



Policymakers can use surf breaks, as in Playa Guiones beach, Costa Rica, to create jobs and reduce poverty.

Surf's up, and so is economic growth

Mark Mulligan

It's no secret to surfers but may come as a surprise to the uninitiated: quality breaks, once discovered or exploited, can drive business growth by bringing crowds, infrastructure and business.

And while anathema to the perpetual search for the perfect, uncrowded wave, most surfers also know that discovery can ring the death knell for those treasured, solitary sessions and give rise to hamlets and even large towns and small cities where once there was nothing.

A study released on Monday by wave-chasing Sydney University academic and economist Sam Wills tries to quantify the impact a quality surf break can have on a local economy.

By studying 5000 surf locations across 146 countries between 1992 and 2013, he and his team from the university's School of Economics concluded that a perfect peak, peeling left-hander or freight-train right-hand reef break can add up to 2.2 percentage points a year to local GDP.

Economic growth around the breaks was tracked via satellite images of night-time light emission, and by following population expansion over the same period. The theory was tested along with the influence on wave access and quality of wetsuit technology and climate patterns.

"We conducted four sets of experiments and they all confirm that good waves significantly increase growth, particularly after recent discoveries and during El Nino years [better swells

and winds prevail]," Dr Wills said.

He said while it was well understood that natural features such as rivers and fertile soil have always mattered for economic growth, the study "provides some of the first evidence that natural amenities are also important".

The paper suggests policymakers can use surf breaks as a way to create jobs and reduce poverty, especially in developing countries. To do this they can promote public and private investment needed to enjoy surf breaks, while protecting their environmental quality.

Discovering a high-quality break increased growth in surrounding areas.

Sam Wills, Sydney University

"Discovering a high-quality break – or battery-heated wetsuits that made cold-water breaks more accessible – increased growth in the surrounding areas," Dr Wills said.

To prove the point, researchers cited famous breaks around the world whose disappearance has damaged the local economy. Spain's Mundaka, a grinding left-hander in the Basque country that breaks across an estuary sandbar, was ruined by river dredging to broaden a boat channel.

"The annual Billabong Pro, which runs each October at this famous locale, was cancelled for two years in a row after the sandbar seemed to have

practically disappeared," said the Save the Waves Coalition at the time.

In a similar case, world class left-hander Jardim do Mar in Portugal was spoiled by the construction of a sea wall to protect a new coastal road.

The University of Sydney research, entitled "Surfing a wave of economic growth", has also yielded a list of Australia's and the world's fastest-growing surf breaks over the 21 years to 2013.

Nine of the 10 top Australian breaks are in the Margaret River-Yallingup region of Western Australia.

Three of them – Rabbits, Isolators and Yallingup Beachbreak – also make the world's top 10, after breaks in Costa Rica – a notable beneficiary of surf tourism – Peru, Malaysia and Vietnam.

"I had the idea for the paper straight after I submitted my PhD thesis," Dr Wills said. "It was November and I needed to get out of Oxford, so I looked for somewhere warm and sunny with good waves.

"I settled on Taghazout in Morocco, thinking it would be quiet. Flying in at sunset over the desert I noticed that everything was dark, except for one little spot that was lit up like Pitt Street Taghazout. Once I arrived I realised this previously sleepy little fishing village had been overrun by surfers, and so I wanted to figure out whether it was systematically happening around the world."

Dr Wills will present the findings at the International Surfing Symposium conference at the Gold Coast this week in the lead-up to the Quicksilver Pro, the first stop on the 2017 surfing World Championship Tour.