

**SURFING THE WAVES OF “SMALL-SCALE” LOOTING:
TOWARDS A RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE
SIERRA DE SAN ANDRÉS, BAJA CALIFORNIA**

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For the past few decades, surfers from all over the world, but predominantly American, have visited the barely populated Sierra de San Andrés, 4 km North of Santa Rosalillita on the Pacific Coast of Baja California. These visits have turned the Sierra into one of the most heavily looted areas in the peninsula. The first archaeological survey in the area has revealed its archaeological richness along with the impacts caused by foreign looters. Therefore, it is urgent that environmental and surfing organizations take accountability and protection in the development of a responsible management plan for the Sierra de San Andrés.

In order to recognize archaeological looting as a common and serious issue in Baja California, it is important to deconstruct the idea that looters are stereotypical criminals selling “treasures” on the black market. As a matter of fact, researchers from multiple disciplines including archaeologists had undoubtedly taken artifacts from archeological sites in Baja California and incorporated them into their collections without notifying Mexican authorities. On the other side, however, the coasts of Baja California had long been a surfing attraction for foreign tourists who have heavily impacted the cultural resources associated to these beaches. In this specific case, we will address a particular group of looters that have clearly affected archaeological settlements in the Sierra de San Andrés, in southern Baja California.

GEOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY OF SIERRA DE SAN ANDRÉS, BAJA CALIFORNIA

The Sierra de San Andrés is located on the Pacific coast of Baja California, 4 km North of the Santa Rosalillita town, which is ~100 km north of Guerrero Negro (Figure 1). It runs East-West and has an approximate longitude of ~144 km² and a mean elevation of ~200 meters above sea level. The coastal portion of the Sierra de San Andrés shelters extensive sand dunes, tidal pools, mud flats, and a seasonal arroyo formed ~60 km East on the Sierra de San Borja, locally known as “Sierra La Borreguera”. The geology of San Andrés is mainly composed by steep hills of metavolcanic rock and high volcanic mesas, as well as dark basalts near the coast (Minch et al. 1998: 72-73). This whole area is encompassed by the Valle de los Cirios Natural Reserve in charge of the Commission for Protection of Natural Areas (CONANP). The bay called Punta San Andrés is often visited for its adequate swell conditions. It is also known as “Los Alejandros” surfing camp and it is located within the famous “Seven Sisters” surfing spot (Figure 2).

BRIEF HISTORY OF BAJA CALIFORNIA AS A SURFING DESTINY

Warshaw (2005) indicates that surfing in Baja California started in the 1940s by San Diegan surfers traveling south of the border. By the 1960s southern areas such as Ensenada became more popular, especially through the creation of the “Windsea Surf Club” and the 1966 to 1969 Surfing World Championships held in San Miguel by Nacho Felix Cota, who became one of the first Mexican icons to introduce surf to the Baja California community (Figure 3). Through the 1970-1980 decade the central



Figure 1. General Map of Study Area.

Baja California and Baja California Sur coasts, such as Scorpion Bay and Los Cabos became quite popular culminating in the designation of Bahía Todos Santos, Baja California Sur as the first World Surfing Reserve in Mexico.

Punta San Andrés has become increasingly popular in the last 10 years. Multiple surfing anecdotes as well as wave prediction websites recommend Punta San Andrés and the Seven Sisters as a must for adventurous surfers who enjoy a type of “no-man’s-land” experience. While surfing is essentially a non-exploitative practice, the impacts of human colonization – trash, roads, erosion, water pollution, environmental degradation, depletion of cultural resources – inevitably permeate the area (Barilotti 2002).



Figure 2. “Los Alejandros” Surf Camp West of Sierra de San Andrés. (Photo credit: <http://www.adventureparents.com/photo-galleries-adventure-outdoors-family/276-photo-gallery-alejandros-surf-camp-baja-mexico>)



Figure 3. San Miguel, Ensenada has been a Popular Surfing Point since the 1960s. (Photo credit: <http://www.sunlassesbytower.com/wood-wayfarer-sunglasses-p/wd-wfr-sanmiguel.htm>)

CENTRO INAH BAJA CALIFORNIA'S PRESENCE IN SAN ANDRÉS

On December 2005, archaeologist Porcayo visited San Andrés in order to evaluate the impacts made by the first stages of the “Escalera Nautica” megaproject, which aimed to facilitate the transportation of boats from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of California. He focused on the effects of the road built between the Transpeninsular Highway 1 and Santa Rosalillita and the placement of unauthorized signage promoting unsupervised access to petroglyph and rock art sites, which resulted in increased looting and vandalism. Earlier that week, a surfer from San Andrés had contacted archaeologist Porcayo to officially record petroglyphs and rock rings north of Santa Rosalillita in the San Andrés Sierra.

