?

Can't we just all get along? Everyone has their place out there in the water. From the young grom with the neon wetsuit (otherwise known as the “hot pro bro, with the high pro glow”) found frenzy paddling everywhere, trying to get whatever leftovers can be found in the line up, to the mature, older surfer on the longboard. You know, the one with the “furniture disease”. That's where after forty, his chest has moved into his drawers. Longboarders, naturally wearing subdued black but highly expensive and “in” wetsuits, can be found in large groups just outside of the line up. Unlike their younger counterparts, these groups from shore can resemble a stationary oil slick, but for the occasional movement of one or two of them trying to pick off an incoming wave. Generally, they can be seen floating out in the water with raised arms, as if to express the size of the fish they caught or the height of their biggest wave experience. For the most part, however, they are discussing good places to eat, business deals and real estate.

If you talk to surfers, they will tell you in no short order that they are the dominant species in the water. Any consideration to any lesser form of aquatic activity is a waste of time, and beneath their dignity to even acknowledge their existence.

If you talk to the spongers, you usually get a mixed bag, if you find a sponger that can talk. Some of the more hardcore (i.e. those who do not embarrass themselves in the lineup), will respond in basically the same manner as the surfers. However, they are flexible. By this I mean they can put up with the surfers if a mutual respect is present. If this respect is missing, then their philosophy is to burn, rape and pillage and cut off everyone in sight with the excuse “bro, I didn't see you!”

The kayakers are in a universe all to themselves. Who knows what they think? Why would they want to ride a boat on the face of a wave anyway? I think all can agree, kayakers need their own place somewhere, anywhere, maybe Alaska?

Having been a kneeboarder myself, there is a soft spot in my heart for this form of wave riding. To the younger generations, this is a strange form of wave riding. Most people in the water have no real opinion on the matter. Very few people kneeboard today, and those who do aren't very good at it. It definitely is a lost art form in today's sponge culture of drop-knees and belly-spinners.

Finally, and most importantly, is body surfing. I am a body surfer. I have always been a body surfer. I will always be a body surfer. Hell, I belong to a body surfing association that has been in existence for thirty-five years, with two multiple world champions to its credit and Bob Burnside as an alumni. When you talk about body surfing, that is where the rubber hits the road. If anybody deserves to be in the water at any time, on any given day, by themselves, without any competition from mindless groms, aging fat long boarders, and kayak weirdos, then it is the body surfer. Why one may ask? It's simple. Body surfers do not need the use of a floating device to allow them to get into the lineup and then stay there. They do not need the use of a floating device

to get into waves. They do not need the use of a “kook” cord to keep them alive in case they lose their floating device. Body surfers actually can swim. Body surfers do not leave their trash in the water, like wax, broken foam, broken leashes, etc.. All in all, body surfers are low profile and experienced watermen, void of the ego and illusions of greatness that all the rest seem to suffer from.

So the next time you hoist up that black ball, look up and down the beach for a lone head or two bobbing in the line up. If they are experienced in their craft, then you have two less bozos in the water to worry about.