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## **New moves in the imagineering of surf tourism: scripting wave pools.**

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### **Abstract**

In the twenty first century, surfing spaces are changing. Whilst the socio-demographics of surf-riders diversify, media spaces digitize, and craft innovate, a range of new sites both natural and artificial have emerged around which surf-riders can tour and travel. As these changes occur, questions emerge about how these new surfing spaces will be 'imagineered' by their creators into a thriving cultural geography. Drawing on existing literature which argues that 'modern surfing spaces' have been imagineered into a 'script' which has moulded the practice and its geographies, this paper examines two artificial wave pools and the nature of the scripts emerging to attract surf tourists. By critically engaging with marketing information both on site and online, the paper evaluates the scripts imagineered at *Surf Snowdonia* (Wales) and *The Wave* (England) to offer new insights into the meanings, experiences, and nature of surf travel in these new surfing spaces.

### **Keywords**

*Surfing, geography, script, tourism, theme park*

### **Introduction**

“Tourism texts... etch significance onto landscapes. ... destinations are ‘scripted’ by advertising texts [and] these advertisements are generative and actually create place” (Frohlick and Johnston, 2011: 1093).

Surfing spaces are not just about the practice of surfing itself – the engagement of aspirant rider, craft, and cresting water – but also about how this experience is selectively shaped, represented, and commodified. Drawing on the vocabulary of Melucci (2006), as Frohlick and Johnston note above, this ‘scripting’ creates a central framework of meanings and symbols which seek to “mobilise”, “validate”, and “enlarge” (after Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993: 166) interest and participation in a particular cultural geography. Such generative scripting can be understood to be integral to a broader process of ‘imagineering’ (after Nijs and Peters, 2002). Imagineering is a compound process which merges “imagination” and “engineering” undertaken for the purposes of commodification (in other words, the translation of culturally significant practices or artefacts into resources for economic transaction (see, for example, Scott, 2001)). Imagineering thus refers to a process which does more than simply ‘construct’ (a practice which uses intellect to categorise and represent). Imagineering initially employs imagination - along with culturally significant ideas and values - to impose order on and give meaning to selected elements of reality, then, these ideas are engineered into a physical, material geography. As Routledge et al state: imagineers, “work to effect what Callon ... terms the ‘moments’ of translation” (2007: 2578), turning not only ideas into action, potential consumers into a functioning market, but also disparate individuals into a culture. In sum, “‘imagineers’... ‘ground’ the concept or imaginary ... (what it is, how it works, [and] what it is attempting to achieve)” in a context (Routledge, et al, 2007: 2578).

An imagineered event, practice, or location seeks to appeal to its constituency (which are predominantly and importantly positioned as “consumers” by those imagineering it) creating not simply functional products or practices, but “meaningful experiences” (after Kuiper and Smit, 2014: 1). As Anderson (2023) has argued, the success of imagineering has been central to the generation of modern surfing spaces. As Anderson has also pointed out (forthcoming), through this process the modern surf traveller has come to be understood as white, male, young and athletic (see also Dominguez Andersen, 2015; Wheaton, 2017; Olive et al, 2015). ‘He’ is an individual who predominantly rides a shortboard (see Kampion and Brown, 2003;

Ford and Brown, 2006), seeks out risk and adrenalin (which is sub-culturally known as 'stoke' (for more see Fordham, 2008; Evers, 2006)), and is often performatively competitive (formally or otherwise) against 'his' peers (cf Bush, 2016). In terms of travel, the modern surf traveller aspires to ride empty waves in tropical climes (Ponting, 2009), and exhibits broadly colonising attitudes to foreign places, cultures, and surfing practices (see Comer, 2010; Lawler, 2011, Hough-Snee and Eastman, 2017). This scripting of surfing spaces has been commercially and culturally successful. As a consequence of the imagineering process surfing is now popular in a range of countries across the globe (see Borne and Ponting, 2015; Hough-Snee and Eastman, 2017), and the dominant surfing 'script' is used to sell a range of products and practices which bear little relation to the pastime, but which benefit from being commodified-through-connection with it (see Anderson, 2016). In 2014, for example, it was estimated that this imagineered-industry was worth over US\$20 billion (Surfer Today, 2014), whilst companies such as Quiksilver were reported annual turnovers in the multiple billion dollars (e.g. US \$1.81 billion in 2013, as cited in Surfer Today, 2014). Indeed, the opportunities for further profit-making has led to the extension of the imagineering process into new surfing spaces.

### **Locating Surfing Spaces.**

Conventional surf-riding occurs in littoral locations, with surfed-waves occurring through the convergence of rider and craft within a complex assemblage of water, wind, beach, continental shelf, storm surge, wind energy, solar power, and planetary movement (see Anderson, 2012; Anderson, 2019). However, not only has the imagineering of surf-riding in these locations realised significant economic profit (as we have seen above), it has also identified the limitations in doing so. Basing commercial operations on a set of natural relations which are unpredictable, unreliable, and variable in terms of quality, has led to some entrepreneurs seeking to replicate surfable waves in artificially-controlled locations. Innovations in technology and engineering, such as ploughs and foils, have been pioneered in order to generate waves to order, with a range of purpose-built arenas constructed to control not only how waves crest, but also how their post-break energies are safely channelled. A set of ranches, pools, and lakes are in various stages of commercial operation. These new spaces are predominantly located in sites not conventionally associated with surf-riding (for example, they are in land-locked locations), and placed intentionally close to tourist hotspots or large population centres. In line with the broader trend towards the commodification of

tourism and leisure (what Loynes has termed 'recreational capitalism' (1998: 35)), these sites provide not only surf-riding experiences but a range of other pursuits; as Hollinshead notes (in relation to broader tourist activities), these sites:

“provid[e] a clustered mix of activity-experiences and shopping/catering amenities cohesively packaged and presented towards family leisure and tourism markets” (2009: 269),

the sites provide their visitors with fully-packaged locations for a day out, comprising entertainment, food, leisure, training, shops, and often conference or competition facilities.

