



SURFING PNG

Teresa Lyons

Photography by Jason Pini and courtesy of SAPNG

The Surfer's Association is a growing force behind tourism and sporting in Papua New Guinea. Who and what is behind the Surfer's Association of Papua New Guinea, and what have they been up to for the last twenty years?

In the early 1980s, a young boy fell from his motorbike while motocross racing, breaking his leg in the fall. He was rushed to a local hospital, where medical staff set his leg and sent him home in a cast. It eventually became apparent that the job was botched when he began walking with a limp – his leg was a centimetre shorter than it should have been. His father sent him to Brisbane in Australia, where the boy's leg was re-broken and set correctly. Strapped up to twenty pound traction weights and with metal pins protruding from his leg, the young lad was then moved to Maroochydore, where he would spend three months recovering.

With his leg in a cast, the boy would make his way gingerly down to the beach on crutches, and spend his afternoons watching the local surfers. The more time he spent at the beach, the more he longed to learn how to ride a surf board. Inspired, the boy convinced his father to allow him to complete his senior high school in Australia, so that he could take up surfing as a sport.

A few years later, Andrew Abel returned to Papua New Guinea with his surf boards. An accomplished young surfer, Andrew began to scour the

coastlines of PNG for good surf breaks. He could not have known then that what began as a young boy's passion for surfing would one day grow to become the driving force behind one of Papua New Guinea's most successful sporting and tourism bodies.

The Surfer's Association of Papua New Guinea was created from humble beginnings. A rag-tag team of Port Moresby based surfers got together and formed a close-knit group of surfers in 1988, some of whom included Andy, James Kruse, Michael Wright, Peter Aitsi, Stuart Wallace and several others. It wasn't until 1989, however, when Andy teamed up with good friend Hon. John Tekwei, who was then Governor of Sandaun Province, that the SAPNG was truly established.

One day, Andy received a phone call from a mate known as 'Crazy Tas', at the time a pilot for Talair who had been relocated from Port Moresby to Vanimo. Andy listened with growing excitement as Crazy Tas described magnificent point breaks and, astonishingly, whole communities of local Papua New Guineans who were seasoned surfers.

Without any tutoring or outside influence, villagers along the coastline

in Vanimo were seen riding wave breaks on pieces of carved wood from abandoned dugout canoes, fashioned into streamlined 'splinters', with the exception of one particular village which had been left with a surfing magazine from a lone surfer who had passed through in the early 80s. Without any access to modern surfing technology, they fashioned boards identical to the ones they saw in the pages of the surf magazine, complete with wooden fins and strips of inner tyre tubes for ankle straps. Even today, this community can be seen using these primitive versions of modern surf boards, quite unlike the 'splinters' seen in other villages.

Perhaps the most astounding discovery about all of these wave-riding communities was that there was strong evidence to suggest that they had been surfing waves for centuries. An ancient cultural festival involving the 'calling up' of waves indicates that these wave-riders have been surfing waves for a very long time - it has even been speculated that they have been surfing long before the Polynesians.

When Andy received that fateful phone call from Tas, he flew up to Vanimo and spent two weeks meeting



Above: 'Crazy Tas' and Andy Abel in the late 1980s. Below: The original members of the Vanimo Surf Club pause for a photo while clearing jungle to make room for their surf camp. Below right: A young grommet heads out for a wave with his body board. Opposite: Grommet on a splinter.

many different village communities and checking out their surf breaks. "Those were crazy days. Tas and I would hit the waves at five in the morning, and by seven-thirty Tas would be getting dressed in the cockpit, combing his wet hair and welcoming passengers on his flight."

Impressed by the region's breaks and even more so by the attitude of the people towards wave-riding, Andy returned to Port Moresby with a budding idea for surfing in PNG. Andy travelled back and forth between Port Moresby

and Vanimo, teaching young rural kids to surf and donating most of his surf board collection to eager surfers who had never had the luxury of a proper board.

In 1989, Andy and Hon. John Tekwei founded the first surf club in Papua New Guinea, the Vanimo Surf Club. Andy and John based the club out of Lido Village, established a surf camp for visiting surfers, and began to take memberships for the club. It was here that the marriage between surfing as a sport and surf tourism as a sustainable source of income began to present itself as a means to develop the sport, sustain their surf club, and directly benefit all parties involved in surfing and surf tourism.

Andy and fellow pioneering surfers started to guide their surf club and burgeoning surf tourism venture towards a community based approach that began with fulfilling the needs of local grass-roots communities.

With his view towards building up PNG surfing from the "bottom up", which would later become his trademark "bottom up approach", Andy's work with the Vanimo Surf Club took on a more focused role. That once rag-tag team of surfers consolidated to become the Surfer's Association of PNG, operating under the patronage of Kieran Nash, who has surfed in Papua New Guinea for some 30 odd years, and Andy's late father, Sir Cecil Abel KBE OBE.

Watching the ever increasing market for surf tourism and the growing demand for more exotic locations, the Association recognised in a statement by Kieran Nash in 1995 that the geographic

characteristics of Papua New Guinea required the sport to develop in each province, and would therefore need the support of individuals living in those areas. Perhaps most importantly, the Association acknowledged the need to encourage the growth of the sport at a rural level. "There is a real need to marry the aesthetics of the sport with commercial common sense, whilst never denigrating the cultural and geographical





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beauty of this country.”

