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# The Effects of Surf-Driven Development on the Local Population of Playa Gigante, Nicaragua

## Abstract

In many of the world's developing countries, tourism is starting to play a more important role in the improvements of the local and national economies. One of these countries that have started to view tourism as a way to alleviate poverty throughout the country is Nicaragua. With miles of beaches, large swaths of pristine rainforests and beautiful volcanoes, Nicaragua has plenty to offer to travelers from all over the world. One of the sectors of tourism that has rapidly expanded in recent years is that which caters specifically to North American and European surfing tourists, who travel to Nicaragua for the powerful surf found on the Pacific coast. Even though many of the hotels themselves are owned by foreign tourism operators the Nicaraguans have managed to find employment that can provide new alternatives to their traditional means of self-support such as farming and fishing. This study found that the new employment opportunities can allow them access to capital that would have been unheard of as early as five to ten years ago. However, with the emergence of this tourism sector and the rise in popularity of tourism destinations such as Playa Gigante, foreign actors may cause a rise in the overall prices of goods and real estate in the area.

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The Effects of Surf-Driven Development on the Local  
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Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

Nicholas H.W. Earhart

June 2015

Advisor: Dr. Matthew J. Taylor

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Title: The Effects of Surf-Driven Development on the Local Population of Playa Gigante, Nicaragua

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### **Abstract**

In many of the world's developing countries, tourism is starting to play a more important role in the improvements of the local and national economies. One of these countries that have started to view tourism as a way to alleviate poverty throughout the country is Nicaragua. With miles of beaches, large swaths of pristine rainforests and beautiful volcanoes, Nicaragua has plenty to offer to travelers from all over the world. One of the sectors of tourism that has rapidly expanded in recent years is that which caters specifically to North American and European surfing tourists, who travel to Nicaragua for the powerful surf found on the Pacific coast. Even though many of the hotels themselves are owned by foreign tourism operators the Nicaraguans have managed to find employment that can provide new alternatives to their traditional means of self-support such as farming and fishing. This study found that the new employment opportunities can allow them access to capital that would have been unheard of as early as five to ten years ago. However, with the emergence of this tourism sector and the rise in popularity of tourism destinations such as Playa Gigante, foreign actors may cause a rise in the overall prices of goods and real estate in the area.

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## **1. Introduction**

The group of surfers gathered around the bar that night at the Camino Gigante Hotel and Restaurant, men and women whose skin had been tanned deep red from the long hours spent in the sun and ocean, to confabulate the action of the day. They had left early that morning before sunrise to journey on foot and by boat up the coast to some of the five surfing waves that are within close proximity to the town of Playa Gigante in the Southwest corner of Nicaragua. Now, sitting in a large group drinking cold *Toñas*<sup>i</sup>, they recapped the day and spoke of individual waves and even individual moments of waves that they could still remember as vividly as when they had rode them hours before. This same scenario was being played out in each of the hotels that dot the beach in this small coastal community and other communities up and down the coast – the day didn't seem complete without first rehashing the best rides and waves of the day while watching the golden sun dip below the western horizon. Soon the group would be finishing their dinners and heading early to bed so they could rise the following morning, before the sun's rays had lit the town, to travel the coast and search for the best waves to ride.

There was another group assembled that night at the Camino Gigante Hotel and Restaurant. A group that had traveled far fewer miles to reach their destination than had the surf tourists strewn about the restaurant; the Nicaraguans who staff the bar and cook and serve food and drinks to the tourists. This group – who might otherwise have found themselves in their homes gathered around a small TV broadcasting Mexican soap operas

streamed through the red Claro satellite dishes<sup>ii</sup> mounted on the roof – were now a part of an emerging sector in Southwest Nicaragua that caters to North Americans and Europeans who traveled thousands of miles to reach this small stretch of coast. These *Nicas* (as they are known by both the tourists and the Nicaraguans alike) have found a new way to support themselves by working in establishments catering specifically to traveling surfers, many of whom had made their way to Nicaragua due to its low cost, close proximity to the United States, and its abundance of high quality and relatively uncrowded waves<sup>iii</sup> (as compared to the overpopulated waves of Southern California, for example). Now, in a part of the world where the setting sun usually means the end of the working day, these *Nicas* had discovered a way to earn money that none of their older family members could have imagined as little as 5 to 10 years earlier.

The idea of supplementing traditional incomes through working in the tourism sector is by no means a new concept in Central America, especially in countries like Costa Rica where tourism dates back to the early 1970s. Research conducted in other developing countries has found that tourism is now a key economic development strategy because of its potential to generate foreign exchange earnings, increase foreign investment, increase revenue collected from taxes on local businesses and increase the available number of jobs for nationals in a given tourism area (Carbone, 2005; Chok et al., 2007; Scheyvens, 2007). But considering Nicaragua's recent political history, including a revolution that completely changed the political landscape of the country in the late 1970s and early 1980s, tourism is just now beginning to take a grip on the country and the dilemmas of that new development are only now being addressed. Now,



working in hotels and restaurants has not only become a great way for Nicaraguans to help supplement the income earned in the traditional sectors of the economy, but it has also become a primary source of income for many of the younger generation of Nicaraguans who see farming and fishing as an antiquated means of earning an income that is much more susceptible to fluctuations in Nicaragua's unstable weather patterns.

The town of Playa Gigante<sup>iv</sup> sits in a delicate balance between those locals who have stayed true to their traditional means of economic subsistence, and those who are seeing the emerging tourism market as a way to branch out into a more diversified support system. Research into the effects of tourism in developing countries has shown both positive and negative impacts historically. On the one hand, studies have shown that tourism can create positive economic benefits and new opportunities for business, revenue generation for local government, more employment opportunities and increased foreign exchange earnings (Andereck et al., 2005; Belisle & Hoy, 1980; Mbaiwa, 2005). While other research has shown that there can be distinctly negative effects, which include: increased social stratification, increased demand for public services, higher taxes, increased prices and the reinforcement of neoliberal economic practices which make the rich elite in the community richer and poor even poorer (Geenwood, 1976; Jarari et al., 1990; Scheyvens, 2007). The goal of this study was to find out which of these positive and negative impacts was most prevalent in the tourism market that has sprung up in Playa Gigante and to what degree those impacts affect the local Nicaraguan inhabitants. What was once a small sector of the local economy is now becoming more and more inviting to the people who see the tourists, and the money they bring with them,

as an enticing financial incentive. As more North American and European surfers begin to zero in on Nicaragua as a travel destination, the incentive to work in the tourism sector is becoming more inviting with each passing season.

According to the Instituto Nicaraguense de Turismo (INTUR), the tourism sector of Nicaragua's economy, and specifically that development which is taking place in the southwest corner of the country, is now the fastest growing division of the country's economy (INTUR, 2014). Indeed, since the mid-1990s, tourism arrivals and receipts have grown at a steady rate from \$50 million USD in 1995 to over \$400 million USD in 2013 (Lavanchy & Taylor, 2015). One of the main attractions that Nicaragua has to offer to North American and European tourists is a long, sparsely developed coastline that holds some of the best surfing waves in all of Central America (Weisberg, 2010). Upon accessing the INTUR website, one will even find photographs of *gringo* surfers riding Nicaraguan waves near the study site. One of the towns that has emerged as a quasi-mecca for many of these traveling surfers is Playa Gigante, which boasts walking and boat access to five of the most famous and high-quality waves in the country: Manzanillo, North and South Amarillo, Colorado's and Panga Drops (Figure 2. Pg. 27). Along with the high-quality surfing waves that can be found in this small community, there are also a number of other coastal tourism attractions, such as charter fishing and sailing tours, that make this town a catalyst for the change that is now taking place along Nicaragua's Southwestern corridor. Ralf Buckley, who has published a wealth of surfing related academic work in the field of geography, has even gone so far as to say that surfing, and the development that follows as a result, provides residents of local

communities with the first opportunity to break away from their traditional means of living, and to earn money on a scale that was impossible prior to surfing's emergence (Buckley, 2002). The question at the heart of this paper then is to examine whether or nor Buckley's words are holding true for the town of Playa Gigante; has surf tourism allowed locals to break away from traditional means of living, or have the majority of benefits accumulated in the hands of the foreigners and wealthy Nicaraguans who have been able to leverage the tourism boom?

The issue as to who benefits from this new development in Southwest Nicaragua, like many issues in the world of academics, has not avoided debate here or in other parts of the world. Some scholars have suggested that this development has the ability to marginalize local residents who cannot take advantage of the financial boom associated with a growing tourism industry due to their inability to ante up financially, on an equal level with North American tourism developers (Alvarado & Taylor, 2014; Babb, 2004). True, the majority of Nicaraguans, especially those from this coastal region where surfing oriented development is taking place, lack the financial means to compete with those who have access to enough money to make development feasible. What I will explore in this paper, is whether or not those without access to significant capital are still seeing economic benefits from the influx of tourism, despite the fact they are not the ones primarily developing the hotels and surf-related tourism establishments (aside from a few exceptions where the hotels and restaurants *are* run by Nicaraguans from Playa Gigante which will be discussed in the results section of the paper).

The second section of the paper investigates the background of both tourism developments in less-developed countries (LCDs), as well as some of the history of surfing tourism, including the idea of the “endless summer” and how the travel bug has infected the sport of surfing in recent decades. Also examined are some of the issues that are closely tied to ecological economics and in the case of this study, the idea of ecotourism and its relatively recent rise in popularity. Section three of the paper provides a brief historical background. That history includes an examination of tourism in Nicaragua. I then describe the study site, why it is so appealing for traveling surfers, an overview of the surfing waves that can be found in the area, and why the access to these waves is key to Playa Gigante’s growth in popularity over the last few years. In the next section, I review the research methods, before moving on to present results of the fieldwork. I then discuss those results in the context of prior research on tourism and surfing. Finally, I make recommendations regarding the most effective way to approach future development in Playa Gigante in a way that will provide the most financial and cultural benefit to the local *Nicas*. I follow with a brief conclusion where the study is summarized and my thoughts on the issue of surf tourism in Nicaragua are discussed.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Impacts of Tourism Development in Nicaragua**

Since the end of the Contra War in 1990, the tourism industry has been growing year after year as more tourists see Nicaragua as a viable option due, in part, to the end of conflict, proximity (for North Americans) and favorable exchange rates. This increase in the number of tourists has been especially prevalent since the late 1990s when the first leisure tourists started to replace the journalists and activists who had come to the country in response to the revolution (1979 – 1990). In the last fifteen years, tourism has played an ever-increasing role of importance in the country's national economy. The money earned from tourism now exceeds the revenue generated from the country's two main exports of coffee and beef (INTUR, 2014). A 2008 study on the economic impacts of Nicaragua's tourism industry, using available tourism data from 1980 to 2004, found that tourism "led to increased gross domestic product, economic expansion, because of increased foreign exchange earnings and an overall reduction in poverty" (Croes & Vanegas, 2008. Pg. 6). Along with the direct injection of foreign cash that Nicaragua had seen as a result of the tourism industry, there has also been a greater increase in investment that has come from the foreign markets in the form of the development of hotels, hostels and bar/restaurants along Nicaragua's new tourism frontier in the Southwestern portion of the country (Alvarado & Taylor, 2014; Babb, 2004; Baranay et al. 2001; Lavanchy & Taylor, 2015). What was once a sparsely populated stretch of coast

that was lined only with the occasional, quiet fishing village, is now ground zero for Nicaragua's new tourism development strategy.

This development project (which I have heard referred to as both the "Hawaii project" and the "Nicaraguan Riviera Project") has seen an increase in the number and size of towns with newly constructed hotels, bars and restaurants that cater specifically to the North American and European tourism market. In addition to cheap hostels geared towards parsimonious backpackers, there are large resort-style hotels, such as Guacalito de la Isla<sup>v</sup> (located about five kilometers south of Playa Gigante), that cater to the Nicaraguan, North American and European elite (the cheapest room at this hotel is \$450 USD per night). While observers with a neoliberal perspective would see this new development positively, with a potential trickle down benefits for locals, neo-Marxist thinkers often focus on the costs of tourism to local populations and the benefits that may or may not be realized by the local community (Wilson, 2008; Alvarado & Taylor, 2014). With so much money flowing into the area, and even a new international airport under construction, whether or not the whole community will benefit from the tourism boom is yet to be studied.

Of course, when speaking specifically about the positive and negative impacts tourism can have on a country, especially a LDC like Nicaragua, the social impacts are harder to quantify than economic impacts that can be demonstrated by documenting the total revenue generated in the tourism sector. When discussing social impacts, I am referring especially to those factors that might not be directly related to tourism, but have been shown to have a close association to it. These would include: increased crime, drug

and alcohol abuse within the native community, prostitution, environmental degradation, crowding and traffic, and decreased reliance on traditional subsistence means of living (Andereck et al., 2005; West & Carrier, 2006). Social impacts that would be considered positive include: greater opportunities for social mobility, increased cultural exchange, access to new activities for locals, new infrastructure and transportation opportunities, and increased importance of the role of women in society (Usher & Kerstetter, 2014; Dyer et al., 2003; Mansperger, 1995). The impacts of tourism on Nicaraguan society and economies at the local level are still unknown. Some scholars have associated the impacts of large-scale developments in the tourism economies to have an impact on the local economy through a potential “trickle down” effect that improves the financial situation of the poor (Babb, 2004). However, case studies from other areas of Latin America illustrate that the limited political power of locals often leads to their marginalization and that it will be the locals who miss out on the major financial benefits that tourism will bring (e.g. Belsky, 1999; Honey, 1999).

One of the many new developments that are taking place along the Nicaraguan Riviera is that which specifically caters to tourists who travel to the country to participate in the sport of surfing. A review of geographic and tourism based academic journals reveals some recent academic research devoted to the social and economic effects of surf tourism on Nicaragua (Hunt & Stronza, 2014; Usher & Kerstetter, 2015). Indeed, surfing’s popularity has rapidly increased recently. Any hotel located near the ocean or within walking distance of a known surf break is starting to include surf board rentals and surfing lessons in their bevy of available tourism activities. It is not just the academic

literature that has seen a rise in the number of articles devoted to the exploration of Nicaragua's coast; surf magazines regularly feature Nicaragua as a "perfect" surfing destination or "surf mecca" (or at least a destination which lacks the crowds that are so prevalent in other parts of the world) and include at least one photo per issue of surfers riding Pacific coast waves. As Nicaragua embraces the idea of tourism as a means to alleviate poverty and increase the financial standing of the country, so too has the surfing community embraced the country of Nicaragua as a new frontier of surfing open for exploration.

## **2.2 The Idea of "Surfonomics"**

In a fairly recent expansion of the field of ecological economics, the idea of "surfonomics," has seen many researchers attempting to place a direct monetary value on certain surfing breaks around the world. Recent research attempts to quantify how much money surfing breaks generate for the community where they are located. Two of the most in-depth studies examine the breaks at Mundaka, Spain (near the French border) and Mavericks, in Northern California (Murphy & Bernal, 2008 and Coffman & Burnett, 2009, respectively). Studies of this type calculate what a given surf break is worth to a community and can attempt to put a price tag on a surf break as far as the annual monetary contribution of that break to its community. While these studies can be convoluted in the developed world where data are more easily available, studies in this vein are even more complicated in LDCs where data are scarce and difficult to obtain. In the case of these two studies however, both groups of researchers were able to pinpoint an exact number for the total amount of revenue generated. They concluded that both



Mundaka and Mavericks generate upwards of twenty five million U.S. dollars annually for the communities in which they are located. In fact, the surfing industry itself is growing exponentially each year as the value associated with it will reach as high as USD 13.2 billion annually by 2017 and had as many as 23 million total participants (active surfers) in the year 2014 (ISA, 2015).