As such, the emergence of these new surfing spaces can be argued to represent the logical extension of the imagineering process. These new surfing spaces geographically enclose, culturally script, and actively monetise all aspects of the activities occurring within them, from making predictable the water conditions, (b)ordering the cultural experience on the waves, and tying in value-added merchandising and broader consumption on the land. They represent, in short, the imagineering of specific destinations in which a new cultural geography of surf-riding can be scripted then commodified: they embody surfing spaces as theme parks.

### **New Surfing Spaces: the emergent era of the surf-riding theme park.**

“Surf pools are ... an amusement park for ...those who live in the city, in places far from the sea or for those who do not have time to leave at the first sign of a swell” (Scafuro, 2021: no page).

In line with surf journalist Erika Scafuro (above) it is suggested by this paper that new surfing spaces, such as *The Wave* (England) and *Surf Snowdonia* (Wales), can be usefully understood as a form of theme park. According to Hollinshead:

“Theme parks are highly developed, capital intensive, self-centralised recreational spaces, which contain a pre-designated mix of entertainment facilities, specialty food

outlets, and attractions-of-specific interest which are [...] arranged and organized around a 'theme' or 'unifying idea'" (2009: 269).

The emergence of a new era of parks organised around a theme of surf-riding can be seen to be a specialist variation in the broader trend in the commodification of leisure which, as we have noted above, seeks to enclose and control all aspects of the visitor experience. As such, the manner in which these theme parks script their activities significantly influences the nature of how those cultural practices are understood, put into practice, and made attractive to potential constituencies. As Hollinshead points out:

"...theme parks a[re] an important setting of cultural selection and cultural production in leisure and tourism where received and established forms of being, identity, and difference are not only projected but are unmade and remade through the exhibition of that phenomenon as a leisure and/or tourism drawcard. ...they borrow, invent, and articulate certain meanings and representations while they deny, silence, or de or rearticulate other such interpretations of knowing and seeing" (2009: 270).

As Hollinshead suggests, the imagineering of theme parks may draw upon existing cultural scripts to create a sense of authenticity and expertise, whilst also articulating new variations to invent new senses of identity, power, and authority to their constituencies. Through this process, "theme parks... present and perform (and thereby create or help create) particular forms of culture, heritage [and] nature" (ibid: 270), they constitute the "industrialized scripting of people [and] places" (ibid: 286). In this context, questions emerge as to how these new surfing spaces are scripted in practice. How do they, as Frohlick and Johnston suggest (above), "etch significance onto" their new places, scripting "embodied practice and performance" and, through this process, "actually create" new surfing places? In the next section we explore how 'new' surfing spaces have been imagineered with reference to two early movers in this new theme park era: *Surf Snowdonia*, and *The Wave* (Bristol).

#### **Cases: New surfing spaces.**

*Surf Snowdonia* and *The Wave* (Bristol) are two of the first commercially operated surf theme parks in the world. Both parks use *Wavegarden* technology to create waves (it must be noted,

however, that each site is different in terms of the specific iterations of the software and engineering employed, and as a consequence each varies in terms of the range of waves that can be offered to visitors)<sup>i</sup>. *Surf Snowdonia* originally opened as a stand-alone attraction but is now positioned within the broader *Adventure Parc Snowdonia* complex, located on a reclaimed aluminium processing brownfield on the perimeter of the Snowdonia National Park, north Wales (Snowdonia has now formally adopted its Welsh name, Eryri, but is still commonly known as Snowdonia, with over 4 million people visiting the park every year (Snowdonia National Park, 2023)). In line with the importance of acknowledging the unique constitution of water bodies (following Anderson and Stoodley, forthcoming), *Surf Snowdonia's* artificial lake is 300m long and 110m wide, is fed by rainwater from local reservoirs, and its waves are generated by a plough which is towed via cable on a track in the centre of the lake. *Surf Snowdonia* cost £12 million to build, and opened in 2015.

Figure 2. Snowdonia Welcome (source: Adventure Park Wales, 2022).

