

## Australian National Surfing Reserves – rationale and process for recognising iconic surfing locations

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### ABSTRACT

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Australia has a wide range of world-renowned surfing sites. They are spread around the 13 200 km long southern half of the continent from Fraser Island in the east around to North West Cape in the west. This southern coast has 5700 beaches, which prior to 2006 only one of which had been afforded surfing reserve status, namely Bells Beach in 1973. There are however more than 20 well-recognised iconic surfing sites that also deserve recognition and dedication as a surfing reserve. This paper will address the renewed and to date, very successful process of ensuring the remaining top Australian surfing sites are officially recognised and declared surfing reserves. The declaration of a surfing reserve achieves three purposes: it formally recognises the site as an area of surfing significance and quality surf; it recognises the long and close links between surfers and the surf and it will assist in the long term preservation of the site for future surfers. This paper addresses the following: the nature of and rationale for surfing reserves; the selection process; the reserves dedicated to date and those listed for possible future dedication.

**ADDITIONAL INDEX WORDS:** *Surfing reserves, Australia*

### INTRODUCTION

Australians remain the foremost nation interacting recreationally with the surf zone (FARMER and YOUNG, 1988) and surfing reserves for Australians have been compared to sites of cultural, sporting, heritage and religious locations in other countries. The conceptual recognition of surfing icons has been attempted in Santa Cruz (California), Uluwatu (Bali), Pipeline and Waikiki (Hawaii) and Freshwater Beach (Australia) with plaques and statues. While these sites recognise a strong association with surfing, none are capable of protecting or enhancing the site for surfing. For this to occur, as well as visual recognition, a reserve system is required to identify and protect iconic surfing sites.

Australia's first surfing reserve was officially gazetted by the Victorian government at Bells Beach in 1973, followed by 32 years of no further reserves. In this time however, the coastal population, development and tourism had boomed placing increasing pressure on the coast and every surfing site. Bells Beach has during the same period become an international surfing site, location of the world's longest running surfing contest, the Annual Bells (Easter Classic) Contest; while the nearby town of Torquay has grown into one of the centres of the international surf industry.

While Bells, a land-based reserve, has blossomed under the protection afforded by its reserve status, the rest of the Australian coast remains officially oblivious to its surfing status, placing some top surfing sites at risk to over-development and even destruction. In 1993 Brad Farmer, then President of Surfrider Foundation Australia, attempted to have South Stradbroke Island's TOS 'The Other Side',

also known as J-Land after Premier Joh Bjelke-Peterson, dedicated as a surfing reserve. A nomination and justification was prepared (ENGLAND and FARMER, 1993) and received the support of the Goss Labour Government. However a pending State and Local election reprioritised the agenda. Again surfing reserves went into limbo until 2005.

In face of this increasing pressure in 2005, a small group of surfers decided to act to recognise and preserve Australia's premier surfing sites. In February, 2005 Brad Farmer (no longer associated with the Australian Surfrider Foundation) formed a committee, called the National Reference Group of Surfing Reserves Australia, under the patronage of rock legend, surfer, environmentalist and Federal Member of Parliament Peter Garrett. The committee members also included the second author and representatives from Surfing NSW, Surfing Lifesaving NSW, tRACKS magazine, NSW government and the National Parks Association. The aim of the committee was to facilitate the identification, nomination and dedication of additional surfing reserves in each state and as such called itself National Surfing Reserves-Australia (NSR-A). This paper briefly documents the developments to date in establishing Australia's surfing reserves.

### SURFING RESERVES

Once the committee met it soon realised it needed formal definitions of both a surfer and surfing reserve. For this purpose the following definitions were adopted.

*Surfer* - any person who interacts physically with the surf for recreation. It includes bodysurfing, bodyboarding,

surfboarding, surfskiing, surfboating, all forms of surf lifesaving and lifeguarding but excludes all surf interaction powered by wind and machines. It is estimated some 3 million Australians identify as 'surfers' on a regular basis.

*Surfing reserve* - a part of the coastal environment recognised by the NSR-A and the local community for the quality and consistency of its surf and its long-term and on going relationship between the surf and surfers. It usually encompasses the beach and adjacent surf zone but may include features of the marine and coastal zone which intrinsically enhance aspects of the surfing experience, including structures such as surf clubs or localities such as the birthplaces of surfing in each state or a place considered sacred by surfers for a particular reason.

