



HOW THE local Tahitian community and surfers banded together to minimize destruction to the reef at Teahupo'o leading up to the 2024 Olympics—a reminder that for all surfers environmental activism begins with the individual

TOWER

BY CONNER SMITH

Photo by Ben Thouard

OF DOOM

SURFING’S SECOND Olympic act at Teahupo’o in Tahiti is primed to be more exciting than the 2020 debut (sorry, Japan) due to the stunning natural force of the wave where the contest will be held. Yet in March the International Olympic Committee and French Sports Minister moved forward with plans to build a judging tower that over time may cause damage to the storied Tahitian reef’s ecosystem.



The old collapsible wooden tower by Ben Thouard (top)
The new aluminum tower by Tim McKenna (bottom)

News broke last October of the plans to build the initially proposed \$5-million-dollar aluminum judging tower equipped with toilets and air conditioning over the live reef, which would have required dredging in order to barge materials through the lagoon, as well as the drilling of new foundation points directly into the reef. It was a major departure from the collapsible wooden tower previously used for hosting contests at Teahupo’o, which would have been the lowest-impact alternative.

Much credit should be given to local heavyweights including Matahi Drollet who were outspoken in expressing their concern that any plan requiring the drilling of new foundations into the reef will create lasting damage. As Drollet said to *Reuters*, “We are just trying to spread the message that no contest in this world is worth the destruction of nature.”

In response to the outcry from local residents and the larger surf community, French officials made a commitment to pursue a less impactful tower build. Upon completion of the significantly scaled back design, Tahiti-based surf photographer Tim McKenna observed, “The coral suffered minimal damage after a channel was marked in the lagoon so the construction boats could access it easily.” But whether the new foundation points drilled into the reef will cause more widespread long-term damage remains to be seen over time.

The work of surfers was instrumental in helping demonstrate the size of the problem that the initially proposed mega-tower would have created. Last November, a team of researchers led by Hawaiian waterman and scientist Cliff Kapono traveled to Teahupo’o to map the storied reef, and the life—both human and nonhuman—that it supports. Their findings were published this February in *Remote Sensing*, a peer-reviewed journal that showcases how leading-edge sensor technologies can be used in environmental impact studies.

Working directly with the community to conduct surveys and model the impacts of the project, the study estimated a potential \$1.3 million in ecological risk for the establishment of the initially proposed tower. Using Hawaiian standards for ascribing dollar values to ecosystem features, at least \$170,000 in ecological assets were contained within the tennis-court-sized area that the initially proposed tower would have spanned.

Numbers are only baselines; they do not reflect the tapestry of environmental and cultural connections woven across Teahupo’o. We, like the ecosystems we belong to and rely on, are more than the sum of our parts. Kapono speaks directly to this. For him, our many identities (surfer-scientist, for example) combine in an “expression that all equates down to the simplest form of being a part of the ocean.”

This oneness with the ocean runs deeper than wearing “eco” branded products, planting coral, or recycling. Instead of calling people out for drinking from plastic bottles, Kapono would rather we ask, “What’s the access to water in this community? The nexus between the social, the environmental, and this cultural dynamic that exists in these different communities, that’s the future of where we need to be thinking,” he said.

For Kapono, these connections reveal an underlying ecology within the machine of the surf world. “Institutions like the World Surf League are kind of like the center of this landscape, the watering hole.” Outside of this core zone is the “fringe,” where specialized, niche organisms exist. In this landscape, resources are pumped into environmental campaigns through the center, eventually flowing to the fringe. This relationship can be mutualistic (boosting the environmental credentials of the center while supplying resources to the fringe), or it can be parasitic (poaching or invading the fringe to expand the control of the center). It all comes down to something simple: “How do we leverage this machine we’re in? How do we navigate the surfing landscape to actually do a little bit of good because surfing gives us so much good feeling.”

Kapono’s question prompts thinking about how to harness the machine for good. Speaking to Tahitian locals, Kapono heard that “there are also narratives being shared that this [tower] has divided communities. It has divided people, families, and money is at the root of a lot of this.”