Other research in this new field assesses the sustainability of surfing and surfers. Specifically, researchers have examined sustainability that surfers and surfing oriented developers maintain while living their daily lives at home, traveling the world, or in the case of the developers, what sustainability practices they use while creating a new surfing destination. Many, when thinking about the lives and actions of surfers, think of them as shepherds of the Earth, especially given the amount of time they spend in nature and specifically in the ocean. But some research has uncovered an uncomfortable truth; Hill and Abbott (2009) found that while many surfers claimed to always take steps to be environmentally sensitive and to conserve the resources that bring them so much joy, many of them did not practice what they preached. The study found that,

“[surfers] did not consistently participate in sustainable practices through purchasing eco-friendly surf products or [by] engaging with the local Surfrider Foundation chapter. Many surfers even supported the environmentally destructive practices such as dredging” (Hill & Abbott, 2009).

Many people within the surfing community consider themselves to be more environmentally conscious, but some may lack the motivation to take proactive steps to try and help the environment, and to improve the conditions of their local surfing breaks. As mentioned in the passage from the Hill and Abbott study, one of the key ways that surfers can help to protect their waves and beaches in by joining organizations like the

Surfrider Foundation – and they now have at the helm of the foundation a man who is both a surfer and an academic, and someone who has done a hefty amount of work in the advancement of surfing as a potential field for academic study – Chad Nelsen.

When considering the link between the idea of “surfonomics” and ecological economics, there is nobody who has published more work in the field than Dr. Chad Nelsen (UCLA) who has now taken over the reigns as the director of the Surfrider Foundation – based in San Clemente, California. Nelsen has researched a number of different surfing breaks around Southern California in order to examine the economic impact of those breaks on nearby communities, for example, Trestles beach in Southern California (Nelsen & Pendelton, 2007). He also created a socioeconomic breakdown of surfers in the United States (Wagner & Nelsen, 2011), an examination of coastal recreational resources with surfing specific locations (Lazarow & Nelsen, 2007), and a case study for coastal management policies in El Segundo (which sits at the end of the main runways for the Los Angeles International Airport), California (Nelsen, 1996). These studies, centered around Nelsen’s home territory of Southern California, were able to set a precedent upon which further research in the field could be based. Research of this nature that pertains to LDCs, however, is seriously lacking.

While the link between surfing and ecological economics is only starting to come out of its infancy, there has been other research that has been devoted to different types of water sports that have been long established in the annals of ocean tourism and its empirical link to ecological economics. Many of the older works in the field have looked at coastal tourism destinations, what it is that draws tourist to them, and what economic

impacts that tourism has on the communities where it is taking place (Brau et al., 2007; Eugenio-Martín et al., 2004; Hazari & Sgró, 1995).

### **2.3 Surfers as Travelers**

Surfing, more than many other sports of its kind, is one that is closely identified with traveling and the idea of the search for the perfect waves, no matter what lengths one must travel in order to find uncrowded waves<sup>vi</sup> (some even favor the harder to reach surfing destinations because of the uncrowded waves that are promised once the journey is over). Many surfers even relish in the fact that they, more than other athletes, are willing to go to the ends of the Earth in order to find the newest, most secret waves, devoid of the packs of surfers that are so common in areas where surfing has a long established history like Southern California, Hawaii or the east coast of Australia.

Surfers, for the most part, consider surf travel a part of their identity. People in this class take pride in the fact that they are a nomadic bunch who are willing to travel to any small stretch of coast, no matter the hardships they will face along the way (Anderson, 2014). And unlike other sports, where the desire to travel seemed to spawn from the void, with no noticeable catalyst to start the movement, North American surfers can almost pinpoint the date that this desire to become “surf travelers” emanated – it took place in the summer of 1964.

That year a movie produced by Bruce Brown, the godfather of the modern surf movie, was released in theaters across Southern California that would change the way surfers viewed the world, and would open up thousands of uncharted surfing destinations ripe for the picking; the movie was called *The Endless Summer*. This film, which

followed the travels of two Southern California surfers as they made their way on a circumnavigation of the Earth looking for uncrowded waves, is seen by many scholars as the original spark that lit the bonfire that is now the credo many surfers live by – travel the world in search of new waves, no matter the cost or difficulties involved in reaching them (Lewis, 2003; Ormrod, 2005). Usher and Kerstetter said of the traveling surfer: “the movie legitimized American surfers as colonial ambassadors of the sport and offered a paternalistic view of local cultures” (Usher & Kerstetter, 2014: p. 6). If you are a surfer who was raised in the United States, you are unable to recall the number of times you have seen this movie and dreamed about stopping at one of the locations that the two main stars, Robert August and Mike Hynson, visited on their journey more than fifty years ago. This movie acted as a spiritual guide for countless numbers of surfers who have embarked on similar journeys, no matter the destination, in the last five decades.

Since these early beginnings of surfing travel, we have come a long way and “opened up” new areas that are considered viable surfing destinations. Improvements in the technology of surfing and specifically in the advances in the wetsuit technologies have opened up parts of the world that were never considered legitimate surfing destinations. For example, Langseth (2012) explores the surf culture of Norway, a place that many would consider as unappealing due to the cold water in the Northern latitudes and the harshness of the ocean that surrounds the country (Langseth, 2012). Even though this study took a look at the social dynamics within a local surfing group in Norway and not at the country as a travel destination, it speaks to the long strides that the sport of surfing has taken since it was originally practiced years ago as the “sport of kings” in

Hawaii by the Polynesian settlers of the islands. It is not just cold water locations that have been opened up as new frontiers for the sport of surfing – some of the stranger places that people now surf include tidal bores on the Amazon River and in some rivers in England, standing waves created by rapids in the Nile River in Africa and a whole new slew of “mechanical waves” or man-made waves in wave pools around the world.

Other researchers have explored the growing popularity of surfing destinations in Latin America, including studies in Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica (Krause, 2007; Krause, 2013; Nelsen et al., 2008; Pijoan, 2008; Tantamjarik, 2004; Usher & Kerstetter, 2014; Usher & Kerstetter, 2015; Wesiberg, 2010, respectively). These are places that sit in close proximity to the United States and have a relatively low cost associated with reaching them, drawing much appeal from the North American surfing community. Non-academics are also venturing into Latin America to find research material. Many of the popular surfing periodicals such as *Surfer*, *Surfing* and *The Surfer's Journal* have produced a slew of articles on places to explore throughout the region, including the newest of the countries to enter the Latin American surfing craze – Nicaragua. Some of these articles, both academic and those for entertainment purposes, have even declared Nicaragua as the new surfing Mecca of Central America, even though surfers have long been aware of the country's potential for good surfing, and some of the breaks in Nicaragua are now just as crowded (or even more so) than those waves that are found in Southern California and Hawaii (Barilotti, 2002). The town of San Juan del Sur, which lies in the Southwest corner of Nicaragua, near the Costa Rican border, has a long established history of tourism – so much so that some people have started to skip the

town on travels due to its tourism saturation (Hunt & Stronza, 2014). The information about Nicaragua is so abundant that a quick navigation of the internet produces a wealth of information about the country geared directly at surfers, including the best places to stay, the spots that produced the best waves on certain swells and other activities to participate in while the surf is flat (although this rarely happens on Nicaragua's exposed West coast). Although Nicaragua's top breaks are beginning to show some crowds that resemble California, there remains vast stretches of coast that have yet to be discovered<sup>vii</sup>; or if they have been discovered and found to contain good surf, those who discovered them have remained tight-lipped about their whereabouts.

To say that surfers, as a group of travelers, are willing to go to unprecedented lengths to find waves that are as of yet undiscovered would be to state the obvious to someone who has already spent time in the trenches, scouring for surf – sometimes driving for days, insisting that around the next point is where the holy grail of surf might be found. There are even contests hosted by surfing magazines to use new technologies like Google Earth to use satellite images to discover where the next unexplored surf destinations might be. And having spent many hours glued to the front of my computer, trying to observe small patches of white foam among craggy tracts of rocky coast, I know that traveling and searching for new waves is something that surfers will never stop doing.

### **3. Background**

#### **3.1 The Nicaraguan Political Context**

With periods that include direct intervention from the United States and a despotic ruling family that held power in the country for a half century, few countries in the Western Hemisphere have had as jagged of a past. Starting as far back as the 1850s, when the American filibuster William Walker took control of the country with his band of mercenaries for two years, Nicaragua has drawn a close watch from Washington D.C. (Gobat, 2005). Many of the larger political battles between superpowers that emerged after the Second World War were fought in the countryside of Nicaragua – a kind of proxy war against Communist footholds in the region. The struggles for power that have marked the country over the last fifty years have left it in long periods of economic stagnation, and the country is now one of the poorest in Latin America (IMF, 2012). Since the triumph of the Sandinistas against the Somoza dynasty in 1979, and the ensuing “Contra War” (fought against the US-backed guerillas) that ended in 1990, Nicaragua has achieved a modicum of tranquility, but there remains political unrest and frustration with the current ruler – Daniel Ortega.

Of all of the interventions by the United States, the longest-lasting and most deleteriously effective, was the support of three generations of the ruling Somoza family – who remained in power from 1936 until they were overthrown during the revolution in 1979. During their forty-three year rule, the Somoza family manipulated the economy of

the country, held the majority of the productive lands for personal profit, committed horrible acts of suppression against political adversaries and kept many of the landless peasants confined to unproductive, communal lands (Kinzer, 2006). While the peasants in the countryside were dying of malnutrition, the Somoza family accumulated vast quantities of wealth that they stole from the central bank and hid in offshore holdings outside the country (Walker & Wade, 2011). This was allowed to happen without fear of repercussion. The family was supported by the United States and had only to repress any communist sympathies that had grown in popularity around the region in order to stay in power.

The Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), a political movement that began as an opposition force to the Somoza regime, began to emerge in the late 1950s. As the movement gained support from peasants in the countryside, the FSLN began a revolution in the 1970s against the standing government in hopes of restoring power to the dispossessed. By 1979, they had their final victory. The first act of the newly minted Sandinista government, the redistribution of the land to the rural masses, was something that made those in Washington uncomfortable given the close association land redistribution had with communism (Everingham, 2001). In response to the success of the revolution, the United States began to support an opposition army – the *contras* – to take back the power from the Sandinistas they had lost in 1979. This Contra War marked another chapter in the sanguinary history of Nicaragua. The counterinsurgency of the *contras*, and the war in Nicaragua lost the popular support of the American public once it was revealed the US had supported the *contras* with profits made from selling arms to



Iran. This scandal was also the first introduction of Nicaragua into the general consciousness of many U.S. citizens.

Though the FSLN would eventually lose power in the democratic elections of 1990 for a more centrist regime that favored political ties to the United States, it was not before leaving a large imprint on the political landscape of the country (Brown, 2001). The popular red and black flags of the Sandinista army can still be seen being prominently displayed all over Nicaragua. After a period of sixteen years out of power, the FSLN would regain control of the country when the movement's leader, Daniel Ortega, was democratically reelected; Ortega has been in power since 2006. Many have said that the last two elections, in which Ortega won easily, were illegitimate and were scared by voter fraud and coercion. While the country was freed from the despotic rulers who had terrorized the country for so long, there remains a vast wealth gap, and many of Nicaragua's poor remain dispossessed and landless (Zimmerman, 2000; Kinzer, 1991). The growing embrace of tourism as a form of foreign exchange has led many to believe that a brighter future may lie ahead, but given the long history of political disenfranchisement, optimism is something that can be covert.

#### 4. Study Site

Located on a verdant isthmus that runs northwest from the Costa Rican border to the central west coast of Nicaragua, Playa Gigante sits in what many consider to be the breadbasket of the country's emerging surf tourism market (Figure 1. Pg. 24). To the east of the town (whose jurisdiction falls into the department of Rivas in the municipality of Tola) lies thousands of fertile acres of farmland that have been enriched through years of volcanic activity from the long string of volcanoes that run like a spine through the country. Beyond the farmland to the east of town lies the expansive Lake Nicaragua (*Cocibolca*), largest in all of Central America, that forms the eastern border of the Rivas isthmus on which Playa Gigante is located. Traveling north up the coast from Playa Gigante, one will encounter a series of developments and towns that cater to both traveling surfers and Nicaraguans alike including another popular surfing destination to the north named Popoyo, which is also the location of another very popular surf break by the same name. Unlike many communities in the area, where there is a distinct separation between where Nicaraguans live and the resorts where tourists stay, Playa Gigante is a mixed community where Nicaraguans, ex-pat North Americans and short and long-term tourists live in the same small community.

The town of Playa Gigante has two main access roads that come in from the main coastal highway that runs north/south, located about eight kilometers from the center of town.

Driving through the road one will first see acres of farmland that is primarily the subsistence plots of the Nicaraguans who live in the periphery of the community. As you drive down the main road the first major development you will see is the main entryway for the Guacalito de la Isla resort which sits approximately two kilometers to the south of Playa Gigante on the beach at Manzanillo bay. This entrance seems slightly out of place as you pass by the small local homes and settlements that line the road on the opposite side. If one travels up the main entryway to the resort, the hardpan dirt road will soon turn to nicely laid asphalt (as if in a developed country) as you zoom up the road to the main guard gate which sits hidden from the public road that weaves its way to the town. But the Nicaraguans of the community seldom travel this road, as it is reserved for hotels guests, and those who work in the resort must pass through the much more humble employee entrance to the south accessed by the main coastal highway.

As you make your way closer to the center of town, you will pass by a number of smaller entryways to the outlying hotels that cater more to the younger, more budget conscious travelers who aim to stay in Gigante, rather than at the exclusive resort. It is after these hotels that you will come upon the homes of the Nicaraguans on either side of the road. These modest houses, usually of only a few rooms and a main social area where the families pass time, are the common dwellings of the local Nicaraguans in the area – although a number of the houses in the area are much more developed. These modern houses can also be seen on the outskirts of the main town and are owned by the more successful fishermen in the town who have parlayed their earnings into more developed housing structures. Of course, all of the houses, no matter how rustic or

developed they may be, all have the ubiquitous Claro satellite dishes on the roof to provide entertainment for the families who live there.

Driving down into the heart of the town one will come upon the main plaza, which is essentially the main, two-street intersection of the town. Lining the plaza are a number of hotels and restaurants who cater both to the traveling surfers and to the locals alike – the majority of the establishments in this central plaza are owned by Nicaraguans who understand the value of the land that they have managed to maintain control of. Even though this small portion of the town seems like a dry, dusty square from a western movie, it is the most desired land in the area and will surely be climbing in value as the town grows in popularity in the future. From this central plaza there is a coastal access road that runs up and down the beach from one end of the town to the other and it is along this road that the other foreign owned hotels in the area are located.

