

Surfing Lake Superior

Robert Dilley and Geoff Lindberg, Lakehead University
(*robert.dilley@lakehead.ca*)

Abstract: Surfing, a sport normally associated with the ocean, has begun to be practised by a small band of enthusiasts on the waves of Lake Superior. This article looks at the nature of the Lake Superior surfer; what he (and sometimes she) likes and dislikes about the lake as a surfing location; how the lake compares with the ocean for the sport; how the surfers learned about the use of the lake; what their principal motives are for surfing; and whether the surfers would like to see the sport grow on the lake.

Introduction

The sport of surfing appears to have originated some three or four thousand years ago in the Pacific Islands (Pearson 1979) and is thought to be one of the world's oldest and most organized athletic activities (Carrol 1991). After 1945, "surfing changed from a leisure-time activity of a select few, to the focus of an alternative lifestyle, which eventually involved thousands of youths" (Hamel 2001, 25). However, in an activity that conjures up images of bronzed bodies on sun-drenched beaches, even the keenest aficionado may be surprised to learn of it being practised on Lake Superior.

For the surfer, there are several negative points about Superior. First, although it is the largest freshwater lake in the world in area, there is only a very limited distance for waves to form. The longest possible fetch is about 500 km; and for most wind directions well under half of that. This results in periods usually six seconds or shorter in between waves. The shorter fetch often results in heavy onshore winds and choppy unpredictable waves. Ocean waves are usually generated by storms more than a thousand miles away, which results in 12 second periods between waves and clean, consistent waves. The large fetch of the ocean

furthermore creates longer swells that have the ability on the right break to provide surfers with extended rides up to five minutes long. The waves on lake on Lake Superior do not have swells as long and therefore the rides on its waves are shorter, regularly lasting less than 30 seconds (Strazz 2000).

Second, Lake Superior remains cold year round: surface temperatures between 1966 and 1975 ranged from an average of 0.1° C in March to 12.8° C in September (Derecki 1980). Although surface water temperatures are reported to have warmed by about 2.5° since 1979 (Austin and Colman 2007) this is hardly inviting compared with Hawaii's cold-season sea temperatures of 23° C (Hawaii 2008): especially as the best waves for surfing on Superior are often during the Fall and Spring (Deur 2004).

Third, the water, being fresh, is less buoyant than the ocean. This has an impact on surfing, as surfing requires one to stay afloat on the wave. The disadvantage of the less buoyant fresh water is that it is harder to catch the wave and stay on the wave in comparison to the ocean. However, an advantage of the fresh water is that it is easier to paddle past breaking waves in the form of duck diving (Deur 2004), the method of burrowing through or beneath an incoming wave that is either cresting or already broken (Warshaw 2003). To compensate for the difference in buoyancy, surfers on Lake Superior use thicker surfboards than ocean surfers, with the lake boards needing to be about an inch thicker in order to achieve the same buoyancy as on the ocean (Deur 2004).

Despite all these negative points, there are some positives for the Superior surfer. What is surely the greatest attraction is that there is little need to fight crowds on the beach or in the water lining up to catch the best waves¹. There is a good chance that on any given day there will be no one or only one or two surfers at any given surf spot on Lake Superior. Further, for some, the opportunity to surf locations on Lake Superior that have rarely or never been surfed before is appealing.

The first time anyone is known to have surfed Lake Superior was in the 1940s, according to eye witness accounts (Strazz 2000). A few others began in the 1970s. The Great Lakes Surfing Association was created in 1964 from surfers on Lake Michigan. It was not until the late 1980s that the first Lake Superior surfers from Duluth, MN joined the club. The surfing population of Lake Superior remained few and far between until the twenty first century. Then a growing number of surfers from Duluth, Minnesota

¹This is enough of a problem at popular locations that there are web sites giving advice on how to cope with the throngs on the beach and in the water. One suggestion is "Don't shower for a week, the smell you emit out in the water should thin the crowds out around you for a couple of metres" (SRO 2008).

and Thunder Bay, Ontario started surfing. Eventually suitable locations were being surfed all around the lake, though the largest numbers seem to be concentrated on the northwest shore. In Thunder Bay the surfing population grew from 3 in 2001 to about 30 in 2008. In Duluth the surf population has grown to more than 40. The Duluth surfers have a club, the Superior Surf Club, which hosts a competition every year (Tema 2007).

