

Rethinking Gubbah Localism

Gubbah: /gʌˈbbʌ/ non-aborigine, whitefella

It's summer, sticky and humid. The afternoon drags on. A rush of wind sweeps through the window and reminds me of the new cyclone stalking the coast and whipping up a south-east wind. My body cools down.

I knock off work early and drive the ute towards the coast...fast. The traffic slows me down. Why can't people just get out of the way when the swell is up? I decide to lobby council for a surfer-only lane during cyclone season.

I'm rushing to The Point. It stays glassy in these winds. Powerful swells stagger down its flanks, punch-drunk from the dogged south-easterly. On the northern side the swells twist into hollow barrels.

I park at the picnic benches halfway up The Point where a closeknit crew mills about. Scat and Drew sit on the picnic table, and old Laz leans against his car eating a slice of watermelon. Ash sucks on a beer as he prepares his fishing line. Friendly jibes are thrown back and forth. We take up a large area and others have to go around us.

We all grew up surfing The Point and know when conditions are right for it to turn on. Most of our families live in the run-down council-owned fibro houses up the road and have done so for generations. Our boardrider club parties are held in a clearing at the top of the headland. My first root was in the long grass down near the Surf Club.

Our local knowledge and persistent presence afford us privileges. We hang out next to the best facilities and claim rights to carparks, waves, park benches, even girls. We dominate the area by sprawling out and being raucous, acoustic borders being just as effective as physical ones.

When I first began to surf in this area, I had to pay my dues until I earned the right to belong. If I stepped out of line I was promptly put in place by harsh words or a quick fist. It was the same for all the surfers of my age at The Point. It's still the same now.

When I was 15 I got a pat on the back from one of the older crew to let me know I belonged. That felt to me like getting a knighthood. These days the feeling of unity my mates and I enjoy provides us with a sense of authority. We've spent years earning our belonging by surfing on the biggest days, enduring abuse as grommets, fighting housing developments, backing each other up in fights and helping each other out when our luck is down. We have tattoos. Our belonging is etched into our bodies. We have handshakes. Feelings pass easily through gnarled hands to recall experiences we have shared.

We haven't just bonded with each other though. We've also bonded with The Point. That confused beating of your heart has to become familiar. Body strength and stamina grow. Each collision and strained breath teaches oxygen efficiency and turns lungs into a surfer's lungs. Wipeouts rip at flesh and contort the body unnaturally. Whitewater washes, reefs rip, swells sweep. Each surf and watery collision at The Point is another battering and modification your body has endured.

Sometimes it's hard to tell where our bodies begin and The Point ends. As local surfers we feel the waves of The Point and ride with them, not simply on them. Those waves are part of our bodies and our bodies are part of them. My mate Kim Satchell tells me that we've emerged as part of the 'lived cartography' of this coast. He explains this as the coming together of social life, ocean swells, the sun, sand, rock and bodies. Kim's a high-brow ecological hippy!

I wait all year for the cyclones that light up The Point. Over the years I've felt many cyclones and become accustomed to their characteristics. If my skin drips with sweat and I'm itchy, inevitably a lacklustre north-east wind is blowing and there's only a slight chance of swell. If a cyclone is at sea and the wind turns to the south, then the air becomes less humid – clearer – and my anticipation rises. The cyclone is within our swell window, and the confluence of swell and wind means there'll soon be good waves at The Point.

I know every section of The Point. At the pinnacle of the headland the waves are steep, raw and powerful. In the cove the swells even out, the take-off is critical and the wave hollow. Further inside, and closer to the beach, the waves are slower and more rhythmic in their progression.

Each section allows different rides – expressions, enthusiasms, intentions, imaginations and experiences – and each feels different underfoot.

Kim says there's a sensory relationship between us local surfers and The Point: 'Nature and culture entwine as our habitat.' (Told you he was a hippy!) I see it as our turf.

