

Endless Fun



Photos by Frank Magallanes and Althea Edwards



Story by Margaret Dubin



The Third Annual Native Surf Gathering

The sky was a dull, milky white, the same color as the squid that lay motionless in the drying seaweed. The sand was damp and the water was cold. Large pickup trucks and vans with oversized tires lumbered down the beach, heavy with surfboards and kayaks. Kids ran alongside the trucks and sat on the tailgates, their legs dangling and teeth chattering. After a night of bird singing, peon games, hamburgers, and wet sleeping bags, they were ready to take on the surf.

The third annual Native Surf Gathering, held the weekend of July 19–21 at San Onofre State Beach, drew nearly a hundred children aged 9 to 18 from reservations across San Diego County. Sponsored by the Southern California Tribal Chairman’s Association (SCTCA) and the California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness Program (CANFit), the camp provides outdoor activities and cultural programs free of charge for local tribal youth.

“We called the first camp [in 2000] a ‘Return to the Ocean,’” explained Shonta Chaloux (Kumeyaay), SCTCA program administrator and core camp organizer, “because we wanted to emphasize the earlier days of Native Americans on the coast before they were pushed inland.” Now, in recognition of the increased focus on surfing and other outdoor activities, the camp is called the Native Surf Gathering.

Surfboards and lessons are provided by professional surf instructor Israel “Izzy” Paskowitz and his crew, all volunteers. “I wouldn’t miss this camp for the world,” Paskowitz told me as he climbed into his wetsuit and barked orders at crew members to unload the longboards from the truck. Paskowitz runs surf camps throughout southern California, including

Izzy Paskowitz instructs beginning surfers on the basics of paddling and ducking.



Above, Punky McElroy with her board. Below, Punky turns in a good set.

about twelve other volunteer events that are staffed through his nonprofit organization, Surfers' Healing.

When asked if there was anything special about working with tribal kids, he replied, "Most definitely. This is their beach." Growing up in Hawaii, Paskowitz learned from his father and other surfers that, when surfing a new spot, it is important to ask permission from local landowners or tenants. He brought this respect with him when he started surfing in California. "As a surfer," he said, "I feel as though we should be asking the tribes' permission to surf here."

Paskowitz said he would love to see a Native American surf champion, and each year he keeps his eyes peeled for youth with potential. At last year's Native Surf Camp, 15-year-old Candace "Punky" McElroy (Diegeño), from Mesa Grande, did so well that Paskowitz sponsored her attendance at one of his more advanced camps for girls. Even though she didn't get



many opportunities to practice what she learned over the winter, Punky returned to the Native Surf Camp this year to show off her skills on the board.

"I think it's good that they actually take the time to teach kids," she told me between sets. "I wouldn't have the patience to do it." When not surfing, Punky plays softball for the Julian High School Eagles and is a varsity cheerleader. She also enjoys dancing and playing peon games, and she made sure to arrive at the camp early enough to participate in the singing and dancing on Friday night. "Since we're originally from the ocean, it makes sense to have all [these activities] together here!"

The way Dr. Garry Crummer tells it, the idea for the surf camp evolved from a desire to bring kids to the sea and reconnect them with the culture of their ancestors, who lived near the ocean or made frequent pilgrimages to the beach to trade and gather food. As a physician at the Indian Health Council, which has a clinic at

Pauma and offices in San Diego, Crummer got to know the local kids well. While engaged in a CANFit project to assess the nutritional and fitness needs and interests of his young patients, he asked the kids what they would like to do for exercise. Their response was unequivocal: "Go to the ocean!"

Himself a surfer for nearly twenty years, Crummer envisioned a gathering where kids could learn to surf, reconnect with their ancestral cultures, and have a good time. CANFit supported the camp for its fitness benefits, and the SCTCA supplied the cultural elements, according to Arnell Hinkle, executive director of CANFit. "We like the camp because it gets kids active and teaches them skills that they can use for the rest of their lives," explained Hinkle. "They get to explore new ways of being active that tie into their culture and history but are also modern and cool."

For the first camp, Crummer rented two busses to bring the kids to the beach and the SCTCA provided lunch. "Once we got the kids out here, the camp really took off," Crummer said. Last year kids started bringing their parents and camping out on the bluffs. This year the program expanded to include kayaking and more cultural activities, including a Friday-night blessing by Eddie Martinez. Chaloux reserved a block of campsites for Friday and Saturday nights, and the kids and their parents arrived Friday afternoon and set up tents along the red bluffs overlooking the ocean. Crummer dreams of building a permanent camp for the kids to visit whenever they want, or at least a shed to store some surfboards.