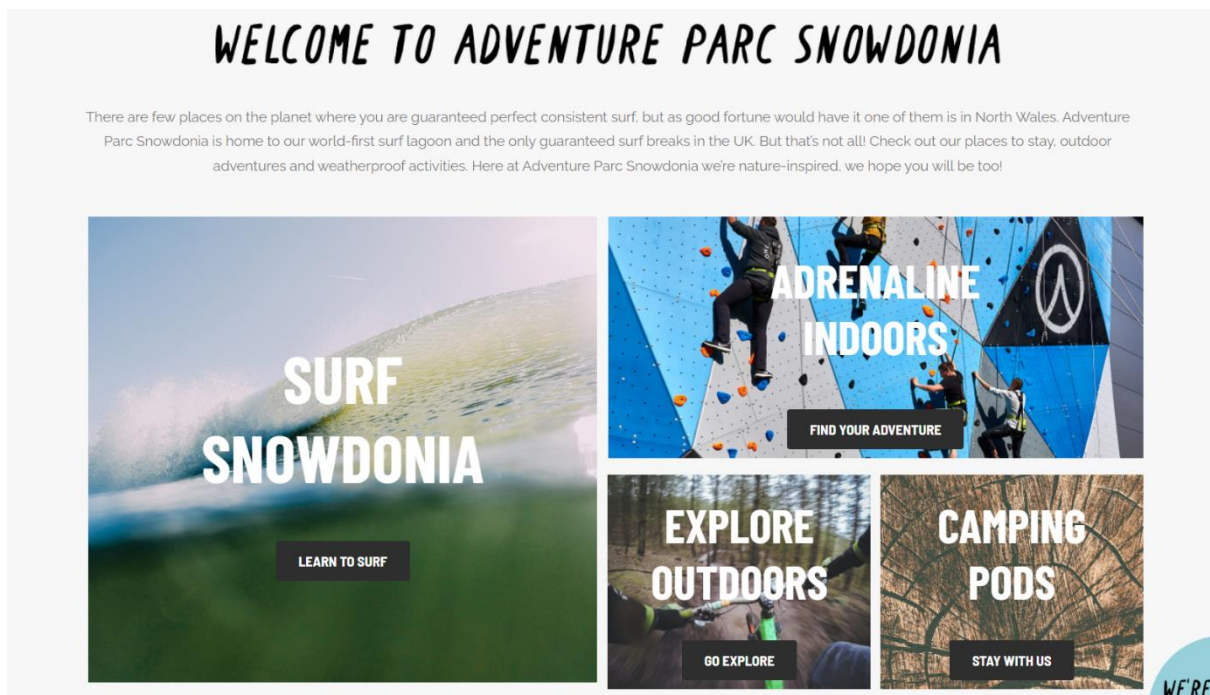


Figure 3. Snowdonia Waves 1 (source: Authors).



Figure 4. Snowdonia Waves 2 (source: Authors).





Figure 5. The Wave 1 (source: Authors).



Figure 6. The Wave 2 (source: Authors)



Figure 7. The Wave 3 (source: Authors).



*The Wave* opened in 2019, on agricultural land in the hinterland of Bristol, south west England. *The Wave* is located in close proximity to the M4 motorway which is the primary automobile route to the tourism hotspots of Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall (this region attracts 136 million day trips per year, and 19.7 million multi-day trips, attracting £4.4 billion in spend (see Visit Britain, 2015)). At this site waves are generated using contemporary versions of *Wavegarden* technology operating in a fan-shaped lake 180 metres long by 200 metres wide. The complex cost £26 million to build (Marshall, 2019).

Unlike surf-riding in the vast majority of littoral locations, there is a direct economic cost associated with riding waves in surfing theme parks. Although parking and spectating at both parks is nominally priced (at the time of writing it is free to park at both locations, and costs £2 for spectators to attend *The Wave*), surf-riding itself is relatively expensive. An hour's surf-riding at each site broadly equates to a mid-priced monthly gym membership in the UK, and as such, although both sites do attract repeat business from well-off surf-riding locals (who

are prepared to pay for theme-park-surf rather than drive to littoral breaks in Wales or the South West of England), both sites rely on tourism as a key source of income. In this light, the cost of surf-riding at each site becomes competitive with entry prices to other theme parks across the UK, and their opening schedules reflect the likelihood of tourist attendance<sup>ii</sup>. Having noted this, in line with many businesses operating in the recreational sphere, both parks do not base their competitive edge solely on price (following Klein, 2001). Rather, they create a 'script' to generate interest in their "brand as experience, as lifestyle" (Klein, 2001: 21); as Frohlick and Johnston put it (and reflecting Nijd and Peters comments on the wider process of imagineering (2002)), such industries succeed when they are able to "portray unique identities", achieved through "promis[ing] various social, emotional, and subjectivity values. In other words, they incite beliefs and evoke emotions" (2011: 1094).

In the vocabulary of this paper, it is through their chosen scripts that themes, identities, and lifestyles are incited and evoked. It is through these scripts that values and experiences are promised not simply in terms of encounters with water and waves, but with the array of other facilities on site and the cultural capital that has been injected into these activities. Through becoming involved at these locations, the brands' promises, values, and capital are shared with participants, and attendance "become[s] fashionable and hence a significant lifestyle indicator for tourists" (after Frohlick and Johnston, 2011: 1094).

### **Scripting *Surf Snowdonia*.**

"theme parks [...] seek to ensure that [...] the identifying theme of the park will be consistently symbolized in terms of the actual image potential visitors 'read' from everything encountered about the theme parks from its name, its logo, its design, its staff, etc." (Hollinshead, 2009: 273).

In line with Hollinshead's suggestion, at *Surf Snowdonia*, key messages can read through images, logos and name of this site (see Figures 8-10).

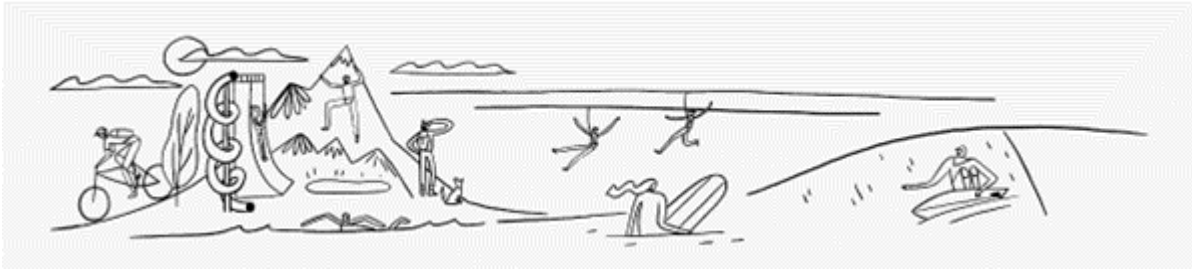
Figure 8. Adventure Parc Snowdonia (Source: Authors).



Figure 9. Evolving Waves (Source: Authors).



Figure 10. Adventure Tourism (Source: Adventure Parc Snowdonia, 2022).



“Welcome to Surf Snowdonia the world’s first and only Wavegarden surfing destination of its kind” (see Adventure Parc Snowdonia, 2023).