One may question the characteristics of those who brave the cold and surf Lake Superior. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the nature of the individuals who pursue their sport in such unlikely waters; to find what they like and dislike about the location; and what motivates them to carry on their activity.

Methods

Information for this paper was collected in part through the technique of participant observation. The second author has been a regular surfer on the north shore of Lake Superior since 2004; both on his own and in the company of others. Further data were collected by means of a questionnaire given to surfers in the Thunder Bay, ON and the Duluth, MN region.

There are known to be about 70 regular surfers in and around the two cities. Initial contacts were made in Thunder Bay with surfers known to the second author, and in Duluth with the president of the surf club there. Then the snowball technique was used to contact additional surfers. Since the surfing community is a close-knit group where everybody knows everybody, the snowball technique was highly effective. A few more respondents were located through two Lake Superior surfing online forums. Because of the small base population, no attempt was made to sample.

The questionnaire was designed to produce quantitative data. Nominal data were obtained through closed-ended questions and ordinal data were acquired by Likert -type scale questions. The questionnaire was pre-tested on a small sample prior to distribution.

Questionnaires were distributed and returned by email. Email was also used to remind those who had not responded. It is possible that a few surfers, who did not have an email connection or who did not use it, were missed. In all, 60 surfers were contacted, which resulted in 30 completed questionnaires. Although a small number, this represents nearly half of the active surfing population in the area. However, data obtained from the questionnaire are used in a purely descriptive form as the numbers are too small for meaningful statistical analysis.

Findings and Analysis

The popular image of the surfer is personified by Gary Trudeau's *Doonesbury* character Zonker Harris: the male "beach-bum," dropping out of society to improve his tan and catch the best waves. Although the number of women surfers worldwide is growing, they total only a small fraction of their male counterparts. In competitive surfing, women face opposition and hostility from men (Toms 2005). Even without the pressures of professional surfing, it is expected that the nature of Superior waters will deter all but the most determined female surfers.

How closely do Lake Superior surfers fit this 'Doonesbury' image? Certainly most are committed surfers. Nearly half of the respondents consider surfing to be an important part of their lives and two-thirds define themselves as strongly committed to the activity. Of the thirty respondents, twenty-five are male and only five female. However, the beach bum image can be dismissed. This is not a young dropout population. The ages of surfers in this study range all the way from 18 to 58, with a mean of 30. Two-thirds of them are in full-time employment (and some of the others are full-time students); all but one have some post-secondary education and over two-thirds graduated from university or college. In any case, a true beach-bum would find the Superior shore a far from ideal place to work on a tan.

Surfing may have been practised for centuries; but not on Lake Superior. None of the surfers in this study had started before the year 2000 and the great majority had begun in or after 2004. In two-thirds of the cases, surfers learned about the possibility of pursuing the sport on Superior by word of mouth and a few simply by noticing someone surfing there.

This may change. The media have recently begun to show some limited interest in this activity. The magazine *Canadian Geographic* had a short piece in 2007 about the growth of surfing on Lake Superior (Dutkiewicz 2007). The next year locally-owned Thunder Bay Telephone included an item in its newsletter sent to customers (TBAYtel 2008) and early in 2009 the *New York Times* carried an article on surfing at Duluth (Regenold 2009.) It seems reasonable to suppose that this publicity may not only alert local residents to this recreational opportunity, but may even bring surfing enthusiasts from further afield.