After the morning's first surf lesson, brothers Anthony and Andrej Dominguez stood with their cousin, Alec Osuna (all Luiseño from Santa Isabel), shivering on the soft sand near the spot where they had dropped their boards. The sun had yet to



Left, Anthony Dominguez stands on the board. Below, left to right, Andrej Dominguez, Alec Osuna, and Anthony Dominguez head to the beach.





*Right, the beached whale.
Below, Krystopher Chaipos
examines squid.*



burn through the overcast sky, and the boys' towels were nowhere in sight. When asked if they wanted to borrow mine, they unanimously answered, "No! We're going right back in."

It was their first surf camp. They had heard about it from their local library, where sign-up sheets for different cultural programs are posted. They had arrived the previous night on a bus, along with other kids from different reservations. After setting up their tents and unrolling their sleeping bags, they joined the others in learning the basics of rattles and bird singing.

Sleeping in the tent at night was a highlight of the weekend. "It was fun," said Anthony, 9, "and warm." "No, it was hard and cold and sprinkly," retorted Andrej, 10. "And it was fun," he added. The boys had never surfed before, but it wasn't long before they were kneeling and standing on the boards at the beach break.

Krystopher Chaipos (Kumeyaay/Quechan), 7, was more interested in the squid and whale that had washed up on the beach the night before. According to the rangers, the whale—which may have been a member of a relatively rare beaked whale species—had been following the squid when it got caught in the tide too close to shore and was washed up on the beach. By morning, it had died and was attracting a large crowd of curious kids, parents, and seagulls. "It couldn't breathe," Krystopher explained, "so it died." Like the other onlookers, Krystopher was sad that the whale had died, but he was also interested in examin-

ing it. "I just like sea life," he said. "I take pictures underwater."

Krystopher's mom, Kristy Orosco (Kumeyaay), ran a program on Native foods before lunch. This turned out to be an opportune time, as hungry kids wandered over to her table to check out the Tupperwares of piñon, currants, and dried salmon. "Good old Trader Joe's," she laughed when I asked where she had found the foods. "Nowadays, that's the gathering process." Also on display for kids to touch and use were flutes, clappersticks, bull roarers, and bows and arrows.

A little way down the beach, Joe Luna (Apache/Cherokee), president of the Native Americans Council in San Diego, organized relay races for kids who were either too young or too scared to try surfing. Armando Martinez of San Pasqual sat at a picnic table loaded with arts and crafts supplies, and helped several girls paint gourds and cut leather. Shonta Chaloux was in charge of the kayak lessons, held about fifty yards down the beach in the direction of the whale. "You want the oars this way; don't make it harder for yourself than you have to," he instructed the group, strapped into their kayaks on the sand. At



Left, Andrej Dominguez tries some Native foods. Below, Shonta Chaloux instructs beginning kayakers. Bottom, Anah Luhui Esquerio stayed on the beach.





Above, Natalie Hernandez paddles out with good form. Below, Ray Lynn Belardes on the tule boat.

4 years old, Anah Luhui Esquerio (Chumash/Kiowa) was too young to take her kayak in the water, but Chaloux gave her a beach lesson anyway. Anah's dad, Ray (Chumash), took a break from demonstrating the bull roarer to watch his daughter paddle on the sand.

Natalie Hernandez (Luiseño), 8, from Pauma, attended the camp with her father, Miguel. Natalie was too busy surfing to answer questions, but her dad said that she had been wanting to surf for a long time. "She doesn't play other sports, but she really wanted to surf," he said. "My other daughter, Olivia, plays ball, but she wasn't interested in the surfing at all." Proud dad Miguel looked on as Natalie paddled out and crashed in, wave after wave, seemingly without tiring or getting cold. "This is a great program. I can rent my kids a surfboard, but these guys give them lessons!"

At the end of the day, after the boards had been stowed and the kayaks dragged to the bluffs, someone decided to test the tule boat—part of the Native foods and culture demonstration—in the water. Ray Esquerio and Garry Crummer took charge and carried the homemade boat down to the water. Everyone was amazed that it actually floated; after Crummer gingerly



tested it under his weight, the kids took turns getting on, paddling out, and surfing in. "It's hard to balance!" yelled 10-year-old Adrian Murillo (Kumeyaay), of San Pasqual. Raylynn Belardes (Luiseño), 11, from Rincon, caught a couple good waves, as did 11-year-old Stephanie Ortega (Kumeyaay) of San Pasqual. Once the reeds became logged with salt water, however, it didn't work quite as well.

Darla Schmidt, parent of three budding surfers and member of the La Jolla Indian Reservation, summed up the weekend well: "The kids have a great time here, then they go home and talk about it for the rest of the year." For information about next year's camp, contact Shonta Chaloux at the SCTCA at (760) 751-7676 or Arnell Hinkle at CANFit at (510) 644-1533.

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