From the images above it can be seen that *Surf Snowdonia* draws on and ‘remakes’ (after Hollinshead, above) a number of codes which have resonance with both western cultural values, and the modern script of conventional surfing spaces (see Anderson, 2023). Firstly, importance is clearly placed on *Surf Snowdonia* being the ‘first and only surfing destination of its kind’ (see above). Cultural capital is generated from the value placed in being ‘the first’, reflecting the value invested in not only beating competitors from across the globe in terms of innovation, investment and organisation, but also reinforcing the value in being a cultural pioneer who, through thinking and acting differently, can invent new ways of being and doing specific practices. In relation to conventional surfing spaces specifically, such cultural capital rearticulates the importance of being ‘extraordinary’ (see Anderson, 2023: 14) and different to the normalised mainstream. In the modern surfing script, value is placed in being irreverent, quirky, and transgressive, the imagineers of surf-riding have explicitly positioned this culture on the margins (reflecting their geographical locations in respect to land-locked urban life), and frame the pastime as one for individuals or mavericks who wish to ‘find their own path’ (to quote the marketing slogan of Quiksilver, a key surf dress brand, see Anderson, 2016). Indeed, as Anderson has argued,

“there is a strong heritage in surf culture of assuming an outsider position, one that is rebellious and on the margins, and [... t]his marginality has evolved into marketing gold; the surfer mystique is carefully choreographed and chronicled to sell a range of products as people buy into the transgressive idea(l) of this lifestyle culture” (2014: 28).

We can see that this essence of marginality, of individuality, of pioneering spirit, and being different, is being rearticulated in the script of *Surf Snowdonia*; the promise is given to participants that if you become part of this place, you too can be part of the culture that is audacious enough to 'surf up a mountain' (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Surf up a Mountain (Source: Authors).



As part of this claim to be the first, *Surf Snowdonia* is keen to script its role in 'evolving waves' (see images above). These words not only refer to the juxtaposed, apparently nonsensical practice of surfing up a mountain (and thus emphasising the free-thinking, rule-breaking tendency of those involved), but also to the foresight in adopting technological innovation to enable surf-riding in different places. As noted by Anderson (2016), somewhat paradoxically surfing imagineers extoll the virtues of adopting scientific and technological innovations whilst simultaneously claiming to be outside or beyond the mainstream cultures that drive them. To date, pushing at the frontiers of hi-tech innovation has been adopted to improve the capacities of surf-riding craft or dress (see Anderson, 2016), yet the script of *Surf Snowdonia* suggests that this trait is being re-articulated to extend the very geographies of surf-riding itself.

It can be argued that extending the frontier of surfing spaces into mountainous areas has further significance for the script of *Surf Snowdonia*. Over recent decades, the imaginering of surfing has not developed in a vacuum, rather it has influenced and been influenced by other 'board' sports (such as skateboarding and snowboarding, see Warshaw, 2010). As this cultural cross-fertilisation has occurred, the markets for these activities have also cross-pollinated, with companies identifying economies of scale in loosely grouping once separate 'whizz sports' (see Wheaton, 2004) into one portfolio. Where once, for example, 'only a surfer would know the feeling' of engaging with nature (see Anderson, 2014), an affinity sector has emerged which orbits around shared sensibilities of adrenalin, fear, and excitement. Over recent years, therefore, activities such as mountaineering or hiking now share brand space with mountain biking or kayaking<sup>iii</sup>. In this context, we can see that *Surf Snowdonia's* 'evolution' into *Adventure Parc Snowdonia* is significant; it represents a move away from an economic reliance on surf-riding in isolation, and – as the cartoon image included on their website notes (see Figure 10 above) - attempts to capture the growing market interested in 'adventure sports' more generally.

Indeed, this diversification into adventure sports has specific resonance for the geographical area in which *Surf Snowdonia* is located. Coinciding with the opening of the theme park, *Visit Wales* (the state-sponsored tourist authority for the country) invested £4 million in an advertising campaign which sought to script Wales as the land of 'epic' adventure. Sites around Snowdonia were used to entice tourists to *#FindYourEpic* (see Powell, 2016), encouraging visitors to engage in walking, mountain biking, zip-lining, and of course, surf-riding in this place. The script of *Surf Snowdonia* – now *Adventure Parc Wales* – is part of a broader narrative which presents the Welsh landscape to tourists as the means through which they can escape their mainstream lives and experience an adrenalin-fuelled adventure.

### **Scripting *The Wave*, Bristol.**

At first glance, the script of *The Wave* (Bristol) bears similarities to *Adventure Parc Wales*. On its website, *The Wave* emphasises its pioneering and world-leading innovations, claiming to be the 'first inland-surfing destination of its kind' (The Wave, 2022)<sup>iv</sup>. When one encounters *The Wave* in person, however, differences in the script can be identified which, to some

extent, clarifies this first ambitious claim. The first theme that its visitors 'read' (after Hollinshead, above) is the Park's extollation to 'stay wavey' (see Figure 13). This slogan initially combines the obvious exhortation to informally greet its visitors (through a physical and friendly wave) with the name and purpose of the park; yet a broader meaning of this slogan is further explained through the signage which leads the visitor from the car park to the complex itself (a walk of approximately 1km). This signage (see Figures 14-16), works to rearticulate broader themes of modern surf-riding to characterise the specific meanings of *The Wave* .

Figure 13. 'Stay Wavey' (Source: Authors).





Figure 14. 'We come from the sea' (Source: Authors).



Figure 15. 'We dream of a place' (Source: Authors).



Figure 16. 'This is that place' (Source: Authors).