Prior to the revolution of the early 1970s, the land where Playa Gigante is now located was a part of an expansive estate owned by the Somoza family called *Finca Güisoyol* that was used by the family to run cattle and as productive farmland. The purchase of the land occurred during a time (1937) when the most productive farm and pasture land was reserved primarily for the Somoza family and other members of the Nicaraguan elite who had little trouble securing the best tracts of land in the country. The Somoza family held this extensive portion of coastline until they were overthrown during the revolution and forced into exile. The land was redistributed by the new Sandinista government in 1979 along with other large swaths of productive land in the area that had been held by elites prior to the revolution. By 1994, through the legal means of the

Sandinista government, the land rights had been officially handed over to local fisherman and farmers who had moved into the area during the revolution.

Playa Gigante, even by the size standards of Nicaragua, is a modest town of just under one thousand square hectares of land space, and a population that hovers around five hundred people. Its roadways consist of two main dirt entryways, the old and the new, and a main “downtown” area (or *plaza central*) where most of the hotels, bars and restaurants catering to tourists are located. From this central plaza, the town moves outward towards the main coastal road, which runs north/south, about eight kilometers to the east of the town center (Figure 1. Pg. 24). The local Nicaraguan population of the town, who had historically been located near the center of the town, are now moving in greater numbers to the peripheral areas where the prices for land and housing are less than in the central plaza. Some of these parcels at the center of the town have now been purchased by tourism operators who have the financial capacity to buy land and construct new hotels; land that is now financially out of reach of most Nicaraguans. Since the recent increase in land prices, North American tourism operators, elites from other Latin American countries, or wealthy Nicaraguans from Managua have often purchased these central plots.

Figure 1: Nicaragua and the Study Site of Playa Gigante



The main reason that Playa Gigante's location is so inviting to surfing tourists is the group of five waves that are all accessible to travelers staying in town, either by foot or from surf taxis that run regularly from the calm anchorage in Bahía Gigante. Starting from the most southern of the waves and moving northwest up the coast, the first wave that surfers seek access to is the powerful left-hand point break called Manzanillo (Figure 2. Pg. 27). This wave sits roughly two kilometers to the southeast of town and is accessible only by boat (the only wave not accessible by foot from Gigante). Land access has been restricted by the major development, Guacalito de la Isla, which now occupies

the beach in front of the wave. Manzanillo can be accessed on foot for those people who are guests at the resort, but many of them are not surfers, rather, they are seekers of luxury and exclusivity. While this wave is probably the least consistent of the five, it is one of the highest quality waves, and is known around the surfing world as one of the most critical, high-performance surfing waves in Central America. Given its fickle nature however, this wave is not one of the most popular waves for surfers in Playa Gigante unless they happen to be visiting during the rare swell conditions (a big southern hemisphere storm that can push huge swells all the way across the equator from the Antarctic) that make the wave work.

Moving northward up the coast, one will reach the first set of waves that is directly accessible on foot from the hotels in Playa Gigante, called Playa Amarillo (Figure 2.). Amarillo (which is divided up into two different surfing zones – North Amarillo and South Amarillo) is one of the most docile waves in the area and is a spot that many people (Nicaraguans and tourists alike) visit either to learn how to surf, or to improve upon existing surfing skills. Since this is the closest beach within walking distance from Playa Gigante and has the most passive waves, Playa Amarillo is usually the site of one of surfing's most time honored traditions; the evening "glass off," where people of the town gather in the waves to socialize and occasionally ride small waves. In terms of the risks associated with surfing, this wave is the lowest risk of all the waves in the area. Moving northwest up the coast on this tour of the surfing waves of Playa Gigante one encounters two more waves; waves that are both higher performance and

harder to access and in turn attract more “die-hard” surfers who are willing to make larger sacrifices to reach surfing waves.

Around the northern headland of Playa Amarillo and about an hours walk from the center of Playa Gigante is Playa Colorado, which holds one of the most famous, most consistent and highest performance waves in the country by the same name: Colorado’s (Figure 2.). This resulting crowd, strong currents and long walking distance combine to make this one of the most difficult waves in the area to surf. But the high quality waves that can be caught on this section of beach often make up for hardships faced while accessing the break. Like Manzanillo to the south, Colorado’s is also located in front of a private resort (this one named Hacienda Iguana Beach & Golf Club), but unlike Guacalito de la Isla, this resort caters more to surfers and has much more modestly priced accommodations (about \$65 – 70 USD per night) that are within the budgetary constraints of some surfers. However, those who cannot afford this type of lodging will often choose to take the walk (sometimes twice a day) up the coast or hire a surf taxi to drop them at the break.

Moving further north up the coast, just over two kilometers from where Colorado’s is located, is the last of the waves considered to be within the scope of the waves of Playa Gigante; Panga Drops (named after the small fishing boats that drop surfers off at the break) (Figure 2.). Like the name would suggest, this break is much more difficult to access from Playa Gigante without the use of a boat, and the walk often takes two hours one-way. This break (located at the northernmost boundary of the Hacienda Iguana property) is much less crowded than the breaks to the south and is a



much easier wave to surf given how deep the ocean is where the wave usually breaks (around 15 to 20 feet deep depending on tidal conditions). Even though this wave tends to be bigger than the other waves in the area given its deep channel and location outside of the protection of the bay, it lacks the high performance of a wave like Colorado's, and tends to be a spot accessed more during periods of low wave height at other breaks.

Figure 2: Detailed map of Playa Gigante, showing the surrounding communities and surfing waves.



While there are more waves that can be accessed from Playa Gigante by boat in the area (such as Playa Jiquelite and Popoyo reef to the north) these five waves are what most visitors and Nicaraguans would consider to be the group of waves that are easily accessed from Playa Gigante.

Moving beyond these five breaks, the cost of either hiring a surf taxi or renting a car puts many of the other waves out of financial reach for most surfers who are staying in Playa Gigante. For example, some boat trips to the Popoyo area can cost as much as one hundred and fifty U.S. dollars per person once the price of food, water and beverages are factored into the cost – many surfers find it easier to simply move up the coast to a new hotel or resort that has access to these more northern waves<sup>viii</sup>. So for the context of this paper, these five waves will be considered the locally accessible waves of Playa Gigante, and the main reason that staying in the town is so appealing to surf tourists. Hotels in the town provide the price point that is so important to young surf travelers and at the same time provide a very diverse group of waves that can be reached for little or no cost. This is the reason that Playa Gigante is one of the biggest surfing destinations for those travelers who think of Nicaragua while planning upcoming surfing trips.

## **5. Research Methods**

The primary data collection method used were in-depth interviews conducted with different actors within the tourism sector, including local men and women who worked in tourism establishments, and others who had no affiliation to tourism in any way (Clifford et al., 2003). During a three-month stay near the town a total of twenty four (24) in-depth interviews were conducted, the majority of them in or around the interviewee's workplace during off-hours when business was slow or in public spaces especially in the case of interviews with females (Jones III, 2010). Interviews were conducted with two types of fishermen – those who had close connections to tourism sector, and those who had loose ties to the tourism sector – to see how their views would differ and to gain a different perspective of their role in tourism. I also employed extensive participant observation, however, this was used more as a way to highlight relevant issues in order to be more thorough during the interviews, and to make logical connections between some of the issues that were key to the study. Even though both methods of data collection were used during the study and were vital to its overall success, the majority of the results rely on in-depth interviews.

Since women play a prominent role in tourism in Gigante and information from them would be vital to any study conducted there, the original plan was to find a female assistant to help interview women in the town on a one-on-one basis. This was because any research being conducted in developing countries must keep in mind that “First

World' researchers investigating 'Third World' subjects need to be highly sensitive to local codes of conduct," including those reserved for the protection of women (Clifford et al., 2003; Longhurst 2003). However, after initially treading lightly with this issue, I discovered that women play such a prominent role in the town's society that interviewing them personally would not be a problem as long as it was in a public place, where other locals of the town could see the interview taking place (yet far enough away that they had no unnecessary influence on the interview itself). Once it became clear that interviewing local women myself was not a problem, I was able to interview a total of 5 women (all of them working in some aspect of tourism) to collect their thoughts on the issue.

The second method used in the data collection process, participant observation, was used more as a way to find issues to be discussed during the interviews that would be conducted later. As I participated in daily life, I took detailed ethnographic field notes in a journal (as described in Emerson et al., 1995) that could later be referred to while examining the results of the in-depth interviews (Laurier, 2010; Allsop et al., 2010). The town of Gigante, like many other small towns around the world, has a good amount of gossip floating around and there were many interesting theories that never seem to escape from the rumor mill. Some of these rumors (whether true or not) turned out to be perfect starting points for the interviews.

The final method that was valuable for data collection during my time in the field was the passing out of questionnaire surveys to traveling surfers, which I did during the second research period in December of 2014. This was preformed to obtain information about the characteristics, behaviors and attitudes of the surfing tourists who had come to

Playa Gigante (Clifford et al., 2003). The surveys were concise and took the majority of people around five minutes to complete while they gathered in the public area of the Camino Gigante Hotel & Restaurant (a place that could provide a mixed group for the questionnaires). I was able to get all of the surveys filled out by the tourists with little trouble. Even though this is a small number ( $n = 25$ ) it represents at least one-third of the tourists in the town in December 2014, a much slower period for surf tourism. Total anonymity was used for the questionnaire surveys because participants were more than willing to share personal financial information with me, such as the budgets for trips. Even though information about the tourists was secondary in importance to the data collected from the locals, it seemed appropriate to collect data on the people who had come to spend money and time in this small part of Nicaragua.

Also, in accordance with University of Denver policy, approval was required and granted from the Internal Review Board to do research on human subjects prior to the start of the study.

Before moving on to the next section I must first stress the importance of the connections that I was able to make with local surfers in the town through the use of hands-on participation in the sport of surfing, which happened on a daily basis during the three-month trip. There were a number of occasions where the people in the town remained tight-lipped on certain issues (such as who is seeing the benefits from the development of Gigante) but having spent enough time out in the water with these people, they rarely hesitated in giving me honest opinions about how they felt. I also feel that my ability to speak Spanish near fluently greatly improved the quality of the

research, and allowed me to conduct in-depth interviews that otherwise might have been less effective through a translator. This is a connection that surfing enhanced and I feel that my results were greatly improved due to the fact that many of the locals considered me “one of the guys” as we sat in the ocean waiting for the next set to roll through.

## **6. Results<sup>ix</sup>**

### **6.1 Surfing Tourism's Effects on Fishermen and Boatmen of Playa Gigante**

Prior research on Playa Gigante would dictate that the majority of adult males, who are of sound body, consider themselves to be fishermen as their primary occupation and means of supporting their families. A few men will acknowledge the importance of income augmentation that is available through working within the tourism sector (Alvarado & Taylor, 2014; Kurronen, 2011). In order to determine the effects that surfing tourism might have created in recent years, a total of three in-depth interviews were conducted with men who are considered as career fishermen. These interviews were intended to gauge how much time is spent working with tourists versus how much time is dedicated to fishing – especially during times when the fishing is unproductive. Of the three fishermen/boatmen who were interviewed, all of them have ample experience in the area and have at least a minimum of ten years experience; long enough that a fair judgment of the value of surf tourism can be made by them. This is further supported by the fact that all of them have been fishing in Gigante since before the arrival of tourists to the area (about a decade ago) and continued to fish while tourism in the area started to grow in popularity.

#### **6.1.1 Lionel<sup>x</sup>**

I spoke to Lionel (who had been fishing off the coast of Gigante for over twenty-five years until his recent retirement) one afternoon in the shade of the Pastoras fishing

co-op, where he had been employed and had spent the majority of his fishing career. Of the many things that were discussed during his interview, one of the main points that he choose to discuss was the increased amount of development that has taken place in recent years in Gigante, where he had spent the majority of his adult life. He spoke reminiscently of the amount of change that has taken place in Gigante: “It’s changed... Playa Gigante has changed at least 75% to 80% that has been developed [since his arrival]... more buildings. And more people, man [meaning more tourists]. There are more people now. In years past, there weren’t as many people. And this was kind of an illusion, the development of the community.” As one of the longest tenured fishermen in the village, he has seen many of the tourism developments that have sprung up around the quiet fishing village.

Of the many new developments he discussed, some of the more productive ones he has witnessed have shown benefits not just for the tourists, but for local Nicaraguans as well. He discussed two of the new non-profit groups that have opened in Gigante (both started by North Americans with the idea that the Nicaraguans should be the main beneficiaries of progress in the town):



“And now there’s no trash from the project that has come here [EcoGigante<sup>xi</sup>] and from the tourists who have come here teaching, because they are teaching many things that people didn’t know before... For the *Nicas*, for the locals that want to learn English... And it’s free... These classes are usually very expensive, for example, in Managua... Or in a University, its super expensive, and here, no. Here it’s free.”

While financial benefits for locals brought by tourism appealed to him, he felt that things such as a “clean beaches” program, or a free English school, were some of the most tangible benefits to come from the resulting tourism taking place in Gigante. But he was aware of development that has taken place in town, and the financial benefits that have followed surf tourism’s arrival:

“If there is a community that doesn’t have development, it won’t move, neither here nor there. But if the people start to come, to visit, if they go to places to eat, they are entering [injecting] money into the community.... But if it is a closed community, then nobody comes to buy stuff, then that place won’t move – neither forward nor backwards. And when the people start to come, like here in Gigante, when the tourism starts to enter here... It will change a lot.”

Some of his thoughts about the development were based upon his own observations (he has not seen any personal gain from the hotels and bars that were being

constructed in the town, since he is a fisherman by trade), but he was able to speak about his involvement with tourism because he had provided “surf taxis” and fishing charter trips. The price of the “surf taxis” very, depending on the service desired by tourists and to which break they want to travel<sup>xii</sup> – trips to waves near the town can run as little as eight (USD) and trips to breaks further up the coast usually cost about one hundred and sixty to one hundred eighty (USD) for a group of four (including the cost of fuel, food and drinks that are provided by the charter company).

According to Lionel, he had only started running surf charters about a decade ago, and it was not just surfers who he transported – sports fishermen were also a market he catered to. He spoke of his history as a charter guide: “At least, like, the last ten years... Working here with tourists, surfers, people who want to go sports fishing... A bit of everything.” And how taking out groups of surfers helps him earn money during unproductive fishing periods: “Clearly, it is helping at least... Man, it helps with the economic things, with money. Because as I told you, when the fishing is bad and at least a group of surfers comes, like even three or four people, we can take them... There is money there. And this kind of thing is good, right?” Also discussed during the interview was the fact that the surfing tourists in the area are spending money in the community on a consistent daily basis, not just while being transported to surf breaks. Any time they eat at a restaurant, buy goods from the local *pulparia* (a small convenience store), or buy drinks at a local bar, they are spending money that will stay in the community. He mentioned that even establishments owned by North Americans tourism operators are

deriving income for the town (as long as those establishments are staffed by local Nicaraguans):

“The *gringos* come here and they start a business where the locals can work... But not just this one [Camino Gigante Bar & Restaurant], in all of them. Roberto [A North American owner of Party Wave Cybercafé] has *Nicas* working for him. Papagayo [another local restaurant owned by an Irishman] has *Nicas* working there. And this is a grand thing... Because the whole community isn’t fishermen, at least 80% of us are, but the other 20% work here, or places like this.”