A surfing reserve does not however attempt to *exclude* any user group and no statutory provisions are attached therein.

Next the committee prepared a short list of potential surfing reserves. This list (Table 1) was intended to provide a starting point for the reserve process and to encourage further nominations from the public. The list is not exhaustive and it is expected others will be added. However, given the definition of and criteria for a surfing reserve, the list is not expected to exceed 50. Next in order to get an initial reserve underway it decided to select two sites to actively support for dedication, one an urban beach the other a country site.

Table 1. Tentative list of potential surfing reserves. **Bold** have been dedicated by 2007.

<i>Queensland</i>
Moffat Beach (Caloundra), Noosa, Burleigh Heads, Kirra (or Kirra-Snapper Rocks)
<i>New South Wales</i>
Duranbah, <b>Angourie</b> , Crescent Head, North Narrabeen, Manly, Bondi, <b>Maroubra Beach</b> , Cronulla, South Coast 'Aussie' Pipe
<i>Victoria</i>
Gunamatta, <b>Bells Beach</b> , Johannas
<i>Tasmania</i>
Mallawah
<i>South Australia</i>
Middleton, Waitpinga, Cactus
<i>Western Australia</i>
Margaret River, Yallingup, Kalbarri coast, Gnaraloo, Exmouth coast
<i>Northern Territory</i>
Gove or Turtle Beach

When the second committee was held on June 24, 2005 two sites had been selected, the urban Maroubra Beach in Sydney located just 8 km from the CBD and Angourie on the NSW north coast, an idyllic site with a famed right-hand point break bordering a national park. Having selected the sites it was then time to get the locals on board and have them take ownership of the project. To achieve this a preliminary outline of the purposed surfing reserve was sent to a number of potential stakeholders including Federal, State and local politicians, the Maroubra and South Maroubra surf lifesaving clubs which date back to 1907 and 1959, Surfing NSW (based at Maroubra), the Maroubra Boardriders Club founded in 1963 and the oldest in Australia and the local indigenous surfers. At Angourie, two long-term members of the small surfing community began preparing a history of surfing at Angourie.

At Maroubra, a very successful site meeting was held on July 22, 2005 at which all were invited to sign a document supporting the dedication. All present were enthusiastic about the idea.

At the third committee meeting on August 26, 2005 a Maroubra Beach Surfing Reserve Committee was formed consisting of a representative from Randwick Council, Surfing NSW, Maroubra Christian Surfers and two local surfers. This committee was charged with organising the dedication day. In the mean time the local council had approved the dedication and offered financial support for the event. This left three items to resolve. First, the wording of the dedication and its physical form and location; second, the completion of the Maroubra Surfing Reserve Proposal which documents the history of surfing at Maroubra; and third, the dedication date, 19th March, 2006.

At the same time locals at Angourie, which was first surfed in 1959 by Ray Moran and three friends, had began drafting their proposal and the October, 2005 issue of tRACKS magazine (TRACKS, 2005) lifted the lid and announced to all the surfing reserve momentum.

### The Maroubra Dedication

Maroubra Beach National Surfing Reserve was dedicated on 19th March, 2006. The wording for the Maroubra beach plaque is provided in Box 1 with a photograph of part of the ceremony shown in Figure 1.

On 27th March, 2006 Peter Garrett MP addressed the Australian Parliament on the subject of the Maroubra Beach Surfing Reserve (Hansard, House of Representatives, 2006), bringing to the attention of Parliament the work of the NRG, the Maroubra Beach dedication and the importance of the role of surfing in Australia life.

#### Maroubra Beach National Surfing Reserve

Surfing is a fundamental part of Australia's identity  
Our coast is where people meet the sea and surfers face  
The might of the oceans

Maroubra Beach, traditional home of the Bidjigal people, is integral to the historical, environmental, spiritual and cultural heritage of Australian surfing. People began surfing here in the early 1900s, formed one of the first Surf Life Saving Clubs in 1907 and the first Australian surfboard riding club in 1963. Since then, many thousands of Australians have ridden millions of waves at Maroubra beach.

