



No Permits, No Permission, Just Purpose

RETURNING TO THE WATER:
A STORY OF SURF, ACCESS, AND BELONGING

By Esabella Bonner, Founder & Executive Director, Black Surf Santa Cruz





Before I ever put on a wetsuit or touched a surfboard, I lived just a few miles from the ocean — but it always felt like a world away. Surfing didn't feel like it was for me. I didn't see myself represented in the lineup, in surf media, or even very often on the beach. My dad didn't know how to swim. My family didn't have the gear, the access, or the generational ocean knowledge and comfort that many others took for granted.

What I didn't realize then was that our disconnect wasn't accidental — it was inherited. It was systemic. The forced separation from water, land, and lineage runs deep. Surfing, a cultural practice with ancient roots in West Africa, where part of my ancestry comes from, wasn't just missing from my own childhood — it had been stripped from our generational memory.

So when I caught my first wave on Sept. 19, 2020, at Black Surf Santa Cruz's very first Pop-Up Program (PUP) at Jack's Beach, it wasn't just

about surfing. It was about reconnecting with something sacred.

We didn't have permits, insurance, or any type of official approval. All we had was community volunteers, borrowed gear, eager beginners, a U-Haul van, and a whole lot of trust. It was powerful. It was joyful. And, because of outdated local surf ordinances and permitting structures, it was technically illegal.

That moment became the spark for everything that followed.

PEOPLE POWER > PERMITS

We didn't start with infrastructure — we started with intention.

Shortly after our first PUP session, we legitimized our programming through piecemeal, one-off permits and strategic partnerships with local nonprofits and land managers, backed by a statewide Equity Access Grant Program, which gave us a pathway to operate on limited local beaches.

We began hosting programs first at Jack's Beach (38th Avenue) and later at Private's Beach, both managed by the county.

For the first time, we were recognized on paper. But paperwork still didn't equal access.

We were often locked into one beach site, which, especially for beginner programs, meant a lack of pivot power. Conditions were unpredictable. High tides at Private's Beach would wipe out the sand completely. In early 2023, storms destroyed the stairs. There were no bathrooms. No showers. Parking was unreliable. Some neighbors and local surfers made it clear we weren't welcome there.

Still, our program was growing. Our impact was undeniable. But the locations, systems, and structures as they were currently operating weren't built to hold us.

A BIGGER ISSUE THAN JUST ONE BEACH

We weren't just bumping up against local logistical limits — we were navigating a statewide issue.

Surf permitting policies across California vary wildly between city, county, state and unincorporated jurisdictions. Nonprofit and tribal groups offering free community surf programs are often treated like for-profit surf schools and required to navigate a dense web of red tape just to get their communities into the water.

We weren't alone in naming this. Organizations in Pacifica like Salted Roots — formerly Brown Girl Surf and City Surf Project — had been pushing against similar ceilings since 2020. Through our involvement with the Surf Justice Collective, a network of ocean access and equity-based grassroots organizations working together to transform California's coast into a place that welcomes everyone, we began sharing strategy and building collective power alongside ocean equity organizations across California. We were part

of a growing movement to make the coast truly public for everyone.

This story is just one piece of that puzzle. It's the story of how we claimed space at Cowell Beach, a city-run beach in the heart of Santa Cruz.

THE PUBLIC EYE MEETS THE PRIVATE STRUGGLE

In February 2023, we partnered with the Santa Cruz Warriors to host a private Pop-Up Program for some of their operations staff, originally permitted at Private's Beach. But winter storms had washed away the sand and destroyed the stairs.

We pivoted locations, showed up at Cowell Beach, and the energy was electric. For many participants, it was their first time in the ocean. The only problem: we didn't technically have permits or permission to be there. Four days later, photos from the event landed on the front page of a local newspaper. On the surface, it was a moment of celebration — and it was. But it also surfaced a deeper frustration and fear of backlash.

We were gaining visibility, but still stuck behind outdated systems that gatekept our access. We were being recognized and supported publicly, while scrambling behind the scenes to find safe, sustainable places to host our programs.

That tension led me to post a candid video on social media later that month, naming the issue directly: Why is it so nearly impossible for a nonprofit organization to host free surf programs for our own community legally?

PRESSURE TURNED INTO PROGRESS

What most people didn't know is that we had already been in conversation with City of Santa Cruz officials and elected leaders, working to untangle the permitting systems and make space for a community model that didn't fit the "surf school" box.

The attention from the Warriors event — and the momentum from that video on social media — added pressure. The questions we'd been asking privately were now public.



BLACK SURF SANTA CRUZ

And then, on May 1, 2023, I received an email:

"A permit is not necessary for BSSC's access and use of the beach/ocean at Cowell Beach."

— Tony Elliott, Director Santa Cruz Parks & Recreation

With that one message, we were cleared to operate at Cowell Beach. A city-run beach with bathrooms, showers, consistent sand, parking, and fewer logistical barriers. No longer stuck in workarounds. No longer forced into the shadows.

For the first time, our programs had a place that felt like home. That fall, we hosted our first full PUP season at Cowell.

A MODEL FOR COASTAL EQUITY

The win at Cowell Beach wasn't the end. It was the beginning of something bigger.

What started as a local breakthrough became a model that can be used to set statewide precedent. Our work helped shape the City of Santa Cruz's 2025–2030 Beach Management Plan, embedding language that reflects the needs of grassroots, culturally respon-

sive, nonprofit surf programs like ours. At the same time, California's AB2939 was signed into law, clarifying that nonprofit and tribal groups may use public beaches without permits, so long as their programs are free and not commercial.

The City of Santa Cruz not only aligned with the new law, but they also embedded that clarity directly into local policy. And in March 2025, the California Coastal Commission approved the updated Beach Management Plan, setting a precedent that could influence coastal access up and down the state.

"Bella's leadership and advocacy led toward a model that can truly be replicated across California. Sometimes we don't always see the barriers ... BSSC's openness, reflection, creativity and advocacy ultimately led toward an outcome that advances both the mission of their organization and the City."

— Tony Elliott, Director, Santa Cruz Parks & Recreation

This advocacy and story of community love and power is bigger than just a permit. It is about making intentional space. About reminding our entire community that the ocean is for all. It's

about holding systems to account and acknowledging our history and existing blind spots so we can truly be in community together.

We didn't change the waves. We didn't change the ocean. We changed the systems. And in doing so, we increased access and made it possible for more of us to return home to the sea.



ABOUT BLACK SURF SANTA CRUZ

Since 2020, Black Surf Santa Cruz (BSSC) has been dedicated to creating intentional, inclusive, and supportive environments for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) within ocean and outdoor recreation spaces. Our mission is to promote physical, spiritual, emotional, and communal healing through surfing, education, and recreation. We center Black community members and other historically and presently excluded people of color in our programming, adhering to the guiding principle of "Let's learn together." This principle invites the entire Santa Cruz County community to join us in creating anti-racist surf, ocean recreation, and marine sustainability spaces.

Black Surf Santa Cruz is a proud coalition member of the Surf Justice Collective, a network of ocean access and equity-based grassroots organizations working together to transform California's coast into a place that welcomes everyone. Learn more on our website: www.surfjusticecollective.org