The problem of money is much bigger than Tahiti, and outsider agendas continue to influence Indigenous spaces around the world. Dina Gilio-Whitaker, an Indigenous scholar, lecturer, and surfer based at Cal State San Marcos, recognizes this in the surge of organizational interest in



Matahi Drollet by Sam Venn

Teahupo'o's reef by Ben Thouard



partnering with Indigenous People. This is a problem when these groups “don’t know anything about Indigenous People. They don’t know how to work with them, and often can’t tell the difference between legitimate and illegitimate groups and individuals. We’ve seen this over and over again. There’s so much harm that can be done in the process.” Gilio-Whitaker is working with Kapono and others on creating “a clearinghouse where activists and researchers that want to work with Indigenous People on anything related to environment or climate change can come and we can help guide them in that process, so that it’s done right and so that tribes aren’t exploited.”

Kapono highlighted the central irony of the conflict leading up to the 2024 Olympics: “You want to celebrate your homeland, and by doing so you want to destroy the homeland of these people here? It’s almost disgusting to think about being a part of a narrative like that. Maybe we are so blinded by this idea of Olympics, gold, validation by others, that we will destroy the very resource we depend on in surfing.”

We are left with what Gilio-Whitaker calls, “fractions and factions.” This fractured landscape makes it difficult for organizations like the WSL, or surf brands for that matter, to effectively engage with local and Indigenous communities. In their own ways, Kapono and Gilio-Whitaker are both working to reduce these divisions and work for a more mutualistic surf culture. They both seem to be saying that if money is going to continue flowing into the center, let’s spend it well and make sure it flows outward.

Naturally, the cords connecting surfing and stewardship can be traced back to Hawai’i. *Āina*, the Kānaka commitment to reciprocity with the non-human world,

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embodies the inseparable nature of land and sea. Unlike modern farming, the Hawaiian ahupua’a system organized cultivation so that forests, watersheds, and nutrient pathways were preserved. This food system included an archipelago-wide network of more than 500 fish ponds, Loko’ia, that supported one of the earliest and most sustainable forms of aquaculture. This “ridgeline-to-reef” approach to stewardship went beyond guards against deforestation and overfishing, embodying an ecosystem-based management ethos that is emulated around the world today. Hawaiians, often and rightly credited for sharing surfing with the world, are rarely recognized for their role in shaping this more embodied form of environmentalism.

From its birthplace in Hawai’i, surfing has influenced every corner of the wave-blessed world. Countries like Australia embraced surfing early and eagerly. Aussie adopters helped to create the foundation for a sporting culture while also implementing some of the earliest formal environmental protections specifically tailored to surf areas. What began as localized campaigns and grassroots action by surfers and other ocean users against oil spills and coastal development has rippled into a global movement backed by governments and multinational organizations.

The Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969, which smothered all of my home surf breaks and the rich marine life they support, initiated the modern era of coastal protection in California and helped launch the first environmental studies program in the nation at my alma mater, the University of California at Santa Barbara. Decades later, when Trestles was threatened with the expansion of highway infrastructure, a massive coalition of surfers, environmentalists, and community members rallied to resist the proposed development. The Indigenous People who were central to this

Dina Gilio-Whitaker by John Suhar (bottom), Cliff Kapono in Tahiti by John Hook (top)



French Olympic Team member and Tahitian native Vahiné Fierro by Domenic Mosqueira

fight to protect their ancestral land were, and continue to be, overlooked in this story—a pattern repeated in Australia, New Zealand, and any other settler surf culture.

Yet there is a growing push to articulate coastal protection that directly addresses the need to ensure clean waves, healthy ecosystems, and vibrant communities. Beyond the conservation goals sought through Marine Protected Areas, Surf Protected Areas recognize the need to protect recreation and human connection to the coastal environment, in addition to its ecological features. Organizations like Conservation International fronting these efforts still have their own unlearning to do. Western models of “fortress conservation,” where protected areas are created by removing any human (and typically Indigenous) presence, offer limited and ephemeral ecological defense at the expense of local communities and Indigenous knowledge. The fortress model stands in contrast to what I’ll call the “oneness model,” built by the Hawaiians and many others.

While environmentalism has become an afterthought in surf culture, Hawaiian history offers a reminder that it wasn’t always this way. Stewardship and surfing have historically shared space. If surfers can begin to internalize the values of the ancestral home of surfing it would restore a much needed sense of *āina*—a spirit of recognizing that there is actually quite little space separating surfing from ocean stewardship. ©

Raimana Van Bastloer goes deep (top), a packed spectator lineup (bottom), both by Ben Thouard