That Lionel (one of the most respected and longest working fishermen in the village) is conveying these ideas, unprompted, adds legitimacy to his claim that the surfing tourism in this area has shown tangible benefits for the local economy.

Other academic research has shown that a high degree of animosity between the local population and new groups of tourists in developing countries (for reasons ranging from economic disparity to simple matters of race related issues) is not uncommon (Krause, 2013; Usher & Kerstetter, 2014; Young, 2000). This animosity can be especially fierce between local surfers and traveling surfers who come to ride the “wave resources” of a local population (Evers, 2009; Preston-Whyte, 2002). But as Lionel discussed relations between Nicaraguans and tourists, he had no personal animosity towards them and had seen very little of this negative interaction between the two groups. He explained:

“There’s never been a problem here either on the beach or in here [in the town]. There’s never been a problem between us... Because here the locals walk with the foreigners and the reverse... It’s normal, man. There isn’t a difference. Because you’re a *gringo*, I won’t go together with you... No... None of this. It’s normal... No, for me no... I don’t have a problem with anything they do. None of it harms me... None of it does anything to me... They live their lives tranquilly... And I live my life tranquilly. They don’t put me in any bad situations.”

From personal participant observation, there does not seem to be a general sense of mistrust or ill will between the two groups. Of course, there were interactions between specific parties that tended to be less than hospitable, but any surfer will tell you that this is a normal occurrence, no matter what country you are in – sometime people who surf the same waves on a daily basis do not like each other and problems arise. In Lionel’s informed opinion, there seems to be only miniscule amounts of animosity between the groups – a quasi-miracle given that the majority of interactions between local and foreign surfing groups around the world tend to be quite bitter (Usher & Kerstetter, 2015).

### **6.1.2 Tomás**

Tomás, another fishermen in Gigante with whom an in-depth interview was conducted, has over thirty years of fishing experience and has been fishing in the waters near Gigante for fourteen years. Though he has never tried surfing before, after working with surfing tourists in the area for the last five years, Tomás has been able to use his knowledge of coastal bathymetry (and ocean conditions) in the area to help guide

customers to surf breaks: “Of course, I have a lot of experience and now I can tell which one is a good wave. Because sometime they come and so, I explain to them – ‘Look, the waves are no good, they’re too small today, but if you want to go there anyway, let’s go.’ Sometimes they just go there to see the point, so I take them.” Tomás has been able to use his knowledge of the coast to enable him to take out groups of surfers on day trips (longer trips up the coast that include food and drinks) – which cost more than surf taxis and earn more money for the captain. This is a way that he can supplement income earned when fishing in the area is slow, or windy conditions prevent him from traveling further out to sea to look for pelagics. He explained what some of the problems with fishing can be – especially when fuel is loaned from the fishing *acopios* (local fish buyers who lend gasoline in return for fresh fish) with the intention of using money from his catch to pay fuel costs:

“Honestly, the artisanal fishing doesn’t pay well, some days are good and some are bad... There’re seasons when the catch is good and all of the sudden you don’t catch anything so you end up owing money for the gasoline [to the *acopios*]. That way you keep losing money and when you earn something, you use it to pay what you owe.”

But tourism can take away the problem of having to owe money as the cost is paid up-front by tourists before they depart on the trip:

“With tourism it’s different, when you go out [on a surf charter] you go knowing the expenses are already paid... When you come back you know everything is covered, that’s why everybody wants to provide this service, but some people can’t afford a good engine for their boats, or they can’t put a roof on the *panga*... And all those extras generate money. Everybody wishes they’d have that.”

With no need to repay what is borrowed for gas, the option of running surf charter, as compared to a long day of fishing (that may not pay off) can provide a more enticing economic incentive for the local fishermen.

The economic details of the tourism trips, including what a boat driver can make from running a surfing charter, rather than a fishing excursion, were described by Tomás who shared information about his trip costs. For example, for a trip up the coast to the wave at Astillero, about thirty kilometers to the north of Gigante, boatmen can earn as much as one hundred eighty (USD) for a day trip. Tomás explained the price breakdown:

“You have to establish the fare according to the place you’re going. If you go to Astillero, the price is at least 180 (USD)... It’s what we all normally charge. That fare applies to no more than four people, because six represents a lot of weight and you use more gasoline. That’s why it’s a fixed price.”

Unlike fishing, where any spike in gasoline prices can mean that fishermen will increase money owed to lenders (if they do not catch enough fish to pay them back) surfing charters can be adjusted with fluctuations in gasoline prices. If the price goes up, changes can be made to the charter to take added costs into consideration: “For the moment, the prices stay the same, but with time you have to regulate them [the price of a charter]. As oil and gasoline rise, you need to keep an eye on that, and raise the prices” [accordingly]. These charter trips provide a viable alternative to the fishing trips that these boatmen would otherwise be making. And they are able to provide financial incentives that are guaranteed upon the booking of the trip, rather than a trip dependent upon the success of fishing in order to make a profit. Tomás also spoke about his thoughts on tourism’s importance to Nicaragua as a way for nationals to earn income: “If we don’t get tourism, Nicaragua doesn’t get money. So tourism, independently, how it mobilizes – walking, by boat, by car. Tourism generates money for the community.” With the scale of Nicaragua’s tourism market growing exponentially as more people travel to the country, there are now more Nicaraguans turning to tourism to earn a living (INTUR, 2014). As far as any hostilities that exist between the Nicaraguans and the traveling surfers in Gigante, Tomás expressed little concern that relations are stressed. When asked if there are any specific problems with the way that North American surfing tourists act while in Gigante, he had little concern about their actions: “The *gringo*, he comes and he never crosses lines, I have never seen them do anything. They go surfing, they eat, and they drink beer.”

Tomás did have some concerns with the effects of surfing tourists however, but not with anything that they specifically do – his concern was more for the young Nicaraguans of Gigante, and that some of the bad habits surf tourists participate in while on vacation might be picked up by Nicaraguan youth. He discussed the problem of how young people in the community try and mimic the tourists:

“That’s one of the ugly parts. The young [Nicaraguan] people don’t want to work; they just want to be drugged. They want to have a good time drinking beer, smoking. So I don’t see the point of that. They should dedicate themselves to studying and working.”

When asked if he thought that this could be a direct result of the influence of the traveling surfers, however, he could not say with certainty if the bad habits had come directly from surf tourists:

“That could be possible [that bad habits were picked up by the young people of Gigante by traveling surfers], but today’s youngsters already have many bad behaviors, wrong-doings... Now, young people do not want to work. They want to be on the street, hanging around. They are exposed to many things that they can steal, they can smoke.”

He also explained that some of the problems with the youth of Gigante, might not be a direct result of the surf tourists in the town displaying these behaviors, but might



also be related to the universal problem of adolescence and some of the difficulties that young people can face, no matter where they are:

“It’s hard because as parents, when you try to talk to them, they get defensive. It almost feels like there is nothing you can do about that. A twenty year old can distinguish between right and wrong, but I see them behave like crazy, and that’s wrong... It happens everywhere, not only in Gigante, everywhere you go you see young people acting like that.”

Whether some of these bad habits that the youth of Gigante display were picked up from surf tourists (or are just a natural process of the maturation process) is impossible to know for certain. It is also very possible that these bad habits could have been picked up by local fishermen, who tend to enjoy a drink after they return from fishing trips. This concern was expressed by other interview subjects, and will be addressed in the following sections. When asked about his general feelings about surf tourism in Gigante, and what impacts it has on the community, Tomás again was optimistic: “I feel good, and all the people of Gigante who work with tourism feel the same way, because it represents an income, and it feels good.” For Tomás there are some economic incentives that have pushed him further into the tourism sector, (a motive that can provide economic benefits for his family when the fishing is slow and tourism trips can relieve economic stagnation) it also provides economic benefits because there is no need to borrow cash for gasoline.

### **6.1.3 Carlos**

Carlos, the third fisherman interviewed during the data collection process, took up fishing as his primary occupation later in life than had the first two interviewees, but still

had a substantial amount of experience. He was born in the town of San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua (thirty kilometers to the south), and moved to Gigante in 2000 to join the local fishermen in their boats as they patrolled the surrounding waters. Carlos soon found that the tourism trade was very appealing to him and that it was a way he could supplement the income that he earned from fishing:

“I observed what was going on [with tourism] and I liked it. I was working in fisheries and I would observe the tourism and that there was activity and that there were options, you see...But I didn’t have...How do I say? Influence, or a hook to be able to get involved in tourism. But through some friends, they were able to connect me.”

Through this connection, Carlos was able to make his way into surfing tourism as a charter captain who would bring surfers on day trips to the waves near town, providing them with guidance and knowledge of the conditions in the area. When asked about the changes he had seen in Gigante in the fourteen years that he resided there, Carlos explained that development has changed the town – by opening up different economic opportunities absent prior to surf tourism’s arrival, and how money earned through tourism helps to provide financial stability to local boat captains. He explained:

“This tourism has changed Gigante in the fact that we have jobs and besides the salary we get, tourists give us tips, which helps us. Sometimes the salary is not very much but if you add the tips, we can “defend ourselves” [provide financial stability]. So, in that sense, we feel secure. We just go with the clients and we give everything that we can, we teach them what they can find in the ocean so that they enjoy [the trip]. And we also enjoy and feel good because when they are thankful and they feel we have provided a good service, they give us tips.”

Whether or not a boat captain participates in surf tourism is a personal choice, but if the desire is there, then they are usually able to find more work than that offered from only working in artisanal fisheries. If a captain is able to work in both sectors available for boat captains in Gigante (tourism and fishing) that can further add to the financial stability desired by many Nicaraguans. Carlos explained how money is earned in both sectors:

“It’s better because you have a set income and you can make money in fishing as well, if it is good, sometimes it is good, but not everyday. I mean, it is not a daily salary on which you can count. You see, because in fishing sometimes you do well and sometimes you do poorly. So it is better for me to be a captain [of a tourism charter] because I know I have that salary and I can count on that money” [that comes from tourism trips].

Considering that fishing can at times be fickle and at other times not profitable at all in Gigante, and that the surfing season is now stable throughout the summer months (June – September) and starting to increase more during off-season months, the job of a surf guide is starting to appeal more to local fishermen and boatmen.

Absent from Carlos’ interview were concerns expressed by the other two fishermen about the well being of the youth of Gigante, and potential negative effects that surfers are having. In contrast, Carlos had the view that surf tourists were able to motivate the youth through their enthusiasm for participating in the sport. He explained: “They have also inspired in many of our youngsters the enthusiasm to follow the waves that they have been following from faraway. The *Nica*, who lives here, learns and searches for that wave as well.” When asked to explain why he thought that surfing was able to provide motivation for the youth, Carlos illuminated the connections: “Because it is a sport, like any other sport such as baseball. When a young person dedicates himself to playing baseball he forgets about vices, he inclines towards a sport, and surfing is just

like that. If the young person spends his time searching for a wave, then he leaves laziness aside.” It is possible that Carlos tried to clean up a problem apparently present in the young population in order to draw attention away from it, but there does seem to be a split in the attitudes of young people of the town. From participant observation in the town it seems that some youth have adopted alcohol consumption and drug use as one of their pastimes, and others seemed to have embraced the sport of surfing. Whether it is as a way to better enjoy ones life in this quiet town, or to potentially use surfing as a stepping stone to advance oneself economically (such as a potential career as a full-time, professional surfer – with the quality of waves that are located near Gigante, this is a very real possibility for those who dedicate themselves to the sport) it seems that the young people who have chosen surfing as their main focus are in better shape (both physically and mentally) than those who choose drugs and alcohol.

#### **6.1.4 Future Developments**

Interviews that were conducted with fishermen and boatmen were ended with a question about what the future might hold for the town should the trend of growing tourism in the area stay consistent; and to what degree surfing tourism will play a part in that future. Of the fishermen who were interviewed for the study, all three of them expressed some trepidation for the future of the town, mostly, concerns for the rising price of land in the area (as more foreigners come to Gigante to try and buy land and establish some foothold in the area). When asked what the future might hold, Lionel seemed to think that land he owns (in the central plaza of Gigante) will increase in value as demand for land in the area grows – an increase that he believes he will be able to capitalize on in the future. He explained:

“Clearly, that’s what we are waiting for, man. For here this is going to at least be a lot of people who want to buy land. And if you see that I’ve got a little bit of land here, and you want to buy a *finca* [a small farm]... I’ll leave it and you can buy land for a *finca* and life will be better. Because here, at least in Gigante, I have my little piece of land... Maybe not for a business, but one day someone is going to come that wants to buy it. And this little bit of land that I sell to you, it’s going to make my life better. There is going to be change... The change has already come, a lot of it. Not 100%, but a lot of it, at least 50% of it has changed since I got here. And in ten more years, it’s going to be an illusion.”

While Lionel seemed optimistic about his future in the town, and his ability to make a substantial profit should he decide to sell his land, Tomás seemed to show concern about the future. He expressed his desire for the town to remain in its current condition, and that the change he has already witnessed is more than he is comfortable with:

“No, Gigante is fine the way it is now, youngsters are the negative part but Gigante is great. A few years ago nobody locked their doors at night, no robbery at all. But now we have people from different areas like *Masachapa* and *Astillero* [other towns], so we don’t know everybody anymore. In my case I know my neighbors but that’s it, I see young people everywhere but don’t know who they are... This place can get corrupted. If young people continue to behave this way in 15 years there is not going to be valuable people. They’re going to be corrupting people.”

These are two different points of view that both support a different future – one where Nicaraguans will be able to make large profits off the rising price of real estate in the area, and another where the locals will be marginalized and the crime in the area will rise as a result of influx of tourism, as has been the case in other parts of the world. Carlos, the third fisherman interviewed for the study, had this to say about the future and what lies on the horizon for the town where surf tourism has taken a strong grasp upon the local economy:

“Because as more tourism arrives, we have more help, I mean, it generates help, because you see, now we have the health center [which was recently constructed in the town with the help of a local non-profit that is run by a North American – Waves of Optimism]. Gigante didn’t have it. Tourism came and now it’s there. Sometimes they help in the schools that as a poor community, we are not able to bring that help. In that sense it’s good, because just as it [tourism in Gigante] grows, we now have many opportunities because those who come from outside, they come to exploit the sea [as in find waves for surfing] and we help them because they are not going to come and do it on their own. They need someone local who can show them around, and that’s where we fit in – and it’s beneficial to us.”