National Surfing Reserves recognise sites of cultural and historical significance in Australian surf culture. They acknowledge the surfing way of life and link past, present and future generations with our oceans, waves and beaches. In 1973 Bells Beach, Victoria was declared a Surfing Reserve.

Maroubra Beach is now Australia's second Surfing Reserve and first in New South Wales.

Maroubra Beach National Surfing Reserve  
Dedicated on 19 March 2006

Peter Garrett  
Member for Kingsford Smith  
Patron, National Surfing Reserves

The Maroubra  
Surfing Community

Councillor Ted Seng  
Mayor of Randwick

Box 1. Wording of the Maroubra Beach National Surfing Reserve plaque

Angourie  
is one of the unique places in the world where  
surfers have travelled from near and far just to experience  
the quality of the wave and the beauty of the natural environment that  
should never be lost

**ANGOURIE SURFING RESERVE**

Angourie traditional country of the Yaegl people who lived in harmony with the landscape,  
is home to ospreys and the playground of dolphins, turtles, whales and the many  
creatures of the sea.

National Surfing Reserves recognise sites of cultural and historical significance in Australian surf  
culture. They acknowledge the surfing way of life and link past, present and future generations  
with our oceans, waves and beaches

Generations of surfers coming to Angourie since the 1950's, have ensured that the beautiful  
Place is integral to the environment, spiritual and cultural heritage of Australian surfing

**Share – Respect – Preserve**

	The Angourie Community	
The Hon Tony Kelly	Mr Brad Farmer	Councillor Ian Tiley
Minister for Lands	National Surfing Reserves	Mayor of Clarence Valley

Dedicated January 2007  
Angourie National Surfing Reserve

Box 2. Wording of the Angourie National Surfing Reserve plaque



a.



b.



c.



d.

Figure 1. *The Maroubra Beach National Surfing Reserve dedication: a) Peter Garrett MP; b) the Maroubra plaque. The Angourie National Surfing Reserve dedication: c) Laurie Fox, Luke Egan, Mark Occhilupo. Minister for Lands Tony Kelly and Brad Farmer; d) the Angourie plaque (A.D. Short).*

### Angourie and the Gold Coast National Surfing Reserves

Following on from the success of the Maroubra dedication the committee sent a press release to several coastal councils informing them of the success of the Maroubra Beach dedication, inviting them to consider surfing reserves in their regions. As a result of this the committee was invited to address the Clarence Valley Council and Gold Coast City Council, which represent the Angourie and the Gold Coast beaches respectively. The two authors Farmer and Short met with each council on 21st June, 2006 at which each council decided to support the dedication of their respective sites and established local committees of surfing and community representatives.

The Angourie site was dedicated on 12th January, 2007 (Fig.1 and Box 2). The Gold Coast sites, which will include Burleigh Heads and Kirra, probably extending to Snapper Rocks are scheduled for dedication in 2008.

In the meantime the committee was approached by Manning Shire Council about a surfing reserve at Crescent Head. An inaugural meeting was held at Crescent Head on 22nd January, 2007 with a nomination scheduled for April, 2007. The committee has also been approached by individuals regarding Duranbah Beach, Catherine Hill Bay, North Narrabeen Beach and Manly Beach and has begun discussions with community representatives at Cactus in South Australia and Margaret River in Western Australia with regard to their surfing sites.

It is hoped that all the potential reserves listed in Table 1 and very likely several others will be dedicated within the next few years. These sites will still however represent only a small fraction of Australian beaches and surfing sites (Table 2)

While the Maroubra Beach Reserve was purely symbolic, in October, 2006 the New South Wales Department of Lands approached the committee in August 2006 and proposed that a new category of Crown Land be enacted through their Regional Reserve Strategy called a 'Surfing Reserve'. The reserves would follow the high water mark and extend 500 m seaward, thereby encompassing the actual surfing site. They would be formally gazetted as a Crown 'Surfing' Reserve and managed by a local committee appointed by the Minister for Lands. The

committee accepted this proposal. As a result Angourie was the first such NSW surfing reserve and was gazetted at the

2007 dedication. It is also the world's first surfing reserve to extend seaward and cover the actual surfing site.

