

Santa Cruz City floats surf rules book

By Dan White, Santa Cruz Sentinel staff writer

According to DAN WHITE, Santa Cruz Sentinel staff writer "rules of the surf lineup are passed on by word of mouth —and in extreme cases by fist to mouth." The rules are part of an oral history. They aren't something you see printed on paper — and certainly not on city letterhead. But the city Parks and Recreation Department, responding to packed surf breaks and increasing conflicts between surfers and kayakers, plans to print 7,000 "aloha" wave-etiquette brochures to pass out to wave riders of all types.

City lifeguard chief John Alexiou said the free brochures are an effort to have wave riders regulate themselves. While he wouldn't rule out future regulations for kayakers, which some surfers want, no restrictions are on the table, he said. Most everyone who attended the city-sponsored meetings on the issue stressed cooperation over bureaucracy, he added. The suggestions are non-binding, and parks officials expect them to be enforced by social code, not surf cops. They apply to surfers, kayakers and body-boarders.



Kayaker and surfer take off on the same wave at Steamer Lane. Sentinel Photo by Dan Coyro

The rules were created with suggestions from wave riders, but don't look for any macho posturing in the pamphlet. It is so cautious to avoid surf/kayak conflict that it labels both objects "surf vehicles." "We need to emphasize mutual consideration," the brochure reads. "Be gracious and generous in letting others have their share of waves. Give respect to get respect. Help your fellow surfers."

The project will cost \$5,000. The city is kicking in about \$1,000, and the rest is being raised privately. Among the donors: surf and kayak shops. Kristina Marquez called the brochures a great idea. The normal method of learning the rules is "getting yelled at, or a cool guy will come up to you and explain it," she said.

Marquez, co-owner of Paradise Surf Shop in Pleasure Point, said the city publicizing surf conduct codes reflects changing times and priorities. "Santa Cruz surfing has always been so counter-cultural," she said, but now, "... we have doctors and lawyers surfing. ... We used to have all surfers working in surf shops and gas stations. Before it was perfectly acceptable to dunk a kid who was being a brat. Not anymore. The time is perfect for something like printed brochures."

Bill McGlaughlin, a longboarder who manages Arrow Surf and Sport on the Westside, liked the pamphlet idea but had little faith it will settle all disputes. "When the ocean is calling you, it's hard to obey a bunch of rules," he said. "The people who have conflicts with it, I am not sure they are that reachable with that kind of education." He added he's been "scared out of my mind" by guys on kayaks who lack control.

Former white-water kayaker Jeff Grell, who now runs the Corralitos-based Professional Surfing Tour of America, said the pamphlet suggestions will benefit all groups.

The rules were formed because of simmering conflicts between surfers and kayakers. In the early 1990s the groups brawled during the annual spring surf-kayak contest in Santa Cruz. A group called Surfers For a Safe Berth pushed the city to ban kayakers from surf breaks. Members argued out-of-control kayaks are extremely dangerous to surfers. Kayakers responded, saying they are regularly harassed by obnoxious surfers even when they aren't in the breaks.

Wave riders from as far as Hawaii and Mexico sent e-mails to the city. The pamphlets will include pictures of a wipe-out, and give displays of potential conflict situations and how to avert them. In one display, surfers are designated as "Red" and "Green." "The surfer closest to the breaking wave has possession," the section reads. "Red may not drop in. ...Red has lost forward momentum or wipes out. Green may take possession."

The brochures will be handed out at surf shops, waterfront businesses and kayak shops, among other stops.

While this is the first time the city has waded into surf etiquette, rules are carved in a wood sign at Cowell Beach. The author was Sam Reid, who helped establish Santa Cruz as one of the world's best-known surf spots. Reid, who died in 1978, was known for his large redwood surfboard and his knowledge of Polynesian surfing history. His sign asks surfers to cede right of way to the first on the wave, and most importantly, "Hang on to your board."

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