Given their extensive experience in the surrounding ocean and their familiarity with outboard driven small ocean-going boats (*pangas*) fishermen are able to take advantage of clear economic incentives to earn money from surfing tourists by running day tours or shorter, surf taxi trips to the surrounding waves. Surfing charters can provide a consistent wage to the boatmen, and more importantly, one that is not dependent upon the fishing conditions. The prices are paid up front, with little or no negotiations with those who pay for the trips. Furthermore, if a surfing charter is the eventual choice of the boatman they are able to cover all of the costs of the trip without having to worry about the money borrowed from *acopios* for fuel – a substantial



economic incentive given that they do not have to worry about catching a sufficient amount of fish to cover the cost of the trip. Surf tourism in the area allows the boatmen to maintain more diversified offerings, and to earn income. It allows them to choose between two options, fishing or surfing charters, in order to seek economic compensation for their work (one that is highly specified given their extensive knowledge of the surrounding ocean). If the fishing in the area is good on a particular day, then the captain is able to choose to fish; if fishing is not going to be profitable, they can opt to try and run a surfing charter group through the many hotels and hostels instead. And with the tourism season growing longer each year (and less off-season periods than in previous tourism seasons) the chance of being able to run surfing charters is continually expanding. It is highly doubtful that any of the boatmen will give up fishing as their primary occupation, but surfing tourism is now providing other options for diversity in income earning strategies.

## **6.2 Surf tourism's Effects on Nicaraguan Women of Playa Gigante**

Research conducted in Latin America on the role of women in society shows that females have often played an unequal role in development and carry an “unequal burden” in regards to new development taking place (Beneria & Feldman, 1992). The importance of the role of women has often been underestimated in Latin American society due to its male domination and sense of “machismo,” and the majority of important decisions (either in the home or the context of community development) are made by groups of men who might not take the interest of their female counterparts into consideration (Moser, 1993; Neuman, 2013). On top of this, many of the important roles that women

play in the society are marginalized due to the fact that some roles may not lead to direct financial reward (given that many of the jobs they participate in take place in the home rather than actual, wage-paying employment) (Babb, 2001). But in Gigante, this trend of marginalization is starting to be reorganized as more women take jobs in the tourism sector (often working as either house keepers/cleaners, waitresses, or cooks in the hotels and restaurants that cater to surf tourists from North America and Europe). In order to investigate the roles that women play in the social dynamics of Gigante, and to investigate what effects tourism is having on the Nicaraguan women of the community, interviews were conducted with five local women – the goal being to try and gain insight on their perspective of the development now taking place in community. Of the five women who were interviewed, three of them were life-long residents of the community, and two of them had traveled from other regions in the country to try and cash in on the tourist boom that is now taking place.

#### **6.2.1 Reyna**

Reyna, a woman who had moved from Rivas (the departmental capital) to try and enter the tourism sector of the town to earn a more stable income for her family, was holding three jobs (all of them within tourism) in order to maximize her earnings. Her primary occupation was as a cook at a taco stand in the central plaza that had been opened up by a North American woman six months earlier. Her other two jobs were as a housekeeper at a local hotel and doing inventory shopping for a third hotel in the area. Unlike some of the other female interviewees, Reyna was able to distinguish between those tourists who had come for surfing and those who were simply traveling through the country with no desire to surf – one of the easiest ways for her to tell which of the

travelers were surfers was that the surfers usually rent cars or hire cars to drive them to Gigante; backpackers (*Mochileros*) on the other hand usually took the cheaper, public transportation to arrive in town. Even though she had only lived in Gigante for six months, she had spent enough time there beforehand to notice the infrastructural improvements that had appeared since she first traveled there years ago. She explained some of the changes she had noticed from before the tourism sector had started to grow in the area: “Yes, I think that now it is better than it was before. Because before, Gigante was a little bit more poor. There wasn’t very much, how do I tell you? There was places, but there wasn’t very much variety. It was very small and there was not very much to offer. But now it’s better than it was before.” Asked if she thought any of those changes could have been a result of the surf tourism that had started to grow in the town, and if tourism was able to provide more job opportunities for the Nicaraguans, she explained the connection:

“Clearly, it’s better. Because now there will be more work [for Nicaraguans]. Because the Americans... Can I say that? Are starting to come... The *gringos* have started to visit our country, Nicaragua. I think that things will start to get better. How do I say it? More economy for the poor people, like us, right? Because there are times where we don’t have work. And them [North American tourists], with their... Their... Coming here, man. Here they rule [create] a better economy for us, for the Nicaraguans. Because, if it wasn’t for them [surf tourists] coming here, there wouldn’t be any money. Because they bring the best part... the consumerism... here. They like it here, these places.”

Reyna was aware that the town had a long-established fishing tradition, and that only later, once the tourists started to flock there, did the dynamics of the town start to change. She pointed out that along with some of the added economic benefits that surf tourism had created in the town, there were also cultural benefits that were starting to spread to the Nicaraguan population – and that this cultural interchange could be beneficial for both parties. She explained: “For me, it’s good. For me... For the Nicaraguans... Because if it wasn’t for them [Nicaraguans] there wouldn’t be any people here. And we are learning, because the Americans are very intelligent. They’re always doing something... They always have new ideas.” There does seem to be a cross-cultural sharing of ideas in Gigante, and from participant observation it seems that the majority of new ideas (especially those for new tourism developments) come from North American

tourism operators, but are often implemented with the help of Nicaraguans who are familiar with how best to open up new hotels or restaurants via the somewhat convoluted red-tape of Nicaraguan bureaucracy and permit offices.

Of course, not everything that Reyna had to say supported a positive outlook on tourism. She shared some of the same concerns that had been expressed in interviews with fishermen. She choose to highlight that many of surf tourists who came to Gigante where participating in other activities while they were on their vacations – sometimes drinking, and occasionally smoking marijuana. These were her two biggest concerns, and that those bad habits were easy for Nicaraguan youth to replicate. She explained when asked to share some of the negative aspects of surf tourism: “Possibly, it could be when there are some guys who are very aggressive. And they are always drinking... Or those that smoke.” When asked about whether she meant those smoking marijuana, she answered: “Yes... Those that smoke marijuana. And sometimes it could possibly be that the guys [tourists are saying] ‘I want that,’ and that the Nicaraguan kids are also saying ‘I want that too.’ And then they do what they need to do. This possibly isn’t good for us” [Nicaraguans]. This seemed to be only on exceptional occasions however and she expressed that many surf tourists who were coming into town, (rather than acting as negative role models for the youth) were showing them some of the better traits of surfing, especially the dedication that is found in many of the people who participate in it. When asked her opinion of what surf tourism was doing for the community on the larger scale (rather than tourists who set bad examples for young people) she replied:

“Well, in the first place, I believe that it is bringing us a lot... of this... teaching of the younger kids. Many young Nicaraguans are integrating themselves. They like surfing and they are integrating. Where a group of young tourists come, bringing their surfboards and going out with them... For here [Gigante] I feel it’s very beautiful.”

From the observations that were made during the three-month data collection period, it seems that there were more youths who were benefitting from the sport of surfing as opposed to those who were tainted by drug or alcohol use. On most days there were a large group of young Nicaraguans who surfed the beach break up the coast from Gigante, and the number of children who were surfing far surpassed the number who seemed to be intoxicated in town.

#### **6.2.2 Karla**

Karla, the second woman interviewed for the study, had also moved from Rivas to try and find work in the tourism sector and was working at the Camino Gigante Bar & Restaurant as a bartender and waitress as well as a masseuse at the time of the interview. She felt that by relocating to Gigante, she would be able to profit more than had she stayed in the regional capital, where tourism was less of a factor. Even though she had only been in Gigante for eight months, she anticipated staying and enjoyed the work she was doing. She explained her motivation to find work and some of the other benefits that working here could provide:

“I like it because there is a lot of people here, we are learning the language more, learning how to express ourselves in English... In Rivas, there’s nothing... So here and in San Juan [del Sur] there’s a lot of surfers to watch, because it’s an attractive sport and it’s a form of tourism that can augment the amount of work for us” [Nicaraguans].

Even though she admitted to not knowing precisely the difference between surf tourists and regular *mochileros* she believed that the majority of the clients she worked with were surf tourists: “I have spent the majority of time... The majority of the clients that come here... at least 50% are [regular] tourists and the other 50% here are people who come to surf. That’s why they come here to Gigante.”

In her short time living in the community and possibly from prior experience (she had been to Gigante many times before, but had only lived there for eight months at the time of the interview) she had noticed some of the infrastructural improvements that had been made and new community care services that had been opened up since the arrival of tourism. She explained:

“We have noticed many changes here in the community because before there was only one road that you had to walk out, and now there is a truck that can transport us around. There’s more employment, there’s more restaurants. And now we are more polarized because before there weren’t as many houses. Here was an empty coastal zone, but now with the tourism businesses, there’s been many opportunities that have opened up for employment and the tourists have continued to bring the benefits to Playa Gigante also. Because more employment and also the health center that we didn’t have before” [tourism appeared].

With the opening up of new hotels and restaurants in the area, women are more likely to be able to find employment in the tourism sector, even though their incentives might be less apparent than the fishermen who can run surf charters and surf taxis.

When asked about some of the negative aspects that had been noted in previous interviews (mainly alcohol and drug use among the youth) she disagreed that the surf tourist had set a negative example for Nicaraguan youth in the community. When asked what she thought of mothers who had prohibited their children from surfing (something that seemed to be happening in Gigante) she explained her viewpoint:



“There’s many [mothers] that say ‘you’re just falling in line with the *gringos*,’ that they want to be *gringos*. They’ve just never seen a sport that calls their attention like that. They feel that to ride a wave... there’s many mothers who say ‘you aren’t going to be a surfer’ because it’s a danger. It’s a danger for the mothers that don’t understand it’s a sport. With a sport there’s less laziness, less cigarettes, less liquor, less marijuana because they are concentrated on surfing.”

Asked about the youth that had fallen into these bad habits, and if it was possibly the result of them being in close proximity with North Americans who had been drinking alcohol or using drugs, she disagreed that there was a direct connection between the two:

“This [adolescent substance abuse] could happen with surfers or without surfers because the Americans didn’t bring the drugs. Drugs are on a national level. And now you can see a child of 15, 16, 17 or 18 years old with a cigarette in his mouth. With weed... Marijuana. And this wasn’t brought by the Americans. It’s the same if it’s other Nicaraguans. The consuming of, and the selling of drugs... This isn’t normal.”

Karla was asked to weigh the negative and positive aspects of surf. She replied:

“No, it’s not very affected other than it’s a benefit because if the young ones and the adolescents pay more attention to surfing, it will be a more successful sport. Because if there wasn’t a sport like surfing then the young ones would be more vagrant, but like you can see, here at Amarillo and all the other waves, there’s always kids there. Young kids surfing. So then it’s a benefit for them.”

As mentioned, the number of Nicaraguan youth who were surfing at Amarillo beach predominantly outnumbered the youths who were in town intoxicated. The young surfers seemed to relish in their ability to impress surf tourists and to show them that they could surf on an equal or greater ability than could the surfing tourists. Of course there are going to be some youth who gravitate towards vices that are available to them, but overall it seemed that the majority of the Nicaraguan youths seemed to favor surfing over drugs and alcohol.

Karla was also asked her opinion of what the future could have in store for Gigante, and what changes she thinks will result from the expanding surf tourism market. When she was asked what she thought it would take to make beneficial changes in the future, she implied that it will take work from all three groups who currently facilitate most change in the community: Nicaraguans, surf tourists and the foreign tourism developers/operators who own many of the hotels. She explained: “The town is going to change, because to stay here... but we have to help them [tourism operators] to change as well because it’s not only going to change because an American or a foreigner comes. If

we want the change we of the town are going to have to do out part and support it.” In Gigante, there seems to be an open cooperation between most of those three groups to a certain degree. Of course there will be disputes and some ill will that can mark interactions, but that can happen no matter where development takes place, especially when that change usually requires intercultural interchange for new ideas or implementation (see Monterrubio et al., 2012 for a case study in Huatulco, Mexico). Karla’s ideas where echoed by other females who were interviewed for the study, including Angela, another interviewee who spoke about the development taking place in her town.

### **6.2.3 Angela**

Unlike Karla, Angela had spent her whole life in the Gigante area (she lived in El Tambo, a small section of Gigante farther out the main entrance road) and had experienced the times before the arrival of tourism. At the time of the interview, Angela worked as a cook in a local restaurant that catered to surf tourists who came to Gigante. When asked about the aspects of surf tourism that she considered to be beneficial to the local community, Angela made reference to the increased amount of work in the town that was now available to the Nicaraguans: “Firstly, there is generally more work. There’s more entry into [being able] to make money. You know that here in Nicaragua there’s more movement of money... There’s a lot more access to jobs for the locals. More opportunities for employment.” Asked what she personally thought about the increased level of tourism, she explained: “For me it’s good that they [surf tourists] are coming here. They are kind. I feel very content. The time that I’ve been working here

has been really good. The relationships that we've formed [with tourists]. For my part, with the *gringos*, I like them because they are very kind. Very respectful."

When asked about the role intercultural exchange, she explained: "I think that if you work here, with the mix of *Nicas* and *gringos* that yes, we can go higher" [in the level of development]. When asked what she thought Nicaraguans are learning from the North Americans who play a key role in the development, she explained that there were two important lessons: "The language [English]. And also the models of how to do business. If we here in Nicaragua have good models to learn from, we will learn. And also, the *gringos* are learning stuff from us. So yes, I like it. It's a very beautiful thing."

Like all the others, this interview ended with a question about the future of development in Gigante over the next decade. She also envisioned a future that would see a rise in the level of tourism trips and the possibility for an increase in the amount of infrastructural development and employment opportunities for the Nicaraguans. She explained: "Well... I imagine more hotels, tourists coming here. Generating more employment for us... and well, I think if they [tourists] come, and they continue to come, everything will continue to grow. And us too, like a family, we will continue to grow." In the case of the last passage, Angela is using "we" not just in reference to the Nicaraguan population, but the mixed group of Nicaraguans and North Americans who now live in Gigante. As more interviews were conducted, it seemed that the distinction between the two populations of Gigante were starting to blur – that there was a less obvious divide between the two populations. Indeed there are around twenty North Americans or Europeans who now live full time in Gigante (or in the nearby surrounding

communities that are a part of the town). There is also a substantial amount of interaction between these North Americans who now call Gigante home and the local Nicaraguans. Many of the tourism operators have their whole livelihoods tied to Gigante, and for this reason they feel that it is important to steer the development of the town in a direction that will be beneficial for both parties involved.

#### **6.2.4 Claudia**

The last of the interviews that were conducted with Nicaraguan women was with a local woman named Claudia, who has lived in Gigante for over 20 years and has been working as a house keeper at a local hotel for the last two years as a way to boost the income of her family. When asked if she knew the difference between surf tourists and the *mochileros*, she not only was able to distinguish between the two, but favored surf tourists due to their tendency to spend more money than those who traveled on a tighter budget. She explained: “Because, the [surf] tourists come with all of their baggage, you can tell they are here to surf. And the backpackers don’t [have as much equipment]. They just bring their backpack, and they pay a little bit less. Spend less.” Multiple interviewees noted their preference for surf tourist over backpacking tourists due to their tendency to spend more money while in Gigante. From participant observation, the backpacking tourists seemed to be on a much tighter budget than were surfing tourists who had usually taken the added cost of bringing surfboards on the trip and transporting them around the country, into the budget. Claudia also responded that she had seen the whole scale of the tourism developments that had taken place, given her long time living in the town. She described the Gigante of the past: “Yes, yes... Gigante when... Farther back it was much smaller. There was only like four little houses. Now it has developed a

lot more than it was before.” When asked about what she thought surf tourism was doing for the community, she also pointed out some of the benefits that had resulted from increased employment opportunities that are now available. She also noted that some of the different philanthropic organizations that were now operating in the area could provide benefits for the community as well. She explained:

“There are many more opportunities for us to work now than there was before. More work, more investment, all of it... There are many investors who are coming who are helping other people out here...in the community. Because, it includes those that have come here helping our schools...our kids. And this is a big help for us.”