Firstly, the *The Wave* emphasises to its visitors that '*We come from the sea*'. This 'we' may be read by visitors as referring to humans as a species and the broader evolutionary journey humankind is part of, but perhaps may be linked more specifically to the park's sense of connection with littoral and broader salt-water bodies. Although *The Wave* itself is filtered freshwater, these words attempt to construct a sense of kinship between visitors (who are likely to share a sense of identity with water spaces) and the park itself (which is instantly humanised by the use of the collective pronoun in the signage): 'we' (i.e. visitors and the park) *come from the sea*, and thus we are united in our sense of co-constitution with its mobilities and energies. Being positioned as its first detailed statement, this phrase emphasises the priority placed on generating a sense of community between the park and its visitors, premised on a shared affinity with water. It is also possible to suggest that this signage confers an immediate authority to the theme park. Coming 'from the sea' implies a sense of first-hand experience and vernacular understanding of watery encounters, a trait that has traditionally

been welcomed by surf culture, and – as Stranger (2011) has argued – earns ‘insider’ status for companies that can demonstrate, or at least promise, an awareness of its importance. This choice of words may also offer to some visitors a mild sense of the ethereal or imaginative – ‘we come from the sea’ evokes a sense that this place may align more broadly with what could be labelled ‘eastern’ (rather than ‘western’) sets of philosophies, connecting to cosmologies which are broadly congruent with non-modern practices such as meditation or yoga. From the beginning, therefore, the possibility is constructed that *The Wave* (and by extension ‘staying wavey’) is different from the overtly competitive – or even directly adventurous – aspects of modern surf-riding spaces, and even perhaps the cultural geographies imagined at *Adventure Parc Snowdonia*.

Such suggested affinities are reinforced as visitors continue their ‘path’ to *The Wave*, with signs stating, ‘*We believe in the power of waves and water*’ (see Figure 14). Here visitors may find connection to increasingly popular ideas of social prescribing with respect to nature (see NHS England, 2020) and how encounters with (safe) waters can help the mind and body to feel ‘better’ (see for example, Britton et al, 2018). Use of the term ‘believe’ is an important rhetorical choice which at once sidesteps the need for medical proof of purported therapeutic effects, but nevertheless suggests that by being *here* visitors are embarking on a healthy activity, nudging them to have faith that waves (and in particular attending *The Wave* as a site on this and future occasions) will become a good thing in their lives.

From this ‘community-building’ sign, the next stage of the script that visitors encounter on their route to the park further rearticulates the difference between this place and other surfing spaces. Modern surfing scripts, as stated above, often frame the pursuit as befitting young, male, athletic demographics. *The Wave* is clear in its difference to this framing: here, it is pointed out that, ‘*We dreamt of a space [...] where everyone can share the joy of surfing whatever their age, ability, or background*’ (nb: discussion on how the role of nature is made and remade in the scripting of these surfing spaces will be addressed below). This sign implicitly acknowledges the cultural (b)orders which often dissuade potential surfers to get involved in the practice, discouraged by a range of barriers to entry which often include the (toxic) masculinity of other surfers, competitive cultures in the water, and the perceived need for specialist knowledge and equipment to even try the practice for the first time. This sign

therefore has the intention of dissolving anxieties and opening up potential clientele, positioning the park as a democratic space in which experts or novices can find a place to enjoy surf-riding in line with their skill level. This sentiment is emphasised by the following sign which confirms that 'staying wavey' means that: '*falling over isnt failure its how we learn to improve*' (see Figure 16). Here it is suggested that making mistakes whilst surf-riding is something that will happen to all, and as such, is not something that should or will be ridiculed at this site, but rather be welcomed as an opportunity for learning and improving. Such sentiments move 'staying wavey' further from the competitive mockery of the male surfing stereotype, and further towards a spirit of surf-riding that is open to self-growth, implies a positive connection between mind and body, and is congruent with mental, spiritual, and physical health. As the visitor walks the final steps toward the *The Wave* park, the final statement welcomes them, declaring: '*This is that place*'. This sign confirms that, if you share the symbolic sentiments of being 'wavey', then be reassured that this is the place for you.

#### **Scripting themes: surf-riding in a zone of adventure and from a zone of comfort.**

As we have seen, central to the *Surf Snowdonia* script is the allure of adventure, indeed, the importance of this 'theme' has led to it becoming the central attraction in *Adventure Parc Wales*. The script of adventure has resonance with modern surfing spaces: littoral zones across the globe have been imagineered as places where adventurous surf-riders encounter and enjoy new waves. This script panders to the western idea of a colonising explorer (see Laderman, 2014; Hough-Snee and Eastman, 2017) who imposes their (and particularly 'his') own particular values, and prioritises their (i.e. 'his') own wish for adventure over those who live and work in those destinations. Yet although adventure is central to this tourist-centred script, the 'adventure tourism' encouraged in this theme is something notably different from the term's dominant definition (and by extension the adventure implicit in conventional surf tourism). As Bentley, Cater, and Page identify,

"Adventure tourism has been defined as the 'deliberate seeking of risk and the uncertainty of outcome' (Ewert & Jamieson, 2003: p. 68)" (2010: 563),

And as Ray confirms (in relation to wild water- and sea-kayaking):

‘to adventure, one needs to accept risk’ (2022: 3).

At both *Surf Snowdonia* and *The Wave* a degree of risk remains present to the visitor, inevitably so when humans engage with a socionatural media such as water; however, the extent of this risk is markedly lower than in an unpredictable and uncontrolled littoral surfing space. At these parks there are no dangerous rip currents, no unreliable swells, nor alien objects (human or non-human) in the water; water spaces are clearly (b)ordered for different craft and skill level, and there are lifeguards, training, and appropriate equipment for all users at all times. As a consequence, these parks do not offer untrammelled adventure in the ‘wild’, nor can their users pretend they are independent surf tourists off the beaten track, rather at these parks adventure is ‘domesticated’; at these sites risk is not the definitive component of their version of commodified adventure (following Cater, 2006: 318), rather the theme is commodified adventure as thrill.

At *The Wave*, although a similar commodified thrill is provided, the script’s characteristic trait is not (a risk-reduced) ‘adventure’. Rather than emphasising the adventurous aspects of surf-riding and associated sports more broadly, here the script explicitly seeks to provide reassurance and the removal of anxiety about surf-riding. In fostering feelings of community, awareness, and health, it could be suggested that in place of the script of *Surf Snowdonia* as an ‘adventure zone’, *The Wave* is scripted as a ‘comfort zone’. At this place it is promised that, if you have an affinity with water, you can have a new experience without pressure from peers or culture; here you can have encounters from within your ‘comfort zone’, and from there push your limits and learn new skills. With the absence of absolute risk (from controls imposed over the watery and cultural environments), a safer and perhaps more sanitised form of (commodified) thrill can be experienced, one centred on progression and personal development.

