

Has the Time Come for Artificial Reefs?

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The seventh international artificial reef symposium is being planned for Sydney in March next year. The symposium aims to "expand the network of people interested in the technical aspects of artificial reefs, encourage the dissemination of information, and empower surfers to seek out better outcomes from coastal engineering works." The target audience includes: local boardrider clubs, Surfing Australia, the ASP, surfing industry representatives, coastal planners, government authorities and interested surfers.

The idea of a manmade perfection is certainly an attractive one but 12 years into the process – and following a few underwhelming efforts – there is a degree of cynicism about the artificial reef movement. I contacted Andrew Pitt, from Surfing Ramps, who is organising next year's symposium and ask for an ETA on a world class man-made wave. He correctly points out that we already have one...

What has been the best example of a man-made wave so far?

The best would have to be the Superbank – that was a man-made sand bank, or the extension to Kirra Point with the groyne now removed. Cables artificial surfing reef in Perth is still a leading reef (see overview at surfingramps.com.au). I guess the estuary mouth at Foster would be in the "man-made group" too. The challenge is to design a consistently breaking reef. The biggest achievement has been to build a durable reef that can survive a beating out there in the ocean. We've been able to do that at Cables in Perth and Narrowneck in Queensland.

Are surfing communities, in general, supportive of artificial reefs?

The issue of support is a local community issue. I think most surfers want to have a stronger role in the management of the coast. Issues like how sand nourishment works (see: Gold Coast) and the re-location of stormwater outlets (see: Manly/Bondi) impact the surfing environment. Hazard removal (Fairy Bower) and the 1997 reef renovation at Burkitt's Reef are also important related issues. I was a member of the committee that got the National Surfing Reserve up at Maroubra and I see that as a

right's based approach, similar to Aboriginal native title. Meanwhile I have found particular pockets of surfers are more supportive of artificial reefs, in particular regional areas with small wave patterns or no premium breaks.

Do we now have the experience and technology to build a world class wave?

Most of us surf at a cluster of surfbreaks which we rotate depending on conditions, crowds, moods, whatever. I think the approach for now is to add to that cluster, create surf breaks that work under conditions the current cluster doesn't provide for. For instance, local surfers at Newcastle have identified a lack of surf spots that work on big southerly swells and southerly, sou' westerly winds (winter conditions).

Is the interest still as high as it was a few years ago or are people becoming dubious because of previous "failures"?

Worldwide, I would say the interest is still high. Though I think as surfers we are looking for direction and vision. What not to build, where not to build it. I also think we need to identify and celebrate what has been successful. Failures? Yes, there are plenty of blogs that will expand on that, but I see failure as a part of learning.

What are the main environmental concerns?

I think the majority of environmental concerns are about implanting 'foreign bodies' in the marine environment, for instance 'sand bags'. But guess what, most objectors to building reefs are not based on environmental concerns, they are based on a perceived 'social impact' (see: Harbord Reef) or a 'philosophical objection' (surfing as back to nature). I encourage these people and diversity of opinion - I think more critique will help in the creation of better and more environmentally-sound reefs and a better planet.

The symposium is planned for the 18th and 19th of March. A venue is still being sourced at time of writing. Contact Andrew Pitt at andrew@surfingramps.com.au for more info. Or see www.surfingramps.com.au.

By Kirk Owers

Pic: Can man create a reef as good as Lance's Right?

Credit: Bosko