She also explained what she thought surf tourism was doing for the town and what opportunities it might create in the future:

“The children... They are going to continue to see improvements in the place. They can see that there are a lot of tourists coming to this place. And they tell me: ‘look, mama, they are going surfing, the *gringos*. I want to go learn more’ – They are going to learn what they [surf tourists] are doing, so they are going to be teaching them... For me, yes, it’s a good thing. I can see that surfing is a good thing... and there are good relations between the Americans [and the Nicaraguans]... Because some people are learning a little bit more from them” [the surf tourist].

Claudia highlighted the importance of learning that can take part on both side of the cultural spectrum – Nicaraguans who are learning from North Americans, and vice versa. Each group possesses knowledge that is specific to their background and would help in the framing of future developments. This is not to say that there are not bad habits that are being picked up by Nicaraguan youth, but in the case of Gigante, that intercultural exchange has proven to be positive for both parties involved.

While woman are less able to cash in on the tourism boom that is taking place in Gigante than fisherman and boat operators (given their marginalized role in artisanal fishing and lack of experience operating *pangas*), there are still a number of employment opportunities that are made available to them through tourism. The tourism jobs that women are involved in – mainly working for hotels or restaurants as waitresses, cooks or as housekeepers – injects cash into their household budget. Furthermore, the willingness of Nicaraguan women to work hard at multiple jobs in the community augments their earnings and allows them to substantially contribute to family earnings. While they might earn less than spouses who are active in the surf charter/surf taxi area of tourism, they are still able to make significant contributions to household income than they were prior to the arrival of tourism to the town. Interviews with Nicaraguan women revealed the benefits that come from the intercultural exchange that takes place in the tourism venues of Gigante and that the women seem to enjoy their interaction with surf tourists for the most part. Some women showed concern about the effects that surf tourism could have on Nicaraguan youth, mainly that the use of drugs and alcohol could be prominent among surf tourists and set a bad example, but these problems might not be a direct result

of the presence of tourism in the area (multiple interviewees maintained that these problems could have appeared with or without the surf tourism taking place in the area). There also seems to be some positive examples that were set for Nicaraguan youth by the surf tourists who had come to Gigante, and their dedication to the sport can provide as much of a positive influence to the youth as those tourists who decide to participate in drug and alcohol use. And as tourism in the area continues to grow, and more hotels and restaurants are opened in the area, it is possible that the future will see the availability of more tourism jobs in the area for Nicaraguan women and an expanding role in future development in the area.

### **6.3 Surfing Tourism's Effects on Nicaraguan Owned Establishments**

While the majority of tourism establishments in Gigante are owned by foreign tourism operators and staffed by Nicaraguans, there are also a number of restaurants and hotels that are owned and staffed by Nicaraguans. In an attempt to highlight the issues unique to Nicaraguan owners, interviews were conducted with the owner and staff of one of the more successful "*Nica* owned" restaurants – one that caters to both surf tourists and Nicaraguans alike – to see what issues they felt were the most important. Research on local business owners in developing countries has shown that local entrepreneurs and those employed by tourism operators were more positive about tourism development in the areas where tourism is taking place (Andereck et al., 2005). But other studies have shown that there is a distinct saturation point for locals who work within tourism zones, and that when the number of tourists exceeds the number of residents in a given tourism



location, that level of tolerance can be challenged (Diedrich & Garcia-Buades, 2008). With the insight they can provide and the long period that such business owners have called Gigante home, it is important to tell their side of the story.

### **6.3.1 Miguel**

Miguel has lived his whole life in Gigante and has been involved with a local restaurant – Blue Sol – since it opened twenty-five years ago. While he does not claim to own the restaurant (he insist that the restaurant is owned by his grandchildren) he is in charge of the day-to-day operations and maintaining the quality of the food and managing the small hotel connected to the restaurant. Miguel has lived in Gigante for over thirty-five years, long before the presence of tourism, and has seen every minor and major change that has taken place since he arrived. He has firsthand knowledge of how Nicaraguan-owned businesses are affected by other hotels and bars that are owned by North American tourism operators. During a long, in-depth interview that was conducted in the main seating area of the restaurant, Miguel spoke about many different subjects, and what tourism had brought to Gigante and how the tourism dynamics had changed as more foreign tourism operators started to discover Gigante and open businesses there. He opened up on the subject:

“That’s when the small businesses from the developing countries like ours feel glad when development arrives, but development also brings backlog. At least we have these small businesses, however, next door is full of foreign companies [North American, Spanish, and Mexican owned hotels adjacent to Miguel’s] and they’re more attractive to tourists than” [ours].

When asked if he thought that hotels with Nicaraguan workers are good for the community, he stated that they surely are but if, for example, the hotel decides to “hire” North American volunteer workers there (a practice that has begun to gain traction in Gigante) that those volunteers are undercutting the economic benefits that are available to the Nicaraguans who the hotels employed. He described his problem with North American-owned hotels hiring volunteers to work in their hotels: “Since he has American voluntary workers he's not helping that much.” The hotel that Miguel is referring to does keep a number of North American volunteers on the staff to do menial jobs around the hotel, especially in the restaurant, but the hotel still maintains a paid staff of mostly Nicaraguans who do other jobs in the hotel, mainly bartenders, cooks, and cleaning staff. It is still unclear as to whether those volunteers are taking paying jobs from Nicaraguans as this practice only started towards the end of the data collection period, but from participant observation it would seem that the majority of the volunteers do not hold important jobs at this hotel. What is more likely is that these are travelers who have run short on money, and are doing this voluntary work in order to get free food and lodging (the compensation for volunteer work) and possibly to extend trips that budgets have cut short. It does not seem that the North Americans and Europeans who have stayed in Gigante to volunteer and to extend travel periods while they work at the hotel affects the paying jobs that are available to the Nicaraguans, but given the recent appearance of this trend, that is only an estimation.

There was another legitimate concern expressed by Miguel during the interview, and an issue that seems to strike close to home with many of the Nicaraguans who are in

the tourism business. The issue – that some of the surf tourists who find their way to Gigante find the place so attractive that they will go to any lengths to stay there, including the opening up of hotels and restaurants with loans from North America. Miguel discussed his problem with this trend of surf tourists turning into “surf capitalists”:

“We just observe what is happening and at the same time we see the pros and cons of foreigners coming [here]. We don't disagree with them coming as tourists, to surf, to have fun. But not to consume the internal businesses, [from Nicaraguans] right? There was only one *gringo* – “Chele” [Nicaraguan slang for “Blondie”] who used to close his business one day a week so that local businesses could acquire their own customers. The rest of them are open all the time; that's the reason why we want to create a bill for tourism, to negotiate. The tourist who comes exclusively to function as tourist, the surfer who only comes to surf... Surfers have always come to leave their money here.”

He also explained that this problem that was now facing Gigante, had already taken place in the development of Costa Rica as a destination for surf tourism, and that as a result, the Costa Rican tourism developers had suffered:

“The whole tourism idea is just like it happened in Costa Rica; in Costa Rica the tourism started as internal tourism but as soon as it got settled, international tourism came and started to buy properties and to build grand hotels, by the time the *tico* [slang for a Costa Rican National] realized that, they had nothing left, they didn't think correctly. But we haven't done that; we're still the owners from that corner where the bike is, to that railing [Miguel gestures to the border of his property in the central plaza]. All this belongs to us... What we really want is a tourism that can come and stay in a comfortable and affordable place. Blue Sol is the cheapest lodging among all the places in Gigante; I don't say that just because I'm the owner.”

For clarification, this study is not designed to examine North American surfers who have come to Gigante and set up businesses, but this does seem to be something that has happened before (some of the North American tourism operators who now work in Gigante traveled there and for one reason or another and decided that this would be a place they could call home). It seems that this is something that has happened before, but the number of surf tourists who decided to stay and set up businesses is so rare that it seems to be only a rare occurrence.

Once the businesses have been established however, the benefits that they can provide are something of a contested issue between the people who were interviewed. One viewpoint is that North Americans can help out the Nicaraguan population by

employing locals in the bars and restaurants, and through the trickle down effect, can provide income for Nicaraguans – another viewpoint is that these are businesses that could have been started by Nicaraguans, and in turn, the North American run operations are hurting Nicaraguans who might have otherwise been able to open them themselves (although some Nicaraguans attested that they often lack the financial ability to be able to open hotels or restaurants). Miguel was decidedly in the camp of the latter, and had some critical opinions of those establishments that have North American owners. He described his thoughts on a taco stand<sup>xiii</sup> (the same stand where Reyna was employed) that had been opened up recently in the center of town, which was owned by a North American woman: “Of course, they have pretty low prices and that's what customers choose. But the land is still ours, the country, the land titles... The truth is that we would like to give foreigners the chance to work but to do that they need to meet our standards.” He compared the taco stand to his restaurant when asked which of the two provide more benefits to Nicaraguans:

“This restaurant has more benefits for everybody in general. *Nicas*, Latin Americans, North Americans, French, they're all welcome. Here they can find food, accommodation [at the connecting hotel], great quality and attention. If the customers want to serve their meals by themselves they can do that. That's something you can't do at some other places, you have to wait for everything and that may take longer. Fifteen years ago... Gigante didn't have any of this.”

It would seem logical that an establishment that is owned and operated by a Nicaraguan would be able to provide more tangible economic benefits for the town than would an establishment owned by a North American, but data from this study is insufficient to make any definitive judgment. Miguel also shared some information about how it is that North Americans are able to come to Gigante and start businesses even though they might not have the legal status to do so. He explained how some of the North American tourism operators in Gigante were able to secure the residency status that is required to open a business in Nicaragua:

“Some *gringos* come to Nicaragua with a tourist document, they marry a *Nica*, five years later they apply for a residency, as soon as they get it they establish their businesses here, then they leave to the US to keep injecting capital to create a monster. Then they put it on sale and go back to the US to enjoy the profits... For example Dale Dagger<sup>xiv</sup>, he came here shoeless, looking for a place to sleep. Once he was drowning in the ocean because the engine of the *panga* broke down and I carried him on to shore, otherwise he would be dead.”

This is certainly one way to be able to acquire residency in the country, and some North American tourism operators do have Nicaraguan spouses. Miguel spoke about the different groups of tourists who come to Gigante (surf tourists and backpackers) and which of the two groups is likely to spend the most while traveling. Surfers, who have to travel with surfboards and to rent cars that are equipped to carry surfboards would seem

to have a greater amount of disposable income that they are able to leave in the community than do backpackers who are known for traveling on a tight budget. Since Miguel has worked closely with both groups during his time at the restaurant, he highlighted the difference between the two groups. When asked which group he preferred, and which of them spent the most money, he made a clean distinction: “The surfers obviously. Backpackers ask for rides, surfers call the taxicab. Surfers spend more money on everything.” He explained his preference for surfers:

“Right, they [backpackers] don't surf, they just want a place to stay for two dollars and they don't even have a beer. Surfers on the other hand right after their surfing sessions come back to have four beers, go and take a shower and then come back to have one more beer.”

It would seem that because of the added cost of transporting a surfboard around, and having to make plans that include the ability to travel with boards (such as renting a car or van outfitted for surfboards), surfers are prepared to spend more money in order to facilitate the sport. A surfer knows before he embarks on his trip that there will be the added cost associated with surfboards, and most seem to be content with these added cost as long as it allows them to use their own surfboards as opposed to rentals. This would support the theory that surfers traveling to Gigante spend more money and that surfers provide a larger economic benefit to the community than do other tourist groups like backpackers.

In this interview we also discussed some of the negative issues that have spawned

from tourism in Gigante. Miguel had many bones to pick. Again, the majority of what he felt was negative about tourism did not come specifically from the tourists themselves, but from the North American tourism operators who had come to his town and set up shop. One of themes that he seemed to touch upon as being distinctly negative was that those North Americans who now called Gigante home seem to show disrespect for Nicaraguans. He explained: “Foreigners have always tried to own this place, they want to consume the Nicaraguans but they only have consumed the weakest, who are really involved in the tourism business.” When asked what he thought happened to the money that was spent by tourists at North American owned establishments, he did not mince his words: “No way... There’s no chance that the money stays here. That money goes abroad, they’re focused on business, not tourism.” While there were no figures that could support his argument, and many of the operators I spoke to disagree with Miguel wholeheartedly, in Nicaragua it appears that inference can equal truth to many people. Of the foreign operators that I spoke to many insisted that the opposite was true, and that much of the money spent in their hotels stayed in the community. When asked about the original developers of the town, Miguel expressed the view that it was the original Nicaraguan inhabitants who brought the first infrastructural improvements. He explained: “The development... We were the ones who brought electricity to Gigante, not the *gringos*. We built the roads because all we had was trails for pedestrians, but we had cars so we had to create the access so we could use our cars.” This would be hard to prove given the limited amount of information that is available about Gigante’s early development stages, but considering his long presence in the town, Miguel may have



played some role in these developments.

While his views about the *gringos* who have come and created tourism businesses in Gigante seemed to show some resentment, throughout the interview he maintained that those who were there only as tourists were making positive contributions to the local economy. He made it clear that any travelers, whether surf tourists or backpackers, were welcome to the town and were helping out the community by spending time and money there – and he seemed very clear in his view that the surfers were the brand of tourists that he preferred. They were more likely to spend more money while in town, seemed more casual about spending practices, and less frugal than some of the other traveling groups who came to the town. Towards the end of the interview with Miguel, he was asked what the advantages of tourism in Gigante were. His response reiterated what other interviewees before him had stated; that tourism in the town was bringing more money and improved developments. He explained tourism's importance to the community, but once again had a caveat against tourists who become tourism operators:

“The whole point is helping out the community, working together to reach all the same level without differences of race or color. We’re all *Nicas* and we all eat rice, beans and tortillas. We are hospitable people with everyone. My country welcomes everybody, no matter the race or the grounds. However, some “whites” come here to make businesses acting like tourists at first, and we don’t agree with that and we never will.”

### **6.3.2 Fidel**

Another interview was conducted with Fidel, a twenty-six year-old native of

Gigante who works in the Blue Sol Restaurant and is also the son of Miguel. The two interviews were conducted separately, on a day when Miguel was away from the restaurant so that Fidel's responses would not be coerced. He has worked in the restaurant since he was a young child and had spent his whole life living in the community. I spoke to Fidel about some of the same issues that were discussed in the interview with Miguel. We sat down one hot afternoon in the main dining area of the restaurant and spoke about the changes he had seen in his lifetime. Unlike Miguel, who had concentrated on the problems he had with other tourism operators, Fidel took a less contrarian approach to the interview.