Guided by the surfer and her husband, the petroglyphs were officially registered and some rock rings in great conditions were also visited (Figure 4). A projectile point and other lithic tools recovered by them were also recorded. At that time, the plan was to come back in 2006 with a larger budget to recover the lithic artifacts kept by the surfers and record the multiple types of archaeological sites since the first visit only lasted a couple hours and was mainly focused in evaluating the aftereffects of the Escalera Nautica and a general overview of the Sierra de San Andrés' archaeology.

Because the priorities of Centro INAH Baja California focused mainly on the areas of the state where projects with larger infrastructure were under construction such as the Tijuana – Ensenada area, the visit did not occur as soon as expected. It is important to note that on December 2005, there were no buildings or houses at Punta San Andrés and surfers camped or stayed in campers, which suggested that the artifacts and cultural sites was at minimal risk. At that time, the understanding was that surfers only focused on their sport and their recreational activities consisted of engaging respectfully with the environment. It never occurred to the archaeologists that the small-scale looting or what we call in Spanish “saqueo hormiga” (which literally means ‘ant looting’) was going to strongly impact the archaeological context. It was not until 2016 when this became evident.

Eleven years later, in March 2016, San Andrés was visited with the idea that things had not changed much in all those years. The reality was quite different. First, a couple houses owned by surfers had been built near the bay, where some groundstone and lithic artifacts laying in their yards were observed. Additionally, our informants showed us an extensive collection of lithic and ceramic artifacts that were under their possession (Figure 5); some of those had been acquired from other surfers to keep them in San Andrés and conserve them as close to their provenience as possible. Moreover, graffiti was noted on some rocks close to the petroglyphs by Punta San Andrés. This graffiti is also attributable to the sporadic visits to the area by Mexican families.

In order to continue the impact assessment on these sites, San Andrés was visited in 2016 June and July. During these visits, a series of lithic tools and ceramic artifacts that had been removed from archaeological sites and recovered from other surfers at Punta San Andrés were voluntarily and officially turned in to Centro INAH Baja California. These artifacts additionally revealed the archaeological relevance of San Andrés, especially the Paleoindian lithic tools.

Because of the above, we made a last visit on November 2016 and decided to do the official recording of all the sites where according to the informants the majority of the artifacts were found and removed from, so we can contextualize them as much as possible. Additionally, we registered other sites further away from the most impacted area, anticipating possible touristic development, in order to create legal documentation of their existence and warranty their protection when landowners request federal permits to build in the zone.

THE RELEVANCE OF SAN ANDRÉS' ARCHAEOLOGICAL PATRIMONY

San Andrés is located East of Isla Cedros, West and North of Sierra de San Borja, Santa Gertrudis, and San Francisco and South of Laguna Chapala (Figure 6). This region is relevant for studies regarding the peopling of Baja California and North America because it is where two traditions have been



Figure 4. Rock Art Registered during INAH's First Official Visit to Sierra de San Andrés in 2006.



Figure 5. Paleoindian Tools Looted from Various Sites across San Andrés.



Figure 6. San Andrés is Geographically Associated to Major Archaeological Regions in the Peninsula such as Laguna Chapala, Isla Cedros, Misión de San Borja and Santa Gertrudis, and Sierra de San Francisco.

clearly identified: Paleoindian and Paleocoastal evidenced by two Clovis points from the Sierra de San Francisco and one from Isla Cedros as well as the dating of rock shelters with occupation, shell middens, and rock art ranging between 9,000 and 11,000 years old (Harumi and Porcayo 2014: 98-108).

Similarly, the research conducted in Laguna Manuela and Guerrero Negro has shared relevant information in regard to Archaic and Late Prehistoric inhabitants of the zone (Ritter 2002), and from the last ten years the direct and indirect interactions between Baja California native population and Spanish people has been documented through archaeological materials, in some cases through underwater artifacts (Von der Porten 2010).

The materials collected by the San Andrés surfers can be neatly framed with the data known for Central Baja California and the previously mentioned research projects. In relation to the peopling of the peninsula paradigms, the Paleoindian tools from San Andrés, aside from being abundant, reveal what could have been a local lithic industry, perhaps Clovis, distributed among a few intact sites (Figure 7). The fact that looting via excavation has not been noted suggests that San Andrés shelters rich and variable contexts with this type of Paleoindian tools, which had not been reported in any other area around the parallel 28°.

Porcelains and majolicas were not identified in the recovered collections, however, the informants turned in a fragmented Mission-ware vessel, which was later conserved and is now part of an exhibit in Tecate. This bowl was probably brought to San Andrés through one of the ancient indigenous routes between the coasts and the missions, such as the San Borja route (Bendímez, Porcayo and Panich 2016:128). During the first systematic survey conducted in November 2016, we registered the sites shown to us by the informants that were in one case the most heavily impacted due to their close location to the surfer camps and access roads, or the ones that were better preserved. The sites previously mentioned, however, do not compose the entirety of archaeological sites in San Andrés.