I change into my wetsuit as Scat waxes up. Oldie has just got out of the water complaining about the session. 'Fucking crowds! Every Tom, Dick and Harry thinks he's a local here now. Fucking blow-ins, kooks, tourists...the fucking lot. You name it, they're fucking out there. Didn't see one fucking person I knew.'

We nod in agreement and sympathy. Lately we've all been feeling out of place in our own backyard. The land around The Point is changing.

Our homes are being demolished to make way for million-dollar mansions and trendy tourist resorts. Our parks are being developed. We complain about the newcomers. They come from the cities. Some already surf while others are learning at the new surf school.

The line-up is now packed and The Point groans under the pressure. The boys and I don't ask the newcomers about their lives or intentions, or the struggles they may have been through to get to The Point. Guess we assume they had it easy, not like us long-time locals. I know this willful ignorance fuels the fear that the newcomers threaten The Point and our lifestyle. But then I also know that my mates can't afford the increased house prices and resent the newcomers forcing them up. Some have even had to move away.

Recently, some of the younger crew spray-painted 'Locals Only' on the boulders near the jump rock to let people know The Point is ours. Like the first pat on the back an older local ever gave me, local status has to be earned and the blow-ins haven't put in the time. Out in the water blow-ins are often harassed, especially if they think they are now local at The Point. They don't know that Laz's brother died out there. That Ben's family was the first in the area, and that Scat rallied everyone together to stop a sewerage outfall being built. Harassment isn't always violent. Only takes a couple of beltings for the message to get across regarding who is at the top of the pecking order. After that it's implied violence. Just as effective.

But we're beginning to feel outnumbered. Our position at the top of the pecking-order is being challenged by the sheer number of newcomers. We don't like it.

Surf journo Dave Parmenter reckons a surfing boom means there is now a 'kookocracy': the general surfing IQ has lowered as a result of a beginner boom, a legion of zombie surfers. My mates and I say the kookocracy is how any fool thinks he can paddle out into a line-up and just catch waves and get in the way without respecting our tradition, our authority, our knowledge. Addressing my mates in the carpark, I compare our situation to that of the local indigenous people. After all, we are like a tribe, with our own cultural values and laws, and now we're being displaced. Continuing, I parallel our bonding with The Point with indigenous people's connections to the sea and land.

I've thought about this a bit recently and speak with confidence. I can see the words resonating with a few of the fellas who feel the same but haven't thought about it in these terms. I know they're feeling the same flush of justification and vindication that I had when the thought first came to me.

Still, I'll admit I don't really know that much about the indigenous population and their relationship with the Australian coast. Of course I know about Dale Richards who won the Quiksilver Pro Trials a few years back and got into the main event, winning a 'Deadly' award from the indigenous community for his effort. Occasionally I read an article in surf mags on blokes like Paul Evans, Kenny Dann and the Slabb family. I also know about the Dhurga people who live at Jervis Bay on the South Coast of NSW, and have a strong community of surfers who ride the perfect lefts of Wreck Bay down the road from their home.

I can also recall reading in a history book how during the Australian Bicentenary Day celebrations in 1988 Aboriginal lifeguard Burnum Burnum hoisted the Aboriginal flag above the white cliffs of Dover in England. It was an ironic gesture indicating Aboriginal sovereignty over the colonisers of Australia.

After I've spoken, one of the boys, Jack, an indigenous surfer, gets angry with me. His voice shaking, he tells us all to be at the pub that night. He's going to introduce us to Max, one of his elders. Then he storms off, leaving us scratching our heads, eyebrows raised.

After we've had a few games of pool and a few beers, Jack arrives with Max. Max is an older bloke – about 50, although it's hard to say for sure. I've seen him around over the years but never spoken to him. I'm curious to know why Jack got upset with me. After all, wasn't I sympathising with the blackfella's plight?

About ten of us gather in the corner of the pool room next to the TAB. It's obvious Jack has already spoken to Max about what I said as Max begins speaking. He speaks gently but with certainty about the saltwater mobs of Australia and the long history they have with The Point. He explains that my mates and I have forgotten that the traditional custodians of The Point were colonised long before we came along, and experienced physical, social, and cultural displacement in order that we could become local. He tells us that saltwater indigenous mobs have a particular relationship to country and sea: 'When I talk about country I mean the ocean...our sea country that provides so much of the resources we still depend upon for our wellbeing, and which covers the submerged lands that bear the footprints of our ancestors.'

Looking my way, Max says that my comparison of our bonding and plight to those of the indigenous mob works only as a tool for us gubbahs to claim ownership of waves that weren't ours from the outset. By declaring my local status I obliterated many other stories and propagated a long history of colonial dispossession. I ignored the stories of women who collected shellfish, and of blackfellas sitting in Bora rings. And I ignored thousands of years of coastal life where Aboriginal people played on and lived off the ocean.

Max finishes. We sit on our stools absorbing what he's said. Without standing, Jack begins. He tells us that the clearing at the top of The Point where we have our parties and throw our empty beer cans is where past generations are buried, where families were massacred, and where his mob have held traditional ceremonies. 'It's why I never go to the parties.'

And we always thought Jack was soft...

I don't know what to say. What Max said is a revelation but it is also startlingly obvious. I feel ignorant. And I feel sick.

Perhaps it's dented pride that makes me stand up after a while and reply to Max and Jack. Perhaps it's that I still think I've been misunderstood. I'm not sure. But I tell Max that when the housing development was proposed my mates and I were the first to support the indigenous people's land right claim to protect The Point. 'We helped out,' I say. 'We're in this together. We know how you feel.'

Our campaign was similar to the one that has been taking place at Sandon Point, a legendary pointbreak near Wollongong, New South Wales. The 'Save Sandon Point' campaign was a protest against a housing development planned for the vacant land adjacent to the headland. The land is under the custodianship of the Dharawal people. The coastline is part of the Wodi Wodi people's region and they call the point 'Kuradji Sandon Point'. It's a 4,000-year-old tool-making site and ceremonial gathering place.

The developers – Stockland Trust – wanted the indigenous tent embassy at Kuradji Sandon Point dispersed. They were creating bad publicity and were a hinderance to the developers who planned to put in 1,200 homes.

Local residents and traditional custodians protested the development. Their motives for doing so were mixed: to help the indigenous people; to keep the surf uncrowded; to keep land prices high.

The ruling judge declared the Sandon Point development invalid, not because of the claims of the Dharawal people (in fact they were completely overlooked), but because the development proposal had failed to consider the impact of climate change on the flood-prone site.

Again Max stands. He knows about our cooperation with the local mob in protesting the housing development, and he congratulates me on standing up to the developers. However, he adds, we've supported the local mob for our own purposes, to protect our own privileges. Our experiences are nothing like those of the traditional custodians who have been colonised for generations.

'Since colonisation our lives have been plagued by massacres, limited rights, poor access to education and health facilities, racism, lost homes, and persecution. For decades our children were

stolen and put into missionary schools and foster homes. Those families continue to have issues with identity and loss.

'To tie your plight in with our history re-colonises our indigeneity and makes the story all about the gubbah. You forget the power you have to ignore our stories while furthering your own.

'Our culture is our own. Our symbols are our own. And just because a surf company sponsors one of us blackfellas doesn't mean that company has the right to use our symbols, our culture, to sell more clothes. That's cultural exploitation.

'When you gubbahs surf this place and call it home, you enter into a relationship with all us blackfellas and our culture. When you claim exclusive local status, then you're ignoring that relationship and denying our stories and histories, which are just as much a part of The Point as yours. If you're serious about being locals, you gubbahs have to rethink localism. You have to stop asking what you can take from your surf spots, what you think you own. You have to start asking yourselves who's speaking, who's speaking for whom and what for. And more importantly you have to learn to listen.'

I'm not saying anything this time. There's too much to think about. We drink our beer in silence, as Jack chews his lip and nods excitedly, and Max waits...

— *Clifton Evers*