When he was asked why he felt that North American surf tourists found Gigante so inviting, and what change he thought they had brought to the town, Fidel seemed to be open to the fact that his town was starting to grow in popularity. He explained how the tourism had grown in recent years: "...The people are starting to come a little more, and before also, they were just coming to know the place. And the ones that came before were starting to tell the other tourist, from other countries, about this place. Its good." I asked him if he thought the changes that were happening in his community were beneficial for the Nicaraguans; he replied: "Yes, clearly. Better for everyone. Its changing a lot right now... For those that have a business... for the owners of the businesses, yes. Its good. We provide a service to the surfers and the visitors as well."

Absent from the responses of Fidel were preferential treatment for the surf tourists over the backpackers, something that Miguel was very clear in pointing out – it seemed that Fidel was a bit more neutral in his responses about types of tourists. I asked Fidel if

he thought the Nicaraguans were affected by the surf tourists, and in what way. He spoke of the improvements he has seen as a result of increased tourism traffic. “Yes, it’s gotten a little better... The economy, it’s gotten a little better. Since they [surf tourists] started coming years back, it’s gotten a little better.” However, when asked if positive benefits were realized from the surf tourism boom in Gigante, he seemed hesitant to give credit directly to tourism. He explained: “Not really, no... I mean it’s good when they come, during the high season for the surfers [June – September]. We work well, because a little bit more investment comes. But during the low season [September – May], there isn’t anything.” It is true that there is a distinct season for the surfers that follows the period of swells traveling from the southern hemisphere, but that season seems to be getting less distinct as the area grows in popularity. From personal experience, there is also a tourism season that straddles the holiday months (November – December) when once again the town fills up with surf tourists (even though the waves might not be as ideal for surfing). While this season is not as prolonged or as stable as the summer months, it would seem that this month of crowds can help to rekindle the slow period after the summer season.

Another of the topics that were brought up during the interview with Fidel regarding tourism was the intercultural exchange that takes place, and how relations are faring among the Nicaraguans and the surf tourists. He explained: “In Gigante the people are very tranquil, nobody has any problems with any other people.” This seemed to be a reoccurring theme: that there are rarely any problems between the two groups.

Participant observation confirms that there were never any disputes between Nicaraguans and surf tourists during the study period. Of course, it was necessary to ask if he had any

personal problems with the growing crowds of surf tourist who flocked to his hometown.

When asked if potential benefits would outweigh any negative aspects, he explained:

“Yes, because the tourism brings a little bit of everything. It brings good things, and it brings bad things. It brings a little corruption. But it’s also good because there is investment as well. You understand me? But it’s a little bit of everything, clearly.”

Fidel was willing to discuss the difference between Nicaraguan and North American businesses. He made a clear distinction between the two when asked how a restaurant such as Blue Sol provides more tangible benefits for the community. He explained: “Yes, because we have [Nicaraguan] people who work for us, and for this reason, the money is going to stay here... They are all locals [who work here]... It’s a traditionally Nicaraguan place.” As with many others, this interview was ended with a question about the future of development in Gigante – this time asking about the condition of the town ten years down the road. Fidel seem to fall in line with others who felt that the increase in tourism would be able to provide improvements in infrastructure and development for the town. He explained:

“Well, clearly we hope that it will be a better town... And that we will have better benefits for the local people. Of work, and this type of thing... That Gigante has better resources and all that. And hopefully that people [will] keep visiting – the surfers, all of this... With the development of Gigante, what we want is that this place is a place that always has better opportunities... If Gigante is going to be developed a little bit more in the future, what we want is for the people to have employment, for the people to have... more opportunities with everything. Clearly.”

Fidel lacked the same resentment towards North American tourism operators that was prevalent during the interview with Miguel. From personal experience in the town, there are a very small number of the operators who had originally come as tourists, and the vast majority of the surfing tourists that come to Gigante never have any inclination to start businesses. What Miguel did seem to convey is that those surf tourists who do come are helping out the community by contributing to the financial stability of the town. Surf tourists are more likely than other tourist groups to spend money in the town. Surfers seem to come down for shorter periods of time, and in doing so, are able to be more generous in spending habits. Backpackers, many of whom are on longer trips than the surfers, seem to be more conscious of their budgets, and often times look for deals that are unavailable to surfers who travel with surfboards who take those extra cost into account when planning for a trip. From observed trends, the surfers seem to stay in town on average for one to two weeks, and spend more during that time (on transportation,

surfing charter boats, rental cars, etc.). Backpackers on the other hand are often on longer trips to multiple countries around Central America and must conserve finances to be able to extend trips.

The volunteers (who seemed raise the ire of Miguel) were often backpackers who had run short of money and were doing work in hotels in order to receive free food and lodging. The current trend is that surfers are in Gigante for their short amount of time and want to surf as much as they can during that trip (this is especially true given that waves can come and go, and one does not want to miss a good swell). Money that is spent by tourists in Nicaraguan owned restaurants has a greater chance of staying in the community given that Nicaraguans have nowhere else to send that money – it essentially has to stay in Gigante.

#### **6.4 Surfing Tourisms' Effects on Nicaraguans Employed in Tourism Establishments**

Research has shown that the most prevalent link between local support for tourism development and acceptance among the local population is when it can allow for direct economic impacts on those who are employed within the tourism sector (Honey, 1999; Hunt & Stronza, 2014). When tourism markets are established in developing countries (especially in Latin America) however, it has been shown that those who work within the tourism sector can show the least favorable attitudes towards it (Sirakaya et al., 2002). To explore these contradictions in Gigante, interviews were conducted with workers employed within the tourism market to address the impact it had on their

community. For the purpose of this study, this section will be referring to those Nicaraguans who are employed within the tourism sector in hotels, restaurants, and bars or as surf instructors and tour guides. Below, I provide highlights of some of the issues that were brought up in the many of the interviews.

#### **6.4.1 Cristiano**

Cristiano, a twenty-three year old male who had moved from Rivas two years prior to get involved with the tourism business, was interviewed one morning before he came into work at a local hotel and restaurant. Some of his duties there as the manager included the organizing of other workers in the restaurant as well as helping the kitchen staff prepare food and deliver food and drinks. He had been working this same job for the last two years and had spent time with North American and European surf tourists and backpackers while they had stayed in the hotel. Even though he had worked in the tourism business before he had moved to Gigante, he felt that by relocating to the coast, he would have a substantial economic advantages in places that were more popular among travelers. He spoke about the rising popularity of the town where he now lived, and how there were more work opportunities on the coast. He spoke of Gigante's growing popularity: "Yes... The other workers in the same restaurant [as he works]. They're trying to popularize the place so that more clients come. In the medium of internet and other websites that work for this type of thing." Asked what type of improvements he has noticed in Gigante since moving there, and if those improvements might be the results of surf tourism that was now saturating the town, he explained some of the changes he had noticed: "I think yes, because when I came here there weren't as many establishments, like restaurants. There weren't as many promotions... especially

for the surfers. It was different for them in that now there's more information. There's more information that they can take to other places [where the surfers originate] and then more people come here." When asked what the difference was from the Gigante he had seen when he moved two years prior, he replied: "There's a big difference and I think it's going to keep on changing. Because in the last two years, when I got here, there wasn't the influx, the quality of tourists [there are] today. Two years later I am able to see it because I'm directly related to [the] tourism."

The author has traveled to Gigante yearly since 2008 and can back up the statement about the greater number of tourism establishments. Each year, as the popularity of the town grows with more exposure on the Internet and in travel guidebooks, the number of developments is increasing, which increases the number of available jobs Nicaraguans can hold. Foreigners are building the majority of the new developments, but as they are completed there are new work opportunities, and the local Nicaraguan community is filling the majority of the jobs that become available. Of course, new hotels and restaurants opening does not automatically mean that there is an improvement of the community, but when asked if he thought the increased development of the town was a good thing for Nicaraguans, he explained that increased tourism, in his opinion, meant better opportunities for his fellow compatriots. He explained: "Yes, it's positive because when a tourist comes here he... He doesn't mind using our services. And in the end this is our work, providing a service and if we keep doing this we will improve economically. We'll keep the economy growing; we'll keep growing in quality of service and how to do better work. And this will make a better person... It makes your



place, your beach, your city, your country... continue to improve.” As the manager of the hotel and restaurant, Cristiano work closely with other Nicaraguans who are employed and knows firsthand how the tourism is affecting their daily lives both economically and on a personal level.

Cristiano is a close personal friend who I have known for two years so when he was asked about negative aspects of tourism I knew he would give a candid response. Asked if there were any direct results of surf tourism that were detrimental to the community, he thought briefly, and explained that he could not name anything specific: “Always in life there are good things, and there are bad. Nothing is ever perfect. But personally I wouldn’t be able to identify [any] bad things. I couldn’t identify the bad that you can see with the big influx of tourism that we’ve had.” While he was unable to make direct connections between problems that were caused by surf tourists in the community, Cristiano had one concern that could be equated to the growing popularity of the town – the rising prices of land that had resulted from foreigners purchasing property in the area. He explained how some of the North American’s purchasing of land, in the long run, could create problems for the Nicaraguans of the community in the future:

“In this case, I think that we’re going to see many benefits but we’re also going to see a little effect on the locals. Because when the tourists come here... they... fall in love [with the place]. Fall in love to the point where they buy properties, make their houses. And little by little the people... the locals, the nationals, Nicaraguans, they will be dispossessed... of their land, of their houses. Of the houses that were handed down from their fathers. In particular this could be a result of the improvement. Because there are other cases that we’ve seen, like in Playa San Juan del Sur that the people... The nationals practically aren’t owners of the beach anymore. Not anymore, now the foreigners [are]. That I can relate too because if the foreigners here don’t distribute their businesses, there’s going to be many people out of work. But this can also be part of the government, to provide better services for the Nicaraguans. On the other hand, I would also like to see, like in other parts of the world, better developed beaches that they have a better service, that they look nicer, that can be a prominent place where we live... so its not just a forgotten place.”

Concern over land prices in the area seemed to be a double-edged sword that some felt could be capitalized on, and others felt they could be marginalized by. On the one hand, people like Lionel (interviewed for the fishermen/boatmen portion of the results) felt that the rising price of land was something Nicaraguans could cash in on. To

sell small plots of land for large prices would allow them financial security for the future. Cristiano, however, felt that rises in price would be something that was detrimental to the Nicaraguans because it would make land purchases for them in the future much more difficult. This also touches on the point that others have made about the North Americans who come to Gigante to open tourism establishments. It seems that once prices reach a level where North Americans are in contention, they grow significantly out of the economic grasp of Nicaraguans. Once again, these are concerns that can be separated from the majority of surf tourism issues related to this study. Every traveler who passes through Gigante is not going to be purchasing land. Those who decide to make purchases in the community (by buying land or opening tourism establishments) seem to have more economic freedom than do Nicaraguans. However, the number of North Americans who decide to buy land in the community is so small compared to the number of tourists who visit, that there can be only minimal effect from surf tourists buying land.

Overall, Cristiano had a view that was favorable to the surf tourists and he made it clear that they were bringing benefits to his community. Since he plans on staying in Gigante for the future, and is likely to see the future changes, he was able to address these issues. He also expressed his hopes for the future of the community:

“Personally, from this day until I started I’ve liked working with the tourists. Playa Gigante is going to continue growing and... its always good that people from other countries come [here]. Because it’s good to know a little bit about each culture, a little bit about each nationality; each person. There are many people that come from Europe. Many people come from different states of the United States and it’s interesting to interact with that many people. Personally, I like it. I think, in the end, this counts a lot when one... when we pass the years. You might not remember each moment, but the tourists I like a lot. I like it a lot because it’s never the same, it always changes.”

Given that he works closely with surf tourists and has frequent interactions, Cristiano has an unadulterated view of tourism as it affects his friends and family in the community. Had there been any more negative aspects that he could see tourism creating, he gladly would have addressed them.

#### **6.4.2 David**

David is a twenty-three year old Nicaraguan who works in a local internet café and breakfast restaurant called Party Wave Café. He was born in San Juan del Sur and moved to Playa Gigante fifteen years ago to live with his father and to try and enter the tourism economy. At the time of the interview, David was finishing the third year of working at Party Wave. At home, David had a wife who had just given birth to their second child. He depended on this work to support his family and to cover the expenses associated with raising two young children. When he was asked about any new

developments he has seen since he had moved here, David explained that he had seen many, mostly relating to a number of construction projects that were now taking place such as the construction of new hotels and the expansion of the main road into the town. He explained some of the new projects: “They are doing more construction now – they are improving the road, for the bigger road. The principle road (*la calle principal*). And we hope that next year [the road] will bring more people here.” Asked if he thought that those new construction projects were able to provided better economic opportunities for the locals who were working on them, he replied: “Yes. There are more opportunities, of course. I imagine that they are going to do something bigger too, that will be better for everyone. We are going to learn a lot more, and be able to teach people a lot more about our culture as well... From the tourist that are coming to Gigante.”

David expressed an interest in the idea of intercultural exchange that had been brought up in previous interviews, and how Nicaraguans could learn new things from the North American surfers who came to visit his town and vice versa. Being a surfer as well, David and other Nicaraguan surfers could be justified with frustration about an increased number of surfers at their local line-up. Studies have shown that many surfers can be frustrated by this increase in the number of surfers who visit their home breaks from foreign countries, and can show a good deal of animosity towards them (Evers, 2009; Preston-Whyte, 2002). On the contrary, David enjoyed the fact that he could share his wave space with the surf tourists. He explained some of the beneficial things he had learned from North American surfers who had passed through Gigante: “The thing that interests me the most is the English, the language that everyone wants to learn. And

many cultures that they bring as well, to learn a little more.” When asked about the disposable income that surf tourists brought with them and spent in the town during surf vacations, David had a favorable outlook. He explained:

“I think that the money [surf tourists] bring serves for a lot of things. Additionally, what they bring for the community is good too, because if there wasn’t any clients, then there wouldn’t be any work. And if more clients come later, then we are going to have more work. And we are going to have fun because we are going to learn a little bit more through the surfers. If a good surfer comes here, we can know what kind of style he brings, and we want to learn this style... Or, also, we can share something with him – something that we have. And its good too because he leaves some money, and we can do more with what we have. To understand each other.”

Among the Nicaraguan surfers who were interviewed for the study, many of them expressed interest in familiarizing themselves with the surfing styles of North Americans. While this has no economic benefits, it speaks to the interest that many Nicaraguans expressed for intercultural exchange, and how through learning from North Americans they could improve upon the surfing culture of their community. A few of the themes that Nicaraguans felt could be improved upon with some aid from their North American compatriots were improved business practices and management, better planning for the future infrastructural development of the town, and a desire to improve upon their surfing

skills and style. In a place like Gigante, where Nicaraguans and North Americans work closely together on the day-to-day basis, both parties expressed interest in learning from one-another to make improvements in their lives. Neither of the two groups showed any sense of superiority either – in the case of Gigante it was more of an expressed interest in mutually beneficial assistance for both parties to improve the lives of everyone, no matter where they were born, who now lived there.

David was asked if he had any personal issues with surf tourists, and if he felt that there was any negative effects from their presence in the town. He thought awhile, and then replied:

“As of right now, I don’t think there is a single one. We hope that they are well supported in their time while they are here... When they come. And we can support them more when they are here too. We just want them to see that we don’t want any trouble, for any occasion, or any problematic occasion. Neither with the foreigners nor with other people on the beach. We always want to have communication, harmony and peace.”

