

Black in blue: Surfers of color look to assert their rights to find joy in the water



by [Wallace Baine](#)

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Quick Take:

On Friday, the Museum of Art & History hosts an in-person discussion on how far surf culture has come in the realm of inclusiveness, with particular focus on Santa Cruz culture, and how far it has yet to go. “It’s a time to explore these things,” one panelist says. “It’s a time to ask what may be uncomfortable questions.”

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In Santa Cruz, surfing is a popular pastime, a passion, a way of life. But it's also a culture. And like so many subcultures these days, it is grappling with social change — which, in its own way, can be every bit as implacable as climate change.

Given that surfing is itself a popular metaphor for adapting to large unstoppable forces you can't control, how is Santa Cruz's signature activity dealing with the waves of societal and demographic change coming its way?

An in-person discussion at the Museum of Art & History on Friday will look at how far surf culture has come in the realm of inclusiveness, with particular focus on Santa Cruz culture, and how far it has yet to go. "Troubled Waters: The Ocean as Contested Space in Surf Culture," [taking place](#) Friday at 6 p.m., promises to take a historical perspective on racial diversity and racism in California surf culture and to assess whether some of Santa Cruz County's best surf breaks today are welcoming spaces for surfers of color.

The event is inspired by the online project [Decolonize the Surf](#), created by surfer and performing artist David Crellin, which seeks to throw light on California surfing's history when it comes to racism, and to highlight narratives of Black surfers' relationship with the ocean.

Along with Crellin, leading a community discussion will be surfer and activist Esabella Bonner, who founded [Black Surf Santa Cruz](#); surfer and activist Kayiita Johnson, who leads a similar community of surfers called [Black.Surfers](#); and scholar and veteran surfer Paul Richardson, whose research has for years focused on African Americans and their role and relationship in surfing culture.

The evening will begin with the screening of the 9-minute film "The Black Mermaid," about the South African-born free diver Zandile Ndhlovu. "We're going to start out with a really beautiful short film," said Crellin. "It's just a lovely documentary, and then the four of us are going to talk about the things on our minds, and then we're going to open it up to questions."

The theme will center on diversity in the lineup, what the state of that diversity is today, and the barriers Black people have historically dealt with in pursuing surfing. "It's a time to explore these things," said Crellin. "It's a time to ask what may be uncomfortable questions."

How Thomas Sage Pedersen found himself at the center of a burgeoning Black renaissance in Santa Cruz

Bonner founded Black Surf Santa Cruz as a kind of social club for people — both experienced surfers and beginners — to come together and share the exhilaration and joys of surfing. The group sponsors many get-togethers to help people learn more about surfing, including an annual paddle-out at Cowell Beach every June.

"It's a community celebration at the beach," said Bonner. "We had a DJ on the beach last year, and some food. We, of course, had the paddle-out component of it. There are games. I think it's just a day of joy, as well as true educational history and truth-telling. It's really just a joyful way to acknowledge history."



Esabella Bonner, who grew up in Santa Cruz, founded the Black Surf Club in 2020, which has engaged more than 250 people and provides people access to the ocean via surfing, often for the first time. Credit: Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz

That history has not always been pretty. For generations, surfing has had a reputation for “localism,” the attitude and practice of suspicion, even hostility, toward outsiders, particularly when it comes to accessing prized surf spots.

Anthropologist Richardson, 62, grew up as a Black kid in love with surfing in Los Angeles. “Localism was a big deal in L.A. County,” said Richardson, remembering his youth in the late 1970s and ’80s. “You know Lunada Bay [near Palos Verdes]? That place was insane. I remember we couldn’t even drive by and take pictures on a good day, much less paddle out there.”

Richardson said that when he was growing up, he knew of only one other local Black surfer. “It’s harder to understand what the racial climate was back then, because there weren’t many surfers of color in the water, period,” he said. “But [today] there’s a group down there called the Black Surfers Collective. I’ve certainly heard from them that they’ve run into some foolishness.”

Another factor at play is the internalized notion for many people of color that surfing is somehow inherently something only white people do. “Yeah, we’ve heard that about tennis, skiing, skateboarding, hiking, all of it,” said Richardson. “I used to go back to L.A. and visit friends and they’d be, ‘Man, why you trying to be white?’ And I’d say, ‘I’m not. This shit is fun as hell.’ So there are attitudes like that, that the Black community kinda shuts down because it’s like you’re trying to be white. Honestly, until there are more Black surfers to give permission to say, ‘Hey, this is pretty cool,’ we’re going to be stuck in that mode.”

At 27, Bonner started surfing only a couple of years ago, surprising even herself, given her indifference to surfing before then. “That’s something I held when I grew up here,” Bonner said of the attitude that surfing was a white person’s thing. “If you had told me five years ago that I’d be doing this, I’d be, ‘Nah, Black people don’t surf.’ I think it comes from the stereotype that Black people can’t swim. But going back to the whole point of this event, it’s to acknowledge that there’s troubled waters. Well, why don’t black people swim? Let’s acknowledge the history of segregation, and redlining, and the transatlantic slave trade, and how all of these things stripped Black people of their relationship with water.”

‘Really cool to see all these people on boards’: Black Surf Club Santa Cruz brings diversity into the ocean

Today, there are many more pressures on the popular surf breaks, and localism might not be so much based on racism as it is on fear and hostility toward beginners. More and more people taking up surfing means more potential flare-ups and conflicts among veterans concerned about everyone’s safety, long-timers pining for days when there were fewer boards in the water, and newbies asserting their rights to learn and enjoy the experience.

“The crowds alone are problematic,” said Richardson, who moved to Aptos last year. “You’ve got to have a thick skin just to deal with the competition to catch waves.”

Which is not to say that young people, people of color and women should not assert their right to be in the water. The ocean might seem like a vast place where there’s room for everybody, but the most primo spots, from Steamer Lane to Pleasure Point, are going to attract hordes and are going to have some surfers deciding who does or does not belong. Richardson said taking up surfing nowadays, for all people, means being respectful of others and what they want to get out of their surfing sessions.

“I would say, from a cautionary perspective, pick the spot where you’re not going to have so much tension from being a beginner, much less a beginner of color,” said Richardson. “A lot of it is just finding a place you can go and learn how to surf. And you have to be persistent. The problem is everybody gets stars in their eyes and wants to paddle out at First Peak at Pleasure

Point. That's probably not a good place to go. Your goal as a beginner is just to be out in the water a lot."

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Wallace reports and writes not only across his familiar areas of deep interest — including arts, entertainment and culture — but also is chronicling for Lookout the challenges the people of Santa Cruz...

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