Figure 7. Some of the Paleindian Tools Recovered by Centro INAH Baja California.

While surveying we noticed a quantity and variety of sites much higher than what we had registered, but because their location was further away from the surfing areas and their risk was lower, these sites will stay in queue for next visits (Porcayo 2016). The recording resulted in a total of 46 sites, out of which we found 30 shell middens, 9 rock shelters with occupation, 5 sites with rock rings, one lithic scatter and one site with petroglyphs (Figure 8) (Porcayo 2016). All of the above represent the archaeological richness of the zone, which most likely does not reflect more than 15% of the evidence across the Sierra. We do believe that some of the sites concentrated in the most interior parts of the Sierra have better preserved, if not intact, contexts that can help us better understand the interactions from Spanish contact all the way back to the Paleindian period.

HOW DID THE “ANT LOOTING” TAKE PLACE?

According to the informants, this type of looting was in part due to the fact that there was no telephone service, internet access, or sophisticated technology for climatic and wave prediction available in this area. Once Punta San Andrés became somewhat popular, surfers will visit, but wait for days until good waves will appear. During those long wait hours, they walked and hiked around the area collecting shell, plants, cacti, and sometimes archaeological artifacts, especially projectile points since some of the surfers traveling with little money tried to sell them to cover their basic needs. After evaluating the potential annual impact, it is important to note that, according to our informants, this type of looting has



Figure 8. One of the nine rock shelters with occupation registered during the last archaeological survey. Shell, bone, and lithic materials are shown extending several meters below the shelter's entrance.

decreased significantly since swell prediction has become more easily available with modern means of instant communication, thus, resulting in shorter visits by surfers as well as less and shorter hikes around these areas.

In November 2016 when conducting the surveys carried out by Centro INAH Baja California, we noticed the relative decline of lithic tools in relation to the rest of the archaeological evidence. Not surprisingly, no projectile points were found at any of the sites and only one bifacial knife was identified. Moreover, we also had a “close encounter” with one of the “ant looters”, who was walking around looking for stuff to pick up and also decided to quickly disappear as soon as he noticed our presence. As mentioned earlier, none of the sites seemed to have been looted through excavation, which suggests that these archaeological contexts are unspoiled and that the damage has most likely only occurred on surface layers. In terms of vandalism, aside from the above-mentioned graffiti, we also noticed littering on some of the shell middens.

WHAT CAN WE ALL DO?

The Society for California Archaeology has had a productive relation with Centro INAH Baja California for decades and has long held a discourse that approaches California archaeology as intricately connected to Baja California, hence calling for collaborative binational research (Allen 2016:255). Therefore, we are opening this discussion again to bring this issue to the attention of the California audience. We strongly believe that it is important to understand that the research, protection, conservation and stewardship of archaeological patrimony in San Andrés is a shared responsibility between the community that has long visited the bay, surfers and the associations that promote it, as well as archaeologists interested in this region. Centro INAH Baja California is hoping to obtain funds to create a strong management plan that goes from systematic research project across the Sierra de San Andrés, to land accessibility agreements, and interpretation courses for those locals who wish to be involved in giving brief tours. All of it embodying the importance of archaeological research and preservation.

While this is an ambitious long-term goal, we will gladly conduct it to the best of our abilities. Therefore, we ask, urge, and exhort American surfing groups and environmental NGOs, or those of you who may be in contact with them, to take accountability of the impact that surfing had made to our cultural landscapes and partake in our efforts to transform the way we interact as tourists, stewards, landowners, and researchers in San Andrés. It is quite important to point out that Centro INAH Baja California is not against surfing and recreation in the area by any means. Surfers we have talked to have shared their contemporary surf philosophy which does encourages a harmonic and sustainable relationship with the coastlines, and also acknowledges the impact that their practices and ideals have on other cultures. Perhaps the looting occurring in San Andrés was partially caused by a lack of understanding in the treatment of archaeological sites and the Mexican laws that regulate and protect them.

Therefore, as archaeologists, north or south of the border, we need to understand the significance of making our research public and sharing our findings with the population beyond our inner circles. This way we can, perhaps, actively participate in generating better and most conscious treatment of our cultural landscape. Nonetheless, surfing culture must acknowledge its responsibility in mitigating their impact on Baja California's coastal natural and cultural resources. In times like these, where the current administration seems to purposefully ignore protection of cultural patrimony within the country while aiming to make bolder and stronger physical and intellectual borders, it is crucial to recognize that our endeavors as producers of knowledge must be responsible, collaborative, dialectic, and inclusive.

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