### DISCUSSION

Widespread public surfing commenced in Australia in the early 1900's, followed by the rapid establishment and spread of surf life saving clubs and the formation of Surf Life Saving Australia in 1907 (JAGGARD, 2007). While the general public bathed and bodysurfed, surf lifesavers developed a wide range of craft for rescue and competition including wave skis and surfboats. Today the annual Australian Surf Life Saving Championship is the world's largest annual sporting event with up to 10 000 competitors. Board surfing took off in Australia after the 1956 introduction of the lightweight Malibu board and has since seen a phenomenal growth in popularity. Subsequently, bodyboarding, wave skis and other craft have been developed to expand the approaches to surfing. This growth has been paralleled by the growth of the surfing industry, initially backyard and small surfboard factories; to the giant multinational clothing companies that now dominate much of the world's leisure wear. Surfing and surfing sites however receive little from this massive popularity and associated profits, other than more crowded surfing breaks. Some funds go into advertising via magazines, surfing competitions and sponsored surfers, with little and usually nothing put back into grassroots surfing and certainly nothing to improve the lot of iconic sites. Even some of the premier surfing competition sites are rather derelict in appearance. Given this void of leadership from the industry, National Surfing Reserves-Australia was founded to address one important issue – that of officially recognising and dedicating a number of iconic surfing sites around Australia.

Table 2. Summary of Australia beaches and surfing reserves (source Short, 2006)

State/region	km coast	No Beaches	Dedicated surfing reserves	Proposed surfing reserves
Southern Australia				
SE	640	112	1	4
Queensland				
New South Wales	1591	721	2	8
Victoria	1232	560	1	3
Tasmania	2235	1269	0	1
South Australia	3274	1454	0	3
S Western Australia	4267	1603	0	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>13239</b>	<b>5719</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>24</b>
Northern Australia				
N Western Australia	6027	1808	0	0
Northern Territory	5029	1488	1	0
N & E Queensland	5451	1489	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>16507</b>	<b>4785</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>

To date the concept of National Surfing Reserves has been enthusiastically embraced by a number of coastal councils and local surfing communities, which has resulted in the dedication or proposed dedication of one site in 2006, three in 2007, and several more now underway with 20 or more expected to be dedicated over the next several years.

It is hoped that these dedications will not only add recognition to the importance of each site but also to the role of surfing in Australian life. Formalised surfing has come a long way since the first surf life saving clubs were formed in 1907 and first board riding clubs in 1963. It is now time to formally recognise the role of and contribution of surfing to Australia and the Australian way of life. We feel that the National Surfing Reserves will substantially increase this recognition.

## CONCLUSION

The sport of modern surfing, which commenced in places like Hawaii, the USA and Australia in the early 1900's, has seen a phenomenal growth in recent years with the increasing popularity of board surfing and the international dominance of leisure clothing by Australian surf wear companies - Billabong, Rip Curl and Quiksilver. The popularity of surfing has boomed and more and more sites are surfed and sites in general are becoming increasingly crowded and in some places put at risk or destroyed by coastal development. At the same time little, and in most case nothing, has been done to protect and preserve the actual surfing sites. In 2005 only one of Australia's 10 000 plus beaches had been reserved for surfing.

In Australia, with respect to recognising, protecting and preserving surfing sites, there has been a void of leadership from the Australian-based multimillion-dollar surf industry, from representative surfer groups and from surfing environmental groups. Because of this absence of leadership National Surfing Reserves-Australia was founded by the authors in 2005 with a vision to identify and expand the number of National Surfing Reserves in Australia and thereby

ensure the formal recognition and ongoing protection of Australia premier surfing sites.

Maroubra Beach National Surfing Reserve was dedicated in 2006 with Angourie in 2007 and the Gold Coast (Burleigh Heads and Kirra-Snapper Rocks), Crescent Head, and another 20 or more planned for the coming years. In each case the dedication has brought together all forms of surfers, the local community and local council to recognise, dedicate and preserve their iconic surfing site.

The dedication of each reserve will ensure that Australia's top surfing sites are recognised as site sacred to surfers and the surfing community; that the local surfing community works towards the ongoing preservation and enhancement of these sites

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