Clearly, the Association realised early on that with over 800 different tribes and languages, and 13 coastal provinces, the Association would have to rely on the efforts of individuals like Andrew Abel in different parts of the country to continue to develop surfing as a sport.

Today, Andy insists that the most important step was to educate and encourage villagers in the sport of surfing. In Vanimo, Andrew worked closely with village elders and surfers, educating them on the dynamics of surfing and encouraging them to see the possibilities available to them by incorporating “commercial common sense” with their love for wave-riding.

Absolutely pivotal to the peoples acceptance of Andy’s ideas was the history of wave-riding in the communities he approached. As Dr. Jess Ponting referred to in his article, ‘A Worthy Secret’, all Andy was doing was introducing the technologies of modern surfing and new ideas about surfing to an already established wave-riding community.

The Association became bent on developing a sustainable model for surf tourism that was not only culturally and environmentally sensitive, but that would also actively benefit rural landowners in parallel with the



Association, surf tourism operators and the industry as a whole.

According to Andy, it seems there is a global trend for individuals or groups to ‘purchase’ the rights for the use of land from indigenous landowners in third world countries, build up a tourist operation of some description, of which the larger part of the revenue is pocketed by investors and government, and the smaller percentage is filtered down to the local community. Essentially, Andy and others within the Association have taken steps to avoid this trend, which Andy believes is responsible for many disastrous landownership issues throughout the nation and the rest of the world.

Dr. Jess Ponting - who has a PhD in sustainable tourism - has pointed out that the Mentawai Islands of Indonesia are a classic example of how surf tourism can become completely non-beneficial

to rural landowners and communities, whose land and waters are used to maintain surf tourism operations, and represents how a community of people can fall drastically out of step with developments around them.

In Mentawai, a fantastic surf break was discovered, and within a few years the break was overrun by foreign-owned live-aboard charter boats who operated out of the mainland Indonesian province of Sumatra. Meanwhile, just a few hundred metres from where tourism operators were charging US\$50 to US\$500 per surfer, the Mentawai villagers lacked basic infrastructure and were suffering from a 50% infant birth mortality rate. In fact, the lack of infrastructure is precisely why the local community was completely bypassed by surf tourism operators, resulting in very little benefit for the rural people.

Basically, the Mentawai Islands are an example of what is happening on a grander scale world wide. The heavily-marketed idyllic white sandy beach with sapphire blue waters, exotic waves and all the trappings of a five-star resort at your fingertips if you so wish, hides a much starker reality of a thriving surf tourism industry that in most cases currently offers no real benefits to local people at a rural level.

Andy agrees that Papua New Guinea has a unique advantage in the global surf tourism industry, because PNG has the ability to look upon the mistakes or miscalculations of other third-world destinations and use those examples to formulate a strategy that will work



Above: A nice left unfurls at one of the breaks in Vanimo. Left: Old hands from the early days of the SAPNG, including Andy Abel (far left), Stuart Wallace and James Kruse (centre).



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for our tourism industry in the future. As Dr. Ponting aptly puts it, “as long as the surfer and tour operator place the search for nirvana above the need for development and conservation, surf tourism will continue to develop in an unsatisfactory manner.”

In Andy’s eyes, it’s clear that without any real legislative plan to regulate surf tourism operators and prevent serious conflicts of interest, Papua New Guinea will follow in the footsteps of other third-world nations, battling with land disagreements and struggling to keep all parties in the industry happy. There are already significant signs of discontent between rural landowners and foreign investors or tourists in Papua New Guinea. The Kokoda Track, the Bougainville Copper Mine, Kavieng and the Bainings are just a few of the many examples of areas dealing with landownership issues in PNG.

Andy claims that his “bottom up” approach represents a win-win situation for surfers, surf tour operators and local communities. By empowering the rural people with knowledge and equal rights

to the benefits from surf tourism, Andy believes that there is a successful future for surf tourism in PNG.

As a direct result of this belief, recent developments for the Surfer’s Association of PNG involve a close working relationship with the World Bank, which Andy hopes will eventually lead to the establishment of an Act of Parliament that will regulate surfing around the country and protect the interests of rural landowners and their villages with the implementation of regulated levies.

With the establishment of no less than five surf clubs around the country in the past three years, support gained from the PNGTPA and the World Bank, combined with steadily growing numbers of visiting surfers from around the world, it is clear that the efforts of individuals like Andy - who has dedicated twenty years of his life to surfing in PNG - are paying off. On the 16th to 18th of February 2007, the National Surfing Titles will be held in Vanimo, Sandaun Province, and a large turn-out of surfers from around the

country and from overseas is expected.

Over the years, the Association has played an active role in the achievements of young rural surfers from around the country, organising training and travel so that young Papua New Guineans can have the opportunity to represent their village and their country at an international level. Encouragement from members of the surfing world has been received in the form of sponsorship or donations of surf boards or funds, and the exotic appeal of surfing in PNG continues to attract the attention of international journalists and surfers, with the latest article appearing in the Chicago Tribune, in which PNG is referred to as the last ‘Lost World’.

Whether we are the last or not is open to discussion, but as long as individuals like Andy and the SAPNG continue to battle for a better future for the local communities that are the spine of this country, surely we are far from Lost. ■

Teresa Lyons

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