Such growth may not be appreciated by all current local surfers. Half of those asked would like to see surfing on Lake Superior grow. If you participate in a little-known activity that you are sure others would enjoy if only they knew about it, it is natural to want to spread the word. Most of those surveyed wanted the number of surfers to remain the same, while

four did not care whether or not the popularity of surfing on the lake grew. It seems that the lack of crowds at surfing spots is so attractive that many do not want this pleasure spoiled by growing numbers.

The questionnaire asked respondents why a surfer should come to Superior if an ocean beach is equally accessible. Since ocean waves tend to be bigger, more buoyant, more regular, and crest for longer than those on Superior, it seems natural to assume that anyone who has experienced both will prefer the sea. In fact, preferences are not that clear. Twenty-four of the thirty respondents in this study have experienced ocean surfing. Fourteen of these state that they do prefer the ocean, but ten like the lake better.

The questionnaire also asked what it is that surfers like about Lake Superior. The fact that the lake is close to home certainly helps: a large proportion cited geographic proximity as an attraction and for some respondents a strong attraction. Even those who would prefer to be experiencing Pacific or Atlantic rollers are not likely to turn down the opportunity to catch a few waves a short drive from home. However, there is little indication that surfers are moving to Lake Superior primarily to pursue their sport. Almost all indicate that they live near the lake for other reasons—family, work, school—but do appreciate its convenience from a surfing point of view.

It is clear that the number one attraction, overcoming even the advantage of nearness to home, is the absence of crowds. Only one of the 30 respondents who answered this question felt that this was not important. The friendly atmosphere of Superior surfing was also mentioned almost as often as its being close to home. The friendliness is doubtless closely linked with the lack of crowding. You are much more likely to strike up conversations when you may be the only other person surfing that beach that day. It is worth noting that while “relaxation” is given as the most common motivation for surfing, it is closely followed by “spending time with friends.”

Many respondents noted that the frontier aspect of surfing—pursuing your sport in an apparently hostile environment; to boldly surf where few have surfed before—also has its attractions, though a sizeable minority does not consider this to be important. From the literature and from the experiences of the second author, it was thought that the element of *risk* would be an important motivation to surf. Since surfing the bigger waves of winter often involves dodging chunks of ice as you ride the waves, the risk is unavoidable. The assumption is that, as with sports such as caving and rock-climbing, the risk is part of the enjoyment. A recent study comparing surfers with golfers found that “the sample of surfers in this study were characterised by higher levels of Disinhibition, Thrill and

Adventure Seeking and Experience Seeking dimensions of sensation seeking and Openness to Experience” (Diehm and Armatas, 2003: 675). Among Lake Superior surfers opinion was divided: asked if they surfed “to experience a sense of risk” the same number said “No” as said “Yes”.

What is it that surfers do *not* like about Superior? Anyone who has experienced the lake’s water anywhere except in sheltered bays after a long spell of warming by the sun would naturally suppose the cold water to be the part of the experience that would put people off the most. In fact, this is not so. About as many are indifferent to the water temperature as feel negatively about it. Neither the poorer quality of the waves compared with the ocean nor the lesser buoyancy of the water seemed to be of much concern. By far the biggest complaint is the inconsistency of the waves. It seems that with modern wet suits and somewhat thicker surfboards the quality of the surfing on lake poses no serious problems. Only the wait for a decent wave causes annoyance.

Conclusion

Surfing is a sport that has only just begun to impinge on the public consciousness around Lake Superior. Few have been surfing the lake for more than a few years and the activity has only recently begun to appear in the media as something unusual and unexpected. Because there has been no publicity until very recently, most current practitioners learned about the local opportunity from friends.

Like its much older, worldwide, manifestation, surfing on Lake Superior is still predominantly a male occupation; though the male surfers are mostly somewhat older, more likely to be employed and have had much more education than the popular representation of the surfer (which seems to be an erroneous image anyway).

While a majority of those who have surfed both in the ocean and in the lake not surprisingly prefer the former, a significant minority actually rate the lake higher. The main reason is the absence of the crowding that can ruin the surfing experience at the more popular ocean sites. The companionship that springs up among the small group of enthusiasts is also valued, coming narrowly second the relaxation as reasons for surfing.

With modern neoprene wetsuits and thicker boards, neither the cold water nor the lower buoyancy compared with salt water cause many problems, nor do the shorter rides on smaller lake waves. The principal disappointment is with the irregularity and unpredictability of the waves: the newsletter article by the local Thunder Bay telephone company made

much of the usefulness of cell phones to quickly communicate the whereabouts of surfable waves (TBAYtel 2008).

With the media beginning to get interested it seems inevitable that more people will begin to join in this activity. The current surfing population has mixed feelings about this. About half welcome the idea of more joining in their sport. The question of safety cannot be overlooked. Several currently surf on their own for lack of companionship. It might be reassuring to know that somebody else would be there to notice if you got hit on the head with a floating chunk of ice². However, with lack of crowds being seen as the biggest plus of lake surfing, others are clearly anxious that Superior beaches do not get like Waikiki, with people jostling in line to get into the waves.

Overall, it seems unlikely that Lake Superior will ever become a surfing magnet like Hawaii or California. Even current enthusiasts admit that they surf the lake because they live near it; not that they chose to live near it so that they could surf. Nonetheless, as the news spreads that the sport is possible and enjoyable in Superior's waters some growth may be expected. It is probably still safe to predict that, for the foreseeable future, the biggest attraction of the biggest lake for surfers will be the lack of crowds.

References

- AUSTIN, J.A. and COLMAN, S.M. 2007 'Lake Superior summer water temperatures are increasing more rapidly than regional air temperatures: a positive ice albedo feedback' *Geophysical Research Letters* 34, L06604 doi:10.1029/2006GL029021
- CARROL, N. 1991 *The Next Wave: The World of Surfing* New York: Abbeville Press Publishers
- DERECKI, J.A. 1980 *Evaporation from Lake Superior* Ann Arbor MI: Great Lakes Environmental Laboratory, Environmental Research Laboratories
- DEUR, V. 2004 *Unsalted: A Great Lakes Experience* Grand Haven: Vince Deur Productions
- DIEHM, R. and ARMATAS C. 2004 'Surfing: an avenue for socially acceptable risk-taking, satisfying needs for sensation seeking and experience seeking' *Personality and Individual Differences* 36(3), 663-677
- DUTKIEWICZ, J. 2007 'Surfin' Superior' *Canadian Geographic* available at: <http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/travel/travel_magazine/winter_2007/gateway_sports.asp> accessed 20 August 2009

²After the second author's public presentation of his initial findings, his mother made this point quite firmly to the first author.

- HAMEL, S. 1995. *The Subculture of Surfing* Undergraduate Thesis, Lakehead University, School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism
- HAWAII 2008 <<http://hawaii.pinnacle.travel.org/environment.htm>> accessed 9 December 2008)
- PEARSON, K. 1979 *Surfing subcultures of Australia and New Zealand* St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press
- REGENOLD, S. 2009 'Hanging 10 (degrees) on icy Lake Superior' *New York Times* 26 January
- SRO. 2008 <<http://www.srosurf.com/crowdtip.htm>> accessed 9 December 2008
- STRAZZ, P. 2000 *Surfing the Great Lakes* Chicago: Big Lauter Tun Books
- TBAYTEL. 2008 'Surfing the freshwater breakers of Lake Superior' *Connect* 2(1), Winter
- TEMA, B. 2007 *Superior Surf Club* <<http://www.superiorsurfclub.com>> accessed 5 October 2007
- TOMS, K. 2005 'Male infested waters' *The Guardian* 24 June
- WARSHAW, M. 2003 *The Encyclopedia of Surfing* New York: Harcourt Inc.