Although both parks script themselves differently, the general notion of surf-riding from a zone of comfort can be identified within the broader set of supplementary attractions offered at *The Wave* and *Surf Snowdonia*. Resonating with the logic of theme park development (as noted above), both spaces offer a range of activities to their visitors. As stated, *Surf Snowdonia* offers multiple opportunities for adventure (including for example indoor climbing

walls – scripted as ‘indoor adrenalin’, skate parks, and mountain biking trails), whilst at *The Wave* an adventure playground for children, extensive nature walks, surf-related fashion stores, bars, and cafés (including indoor and pop-up street stalls) have been provided for surf-riders and spectators. This range of what may be termed ‘après-surf’ activities (echoing the market for après-ski entertainment) acknowledges that not only do surf-riders often wish for comfortable environments to rest, recuperate, shop, and eat in after their water sessions, but also surfing spectators or others attending the site appreciate such facilities. Indeed, the provision of activities for a full day-out, rather than simply an hour’s surf session emphasises the difference between these theme parks, rather than simply a centre for leisure or sport. These sites do not simply cater for riders, but consider that surfers may be enabled to attend for longer and more often if their family and friends can be entertained on-site whilst they surf. To this end, these broader facilities offer comfort to this wider clientele regardless of sporting interest or favourable weather<sup>v</sup>. Thus these broader facilities, enclosed, controlled, and monetised as part of these respective parks, enable an increasingly comprehensive day out for those attending. Indeed, for these parks, it is this complete comfort package that is commodified into what is scripted as the new ‘ultimate surfing experience’ (see Figure 18).

Figure 18. Nature as scenery (Source: Adventure Park Snowdonia, 2022).



### **Scripting nature.**

A further important element in the construction of a comfort zone for visitors to both parks is the way in which they enrol 'nature' in their surfing spaces script. The importance of nature to each park's script is perhaps unsurprising as, in the popular imagination at least, nature retains cultural capital as a place of escape from the strains of modern urban life. As Frohlick and Johnston suggest, "nature spaces, as commonly understood, supposedly enhance wellbeing, reduce stress and friction" (2011: 1094) and as such are fundamental aspects of the script at these surfing theme parks. To emphasise the region's unique natural landscape *Surf Snowdonia* exhibits aerial footage of the rugged Welsh mountainous as part of its title montage (see Adventure Parc Snowdonia, 2022, replicated in Anderson, 2022), whilst *The Wave* suggests their park is, "not just about surfing, it's about getting back to nature" (*The Wave*, 2022). In more detail, *Surf Snowdonia* states their park is:

"Inspired by nature. Breathe in, its fresh, its wild and its beautiful. At the heart of the majestic Conwy Valley in North Wales, we're surrounded by rivers, mountains,

woodlands and the wildlife of Snowdonia” (Adventure Parc Snowdonia, 2022, see also Figure 17),

“experience the freedom of paddling into our powerful waves in a magnificent forest-cloaked valley surrounded by epic scenery” (Adventure Parc Snowdonia, 2022).

The rhetoric of these scripts is such that the a visitor could interpret them, in Gamson and Wolfsfeld’s terms, to be a “transparent description of reality, not as [an] interpretation” of it (1993: 119). If they did interpret the rhetoric in this way, visitors would believe that the parks themselves are ‘natural’ in their ‘nature’. However, it is important to note that these scripts are actually ‘orchestrating’ (after Hollinshead, 2009: 283) imagined ideals of nature, rather than presenting a neutral version of this reality. More critically, and reflecting the process identified by van Bottenberg and Salome (2010) in relation to the artificialisation of sporting environments, both parks are employing nature as ‘scenery’. Both scripts locate each park in a rural setting, and do so in order to emphasise the pastoral and bucolic aesthetics of the British countryside that they enjoy (see Figure 17). This positioning of nature as ‘scenery’ allows each park to emphasise the adventurous or comforting script that they employ to define their theme, but also helps to remind their constituencies that the parks themselves are not actually places that are wholly defined by nature, but rather constructed by technological advances which enable them to produce a simulated, domesticated, and more surfer-friendly version of nature. In conventional surfing spaces such as littoral locations, nature has primacy; meteorological, hydrological, and geophysical processes determine the presence, quality, and quantity of rideable waves. In shifting nature’s position to scenery, the script suggests these natural cycles have become secondary; visitors should attend not only because of the aesthetically pleasing and relaxing setting, but also because these parks have taken control of water quality and wave generation: according to their scripts, reliable, predictable, and surfable waves exist here which are independent of natural cycles, meteorology, or other geophysical vagaries. Their message is clear:

“we promise guaranteed surf conditions” (Adventure Parc Snowdonia, 2022)



“there are few places on the planet where you are guaranteed perfect consistent surf, but as good fortune would have it one of them is in North Wales” (Adventure Parc Snowdonia, 2022).

“Wavegarden has pioneered the design of a water treatment system specifically for surf parks. The result is crystal clear water and perfect visibility” (The Wave, 2022).

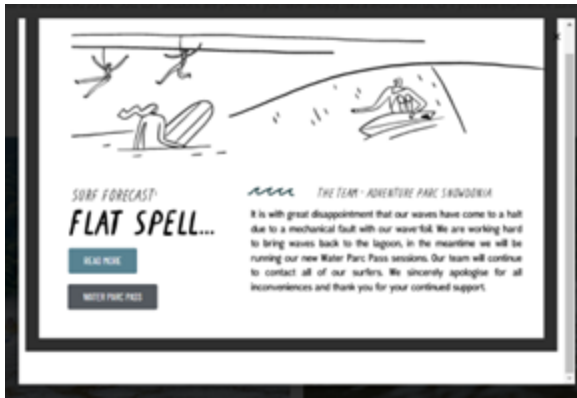
[we have] “the only guaranteed surf breaks in the UK” (The Wave, 2022).

These scripts therefore promise a new version of the ‘perfect wave’ (see The Wave, 2022, and Ponting, 2009), places in which nature retains a scenic role, with its processes ‘inspiring’ a simulated, human-produced upgrade: the generation of guaranteed waves in clean, blue waters.

#### **Going off-script: nature reclaims its agency.**

Despite the claims given in these theme park scripts, both sites have encountered limits in their ability to provide guaranteed surf in blue waters. In Autumn 2022, *The Wave* had to apologise to its customers due to an algal bloom in the surf lake (which changed the water from clear blue to dark green (see The Wave, 2022i, and Grubb, 2022)), while sessions have had to be cancelled due to on-shore winds preventing rideable waves from breaking. The park has also temporarily closed when water temperatures fell close to freezing. Similarly, in Autumn 2022, *Surf Snowdonia’s Wavegarden* technology ceased operating due to a technical fault; in order to fix this glitch the lake required emptying, and due to drought conditions in the region, would not be able to re-filled. As a consequence, a ‘calm spell’ was forecast at the site (see Figure 19), and only reopened for business in January 2023. It is clear, therefore, that despite claims that technology has attained enough control over ‘nature’ to always ‘guarantee’ good surf conditions, geophysical processes and cycles continue to exert an influence over theme-park-surf.

Figure 19. Flat Spell Forecast (Adventure Parc Snowdonia, 2022).



**Conclusion: Scripting questions for emergent surfing spaces.**

Despite some ongoing problems, the emergence of sites such as *Surf Snowdonia* and *The Wave* has the potential to mark a paradigmatic shift in the cultural geographies of surf-riding, and the process of imagineering is vital to this development. The scripting of new surfing spaces actively attempts to influence the nature of surf-riding practice, how it is understood, and its aggregate cultural geographies. As such the emergence of new surfing spaces offers scholars an opportunity to investigate how these sites are imagineered for their constituencies, be they regular local visitors or the (inter)national tourist market. This paper has taken a first step in investigating the scripts adopted at two early-movers in the imagineering of new surfing spaces, and has sought to identify key ‘themes’ from *Surf Snowdonia* and *The Wave* which may direct future research.

Fundamentally, this paper has suggested that sites such as *Surf Snowdonia* and *The Wave* are experiments in a new imagineered venture: surf-riding as theme park. As visitors engage with both sites (be it through an online booking or physical encounter), their respective scripts present “different/rare/special/better fantasy world[s] with [their] own atmosphere, rules, and logic” (Hollinshead, 2009: 273). From this basis, the paper has suggested two different but broadly complementary logics which script these sites: the park as a place for ‘adventure’ (*Surf Snowdonia*) and the park as a place of ‘comfort’ (*The Wave*). Each theme is aimed to “incite beliefs and evoke emotions” (Frohlick and Johnston, 2011: 1094), which specifically in the case of these parks, is the promise of a risk-reduced, commodified ‘thrill’.

An important facet in the emergence of these surfing theme parks is the repositioning of potential visitors from 'surf-riders' to 'surf-customer'. Through the click of an icon and the transfer of a payment, the aspiring surfer is shifted into an economic being who has bought a service which the parks promises to provide. Although the scripts retain partial resonance with the pioneering spirit intrinsic to conventional surfing spaces, their service removes the necessity for customers to embody the skills of surf-riding in littoral locations; for example, visitors are not required to identify when and where a wave may break, or have the experience to position themselves in the correct spot to catch it; in short, they are not expected to be able to compose for themselves a surf-rider assemblage (see Anderson, 2012). As consumers surf-riders are pacified in their agency, reduced to the receivers of equipment, tuition, advice, and positional direction in order to be able to catch a wave. As such, many of the risks which define surf-riding 'in the wild' are removed for these consumers, and as this occurs, many of the associated skills and sensibilities of surf-riding are eliminated too. In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that the key term used to imagineer surf-riding to 'insider' (see Stranger, 2011) constituencies - the verb 'stoke' - is not used as part of these scripts. Stoke has been defined as the,

“hegemonic term [used] by surf-riding cultures in many places across the globe [to] point towards a range of often ineffable, difficult to describe [...] pre-literate relational sensibilities which emerge through engagement with [conventional] surfing spaces”  
(Anderson, 2023: 89)

The present-absence of the term 'stoke' in these theme park scripts suggests that their market may not 'buy into' its use. This may be due to some visitors being existing surf-riders and not accepting that stoke as conventionally understood is wholly appropriate for surfing beyond wild locations (and its use may alienate them from engaging with these sites). It is also possible that tourists may not be literate of this term and its connotations, and mainstream terms (like 'adventure' for example) will be more effective at creating a functioning market. Indeed, framing the surf-rider as consumer projects the new possibility that different sensibilities may also be conjured through this positioned encounter – from the broad set of stoke sensibilities which emerge through surf-riding in littoral locations (including fear, awe, flow, and convergence for example, see Anderson (2023)), to a portfolio of

‘transactional sensibilities’ which emerge from the coming together of domesticated environment and (b)ordered cultural practices. It is possible, for example, for the surf-rider as consumer to generate a sense of customer (dis)satisfaction when the script’s promises and values are not met in practice.

As a consequence of surf-riders being framed as consumers in these new scripts, it can be suggested that the barriers to entry in terms of skill or athletic ability have been removed. On one hand, therefore, new clienteles including broader age groups, (dis)abilities, and genders, are now explicitly welcomed in these parks (see, for example, *The Wave* (2022)). Yet on the other hand new economic barriers have emerged to take their place, with theme park surf-riding reserved for those who enjoy the ability to pay for it. With these themes in mind, questions therefore emerge regarding which communities are “mobilised”, “validated”, and “enlarged” (after Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993: 166) through these scripts? Is it possible, for example, that a functioning market, and indeed culture, can be generated through these new surfing spaces and the accompanying scripts? Who will these markets be constituted by? Will they be characterised by existing or new surf-riders? locals or tourists? by particular age groups, genders, (dis)abilities, ethnicities, or socio-economic groups? And what surfing-sensibilities will be generated by them? Will the introduction of economic pricing into theme-park surf-riding generate a new gentrified market, and if so, what effects might this have for surfing spaces in general? Will the predictability and relative reliability of theme-park waves suit both the tourist market and ‘wild’ surf-riders looking for practice waves? Can new skills be developed at these sites which may promote talent, trick execution, and the rise of surfing as competitive event? If so, how may these sites facilitate the institutionalisation of the sport and the generation of spectatorial media audiences? New surfing theme parks provide the crucible to explore these pressing questions, as the future cultural geographies of surf-riding emerge through their scripts and practices.

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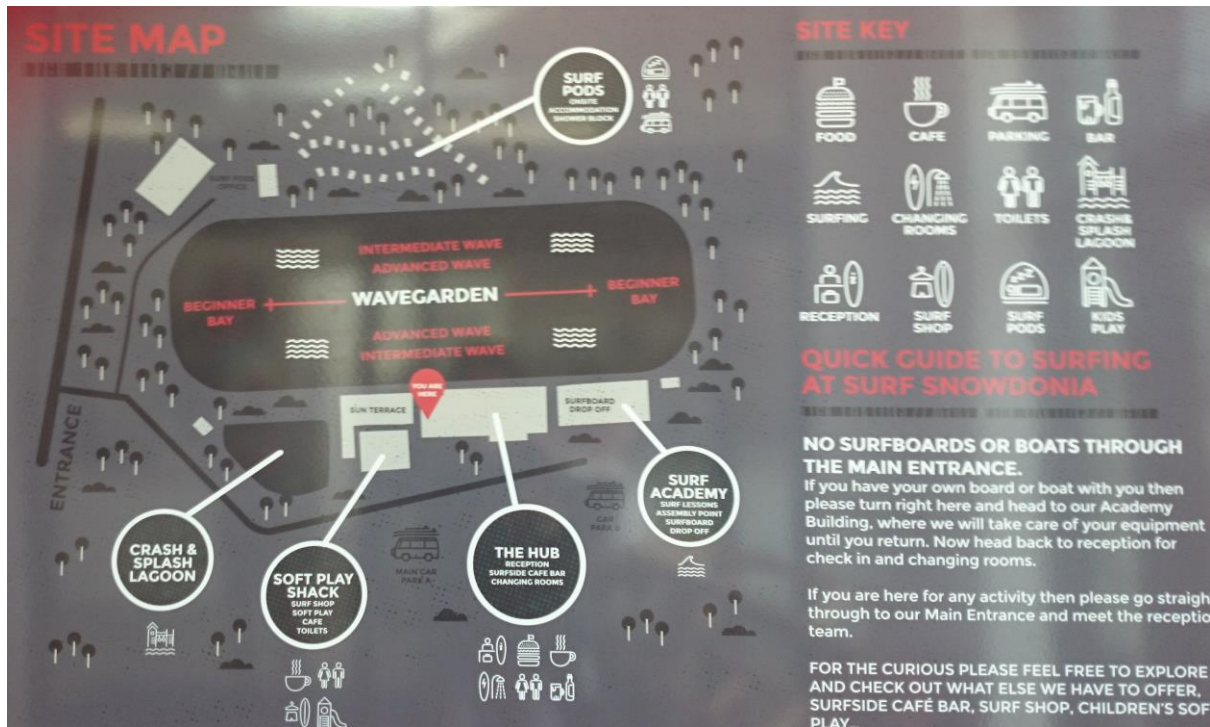
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<sup>i</sup> It is also worth noting that the name of the technology which underpins both parks can be seen to contribute to the nature of the script of these new surfing spaces. The phrase 'wave-garden' was directly used at *Surf Snowdonia* on its public signage when it opened in 2016 (see Figure 1). The name Wavegarden is suggestive of a product that generates an aquatic socio-nature (Swyngedouw, 1999), a cultural geography in which waves are plentiful,



aesthetically-pleasing, with their wild or awe-inspiring dimensions suitably domesticated for recreational consumption and human pleasure.

Figure 1. Wavegarden at *Surf Snowdonia* signage 2016 (Source: Authors).



ii Like many theme parks in the UK, both sites have restricted opening hours during autumn and winter seasons, and only remain fully open in these times during school and public holidays.

iii This diversification of surfing imagineers in to broader adventure sports is illustrated, for example, in the establishment of media platforms such as 'Inertia' which has 'evolved' (to use the phrase from *Surf Snowdonia*) from exclusively focusing on surf-riding, to covering a mixed 'outdoors' portfolio, see Figure 12.

Figure 12. Inertia (Source: [www.inertia.com](http://www.inertia.com)).



<sup>iv</sup> As we have seen, both parks place significance on being the inaugural site of its kind. The accuracy of both park's statements relies on awareness of the specific iterations of *Wavegarden* technology used at each park, the unique bathymetry of each surf lake, and the particular scripts used to define and mould each site. When these geographical, cultural, and technological idiosyncrasies are accounted for, such claims to 'the first' may risk losing some of their absolute cultural capital to some constituencies, yet they may also draw further attention to the value and uniqueness of each surf park's cultural geographies.

<sup>v</sup> At *Surf Snowdonia* a number of cafes and bars provide après-surf entertainment for all visitors, and a Hilton hotel with accompanying spa has also been constructed in order to offer tourists an experience of comfort during their visit (see Figure 17).

Figure 17. Comfort at Surf Snowdonia (Source: Adventure Parc Snowdonia, 2022).



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