Like other interviews in the study, David was asked to describe what he imagined Gigante would be like in the future. He illustrated what he imaged the future to be: “We think that in ten years there is going to be more investment... Like right now the new interoceanic canal is coming to Nicaragua<sup>xv</sup>, and the airport [the international airport being constructed near Playa Gigante]. So we don’t know right now, we are waiting for the new years to come, to see what they bring.” David expressed a view about the

future that showed an obvious degree of trepidation, but his vision of future investment could mean the future would bring increased economic improvements for the community. He did not foresee the amount of investment in the town slowing down in the future. With the increasing popularity of Gigante, and an International airport that soon will bring travelers within a few kilometers of the town, it can be surmised that tourism will continue to grow. It might seem strange that a Nicaraguan surfer would show excitement about an increased number of surfers at his local surf break, but with the increase in traveling surfers comes substantial foreign exchange for those Nicaraguans who work within the tourism sector. For a man with two young children at home and an increased cost associated with family life, the idea of increased income is an exciting prospect.

#### **6.4.3 Arnaldo**

A co-worker of David from the Party Wave café, Arnaldo, was also interviewed for the study. Arnaldo was born in Jinotepe, near the city of Granada, and came to Gigante with the motive of working in the tourism sector. At the time of the interview he had been working in the Party Waves café for the last seven months as the co-manager with David, helping surf tourist stay connected to the outside world via the five internet capable computers behind the kitchen. Like David, Arnaldo is a surfer. We spoke of his opinions on tourism and its effects on the community. When asked about the improvements that had taken place in the community, Arnaldo explained: “Much before I came here I had heard that this place only had two or three houses. Now we have hostels, restaurants, good place for everyone to have fun, and to pass time well.

I asked him if he thought tourism was able to provide more economic opportunities for Nicaraguans who lived here. His reply: “Yes, there’s an opportunity



because it's a zone with many tourists. There's always employment; there's always money to be made. You always have [free] time to have fun, I don't know, playing sports or with your friends. It's a good option, Playa Gigante... If you want to work in Playa Gigante, there's work. If you want fun, it's also good in Playa Gigante for fun.”

When pressed about some of the specific economic benefits he had seen in the community, he explained that some of the new construction projects that were taking place in town had been a result of an increased popularity amongst tourists, and to allow better access to the town. He explained:

“Yes, in reality, before there was only one route to arrive in Playa Gigante. But now, staying in form with the tourists who have come to Playa Gigante, the people... Or the inhabitants of Playa Gigante, the community is... developing more entrances, better entrances. A better road for it to be easier for the tourists that comes here to arrive in Playa Gigante. And clearly there has come new things thanks to the tourists.”

When asked to describe any of the negative affects that the surf tourists have on the community, Arnaldo had this to say: “That's a little difficult because... There is a negative aspect with respect to the tourists, but there's not a great quantity... A situation that is normal [between] the tourists and the local inhabitants, but only very few [referring to confrontations between the two groups]. Only very little does this happen.”

I asked him if he thought that the benefits that surf tourism brought to Gigante outweighed the negative effects they have on the town and which of the two was more

important for the community. He replied: “Yes, the better ones are better because if you’re a foreigner, always saluting the locals... If someone is walking by [and says] ‘Hey Bro, *como estas?* *Todo bien?*’ There’s always good communication, there’s always good relations between tourists and local inhabitants. And I think it’s all good – and I hope it will continue on like this.”

I asked Arnaldo what he thought surf tourism was doing for the community, for the Nicaraguans. Even though he had only been living there for a short time, he still had seen some of the new projects that had come and had a few examples he felt were exemplary for benefits within the community. He explained some of the one he felt were most important from his experience:

“I have heard that surfers have come to Gigante and I have the understanding that there are more projects coming. For example, they have started with the repaving of the [main] road<sup>xvi</sup> [into Gigante]... Now, Gigante has a park for children; it has a health center. Playa Gigante has public wells... But apart from the projects, the community has also started to grow, and we have advanced more. They said earlier that we would have hostels and restaurants, and now we have light [electricity], water and a hospital to serve us. It’s a good project... If Playa Gigante continues to have this rhythm in the future, it is going to be more popular. There’s going to be more visits from the foreigners who have never been here... and that... the foreigners that are here now are going to say to their friends [in their home countries] ‘Let’s go to Nicaragua to visit Playa Gigante.’ I think that the tourism is going to increase a lot here in Playa Gigante.”

In many of the interviews, a final question was asked of the subject to add anything that they might want to talk include – something that I might have forgot during my line of questioning. Many of them either had nothing to say, or touched upon subjects that had been brought up in the interview to reiterate their importance, but with Arnaldo, he had a more optimistic take on his final call to say his piece. He explained his view in the final stage of our discussion:

“Every time I see a surfer going to the beach, they are always excited. They are always happy because they are going to the beach to surf. And this I like because I feel like Playa Gigante is a good place. And I don’t believe that we have many bad things. We only have good things, and for the moment, I hope it continues forever. In some cases there are small problems, but as a community, we are able to resolve them. So for the moment, the area of surfers in Playa Gigante is growing a lot.”

#### **6.4.4 Joaquin**

Joaquin is a twenty-three year old Nicaraguan who had worked in a local hotel and restaurant for just over a year. He was born in Rivas, the regional capital, and had moved to Playa Gigante in order to find work in the tourism sector. Even though he had been born and raised outside of Gigante, Joaquin had some family members who lived in town and had been traveling there since he was young. He was asked if he knew the difference between a surf tourist and a common traveler, and how much time he had spent with North American surfers while working. He explained that the hotel he worked for, while catering to any tourists who had found themselves in Gigante, had started to cater more specifically to surf tourists: “The hostel is, more than anything... we have a focus on surfers, promoting the tourism, [but] more than anything, the surf... Activities for surf, like renting the boards. And we say that, one way or another, you have to interact with the surfers here; we have to maintain communication.” I asked Joaquin what his personal view of North American surfers was, and what he thought of the popularity of his home amongst the North American surfing tourists. He replied:

“I think that the support they have brought to the community is good because, in reality, the community of Gigante lends itself to the development of tourism. Because the waves here are good, you know that the waves here are good for surfing. So this [surf tourism] ... It is good, and it helps us here... us here, in the community. It helps us bring more development, more tourism. There are people who come here to surf and they like it, and they see a [surfing] championship or something like that... And I think that it is a good thing... The surfers, when they come here, other than the waves... that they are captivated by the place. So you see, they could go to other places, but I think they are looking for new things, new experiences. And Gigante has all of that.”

While Joaquin was quick to point out that he had only spent a short period actually living and working in Gigante, I knew that he had family in the town and had seen some of the developments that have taken place first hand. I asked him what types of changes he had seen since he first came to Gigante as a child, and whether he thought those developments had brought improvements to the town. I also asked what his views of this new development were, and why he had decided to relocate to Gigante. He explained:

“Well, in reality, yes [he has noticed improvements] because I know I don’t have much time living here in Gigante. Before I knew the place a little because I have family that has lived here for more than twenty years. And the change has been drastic; it has been relevant that I have seen. I’ve seen more development, more tourism... new things. So I think, in reality, it has changed a lot... Yes, I came here to work because there is a lot of work here in Gigante, lots of tourism... Where I was living [before] really didn’t have much of that, very much work. So I think that in Gigante, the person who wants to work, that wants to work here can work here... either in the restaurants, or taking people fishing or doing surfing lessons, especially if they like to surf.”

Having worked in a bar and restaurant and spending so much time in close proximity to North American surfing tourists, I imagined that Joaquin would be a perfect subject to expand on some of the negative aspects of surfing tourism. He was asked point blank what he thought the worst aspect of the surf tourism in Gigante was, and what about it had bothered him. He replied:

“Well, there are certain customs that really aren’t that normal for me and the [other] Nicaraguans. I don’t know... It could be... I don’t know if it is normal in the United States... We’re speaking of drugs... In the United States, marijuana, I suppose that it is legal. I don’t know if it’s in just one state, or all the states, but in Nicaragua, it’s not legal, it’s very different. In Nicaragua, if you go around with marijuana, it is very dangerous... They can throw you in prison... detain you. So I think one negative aspect could be the focus on drugs. Like I said, I know that it might be legal in the North, but here in Nicaragua, no. And now some Nicaraguans are starting to think that it’s normal, but we have to wait until they legalize it before we do that.”

Multiple interviewees expressed concern over open marijuana use in Gigante. From observations in the town, some surfers and other tourists who are passing through use marijuana on occasion in public venues such as bars, restaurants or on the beaches. Some of the Nicaraguans acknowledged this, and had no ill feelings towards it. Others thought that it had the potential to cause problems, especially when used openly in front of Nicaraguans. Some interviewees (such as Karla, from section 6.2.2) felt that it could set a negative precedent for younger Nicaraguans, who had seen tourists smoking marijuana openly around town. The debate about drug use in the town is one that is complex, but the fact that Joaquin brought the issue up in his interview would support the idea that he was candid in his responses to questions, and did not side-step important issues.

Joaquin was later asked what he felt that surf tourism was doing for the future of his town, and how long-term developments might affect the Nicaraguans. He responded with some of his thoughts on the issues:

“I think we are showing the world the potential that we have here... tourism, like surfing. Because, for example, in the last two years, I’m not sure, they organized a surfing tournament here. And that was good because, we say, various delegations from different countries were all concentrated on this place. So the whole world took note that Gigante has... the beaches of Gigante, the beaches of Tola have a lot of potential... for the development.”

When he was asked about his vision for the future, and what he thought surf tourism would be able to do for the community should it continue to grow, Joaquin said he thought that the developments would still be substantial in the future. He explained: “I think yes, because the rhythm that things have been coming... It’s been like, really fast. Lots of new hotels, for example *Michelle’s*, the other one that was opened by the Mexican guy, I don’t know what he is going to name it. But a lot of tourism, and the materials they bring... it’s rising very quickly. So I think that possibly Gigante, in like ten years, is going to be very changed... more tourism... and more tourists.”

Joaquin was later asked if there is anything in his life that he thought could have been a direct result of the surf tourism taking place, and the job he was working within the tourism market. When asked this question, he responded: “Yes, because where I was living before, there was not very much tourism going on like there is here. So I was able



to rise up a little. I've got my house; I've bought some things like *electrodomesticos* [household electronic appliances]. We say that, in this form it is something good for those who are dedicated to their work, and who are living here in Gigante.” For Joaquin, there are clearly some advantages to working in the tourism sector. Having spent an abundance of time in the country, I am able to report that many Nicaraguans his age are unable to purchase houses, or household domestic products. These types of purchases are simply out of the economic grasp of young people, unless they are able to secure a well paying jobs such as those provided by surf tourism.

Finally, Joaquin was asked if he had anything to add to the interview that might have been left out by the line of questioning, he concluded: “The tourism that is happening here in Gigante, the surfing tourism, is a good thing. And that there should be respect on both sides; the surfers and the [Nicaraguan] nationals. So there isn't any kind of conflict and we can keep moving down a better road.”

## **6.5 Surfonomics as it applies to Gigante**

As far as applying the idea of “surfonomics” to Playa Gigante, there are insufficient data to be able to try and place an exact financial value upon the surrounding breaks. How much they are worth to the community, like those studies that were done for Mavericks and Mundaka, would simply be too difficult to complete given the lack of data available (Coffman & Burnett, 2009; Murphy & Bernal, 2008). This data could be difficult to find given that many of the tourism operators seem to be unwilling to give up financial information from their records. In the past, their financial rewards from surfing surely would have been high, given that the majority of tourists historically were there to

find surfing waves. Now that the dynamics of the tourism in Playa Gigante have changed, including more tourists who travel there with no intention of surfing, applying the idea of the surfonomics to Gigante could be much more difficult.

### **6.6 The Average tourist in Playa Gigante**

To compile data about the average tourist who visits Playa Gigante, a series of questionnaire surveys was handed out during the second stage of the research period during November 2014. The surveys were handed out to tourists in and around a local hotel during off hours, usually when tourists were resting in the bar. A total of twenty-five surveys were collected to gather data about country of origin, budgets, daily expenditure practices, purpose of the trip, and number of visits to Nicaragua and Playa Gigante. The surveys were passed out to both surfers and non-surfers alike.

Of the twenty-five surveys sixteen of the respondents claimed that surfing had been their main purpose of the trip. The tourists came from a different range of locations around the world – eighteen from the U.S., five from Australia, and two from Sweden. A question was asked about if (and if yes, how many) charter boat trips each traveler would be taking during their time in Gigante, either to surf or as a fishing charter trip. While the intention to take fishing trips were small (only eight respondents) eighteen of the tourists were planning on taking surf charter trips, even two who had claimed not to be in Gigante to surf. And of those eighteen, over half of them (ten) claimed to be planning on taking surf charters more than three times a week. Although data about specific types of surfing boat trips was not gathered, that is a potential of thirty boat trips in one week that will be taken by tourists.

Other questions were asked about the tourists spending habits while in Gigante, and how long they had planned to stay in town. Of the twenty-five respondents, twenty-three of them said that they would primarily be getting their food and drinks from hotels, rather than cooking food for themselves. Only two of the respondents claimed to be able to make their food in their own hotels, and didn't plan on eating in local restaurants. This would support data from interviews with Nicaraguans that many of the people who stay in Gigante are supporting the local economy by spending cash in local establishments.

This is just a small sample of the data that was collected regarding the tourists. Since the main purpose of the study was to examine tourism's effects on the local population, only a small amount of time was devoted to this portion of the study. From this data, we can say that most tourists, regardless of their intentions while on the trip will be spending money in local establishments – something that would be supported by interviews that claimed that money that is spent by tourists is staying in the town, and helping with the general financial progress of the town.

## **7. Discussion**

This study sought to examine the economic impacts of surf tourism on the local population of an up and coming surf destination in Nicaragua – Playa Gigante. There are clearly some aspects of surf tourism that are beneficial for the locals, and others that are less beneficial. Surfing tourism, according to local Nicaraguans, provides a clear economic benefit. This immediate benefit, in terms of cash in pocket from tourism-related employment, however, must be tempered by the increasing cost of land and living in the area as demand for land by outsiders will push prices out of the reach of Nicaraguans. In this section, I highlight the results of this study in the context of past academic work on this topic.

### **7.1 Economic Benefits of Surf Tourism for Nicaraguans**

Several previous studies examined how tourism has permitted local Nicaraguans to augment income earned from traditional means such as farming and fishing (Alvarado & Taylor, 2014; Buckley, 2002; Kurronen, 2011). While this can hold true for certain members of the local community, others, mainly females, might not have as much motivation to move into the tourism sector as they will only play small roles, and will lack input on the future framework of development that will take place (Beneria & Feldman, 1992; Moser, 1993; Neuman, 2013). The goal of the study was to examine the impacts of tourism from different perspectives. From both observations and the many in-depth interviews that were conducted, we can see that in general, locals are benefitting

from the surfing and subsequent tourism boom in the area. