
NEW JERSEY

The surfers are defending their turf - Shore enthusiasts lobby for redesign of beach projects

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1493 words

5 January 2003

The Star-Ledger Newark, NJ

FINAL

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English

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Surfers riding a wave of discontent From the days of the early 1960s when large numbers of New Jerseyans first tried to ride balsa boards across breaking waves, the beaches at the North End of Long Branch were a mecca.

Scores of surfers would gather every summer day at Nun's Beach and Kiernan and USO and White Sands and **Gaskins** Point, and a whole culture of activities grew around them: volleyball, sunbathing, surf fishing, scuba diving, kite flying, body surfing. More than one surfer described that stretch of Jersey Shore as "our own little Malibu Beach."

But then sand was pumped onto the beaches of North Long Branch as part of a massive federal project. The beaches were widened and raised. As a result, the waves went away. So did the surfers.

"Now we call it the Graveyard," said Vince Troniec, a local surfing legend who rode his first wave off Long Branch in 1964, around the time the West Coast sport was making its mark in the East. "Nobody goes there anymore."

North Long Branch has become a rallying point for surfers, fishermen and divers who fear the continuing effort of the state Department of Environmental Protection and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to widen beaches will ruin the places they've enjoyed.

While their concerns once fell on deaf ears, that no longer seems to be the case.

Two years ago, for example, a beach fill project in Sandy Hook would have ruined a cherished break in the area, known as the Big Cove, until surfers complained. The National Park Service changed the design, and the cove was spared.

Last year, surfers raised concerns about the extension of an artificial channel - or "flume" - that lets herring swim from the ocean into Deal Lake. The surfers feared the channel would deflect the waves and ruin surfing in neighboring Loch Arbour. After meetings that Rep. Frank Pallone (D-6th Dist.) arranged

between state and local officials and representatives of the surfing and fishing groups, the DEP agreed to a redesign that will preserve the waves.

And, most recently, the renourishment of the beach in the Elberon section of Long Branch was delayed to give the recreational groups time to suggest an alternative design.

"The primary purpose of beach renourishment has always been protecting property and infrastructure, and they've never really been sensitive to recreational issues," said Bill Rosenblatt, a Loch Arbour psychologist who founded the New Jersey chapter of the Surfrider Foundation. "That seems to be changing. The current administration of the Department of Environmental Protection seems to be aware that these projects can cause destruction and loss."

The Army Corps of Engineers awarded a contract in January 1994 for the first section of a \$210 million beach fill project that was to eventually stretch south from Sea Bright to the Manasquan Inlet. Two-thirds of the money is coming from the federal government. The rest comes from state and local sources. The Army Corps calls it the biggest such project in its history.

The project, designed primarily to protect the Shore from storms, calls for pumping 24.9 million cubic yards of sand ashore to form beaches that are 100 feet wide and rise 10 feet above the low tide mark.

The Long Branch phase was completed in September 1999.

Ron Spadevecchia, 45, a Long Branch native who began surfing in the North End when he was 10 years old, said: "There used to be a gradual bottom. When the swell came in, it would break farther out from the beach and roll in. You could ride those swells for a long time. Now the waves just pound on the beach, and you barely have enough time to stand up."

Once the waves in the North End went away, a group of surfers who learned the sport in Long Branch during the 1960s and '70s vowed not to let the same thing happen to their other spots. The group - mostly middle-aged, professional men - slapped "I surf and I vote" stickers on the bumpers of their family sedans and sport utility vehicles and began pushing the government to spare their waves.

They fought their first fight at Sandy Hook, the thin sandy peninsula at the northern tip of Monmouth County that is part of the Gateway National Recreation Area.

The park draws 2.5 million visitors a year - bird-watchers, beachcombers, bicyclists, surf fishermen and surfers among them. The park also is the site of a National Marine Fisheries Service laboratory, a Coast Guard station and a few high school- and college-level marine science programs.

Three years ago, the park administration announced plans to raise and widen the beach to protect the roads, buildings and parking lots that make those activities possible. More than 250,000 cubic yards of sand was to be pumped ashore at the narrowest spot on the peninsula, an area that included the Big Cove.

"Sandy Hook was like the **Alamo** for the surfing community," said Brian Unger, director of the New Jersey chapter of the Surfers Environmental Alliance. "We couldn't let these beach nourishment projects go on as if the only ones using the coast were the people who sit under umbrellas."

The surfers have found a sympathetic ear in the current administration. Gov. James E. McGreevey met

with a group of them during a stop in Long Branch last year. DEP Commissioner Bradley Campbell has met with them, too. A spokeswoman for the department said the agency has been more inclined under McGreevey to listen to the concerns of surfers, fishermen, divers and other recreational users.

"We do place an emphasis on taking into account their concerns," said the DEP's Elaine Makatura. "We are trying to work with them to reach a compromise, but the focus has to remain on Shore protection." THE BIG PICTURE The Army Corps of Engineers says much the same thing, but unlike the DEP -which has signed off on the new design for the Deal Lake flume and agreed to delay the Elberon renourishment - it has yet to weigh in on those projects.

"We are willing to review any and all recommendations," said Anthony Ciorra, the project manager for the Army Corps. "We aren't going to ignore any interest group. But we have to look at the big picture. This is a storm-damage protection project. That has to be our focus."

The Army Corps is studying the new design for the Deal Lake flume and will do the same with the suggestions for the Elberon project, Ciorra said. Once it has completed its review, the Army Corps will make recommendations to the DEP.

Pallone - an unabashed champion of beach replenishment - has been instrumental in helping the surfers make their case about the Sandy Hook and Deal Lake projects, the surfers say. He plans this month to gather together all of the parties interested in the Elberon project so they can begin considering the viability of any of the surfers' proposed alternatives.

"The surfers want the corps and the DEP to reconsider whether the benefits of the Elberon project justify the cost," said Rosenblatt, who in addition to being founder of Surfrider is the mayor of Loch Arbour. "Such an analysis usually involves comparing the cost of building the project with the value of the property it would protect. The surfers want the analysis expanded to take into account the economic value of surfing, fishing and other pastimes that could be lost."

Rosenblatt has suggested two ways of pumping sand at Elberon. Both would preserve the surf breaks by renourishing the beaches at the north and south ends but not in the middle.

One of those designs would involve creating a large, sandy headland alongside a jetty at the south end of town. Sand from that headland would be transported slowly north, he says, by the natural action of the sea.

He also has suggested building an artificial reef near the shore. The reef not only would protect the shore and preserve the surf break but it would create a new habitat for underwater life, benefiting fishermen, he said.

"What were saying is, 'Let's get new,'" Rosenblatt said. "The way the Army Corps is doing it now is an experiment. Nobody knows how it will work. We're saying: 'Why do just one experiment? One size does not fit all. Let's try something a little different.'"

1. Ernest Menocal, 22, of Fair Haven surfs Tuesday in Deal. Beach replenishment has ruined the waves for surfing at other sites. 2. John Parrine, 19, of Fair Haven rides a wave in Deal on Tuesday. Surfers seek changes in beach replenishment projects for Deal and the Elberon section of long Branch so waves will be preserved. INFO GRAPHIC: Beach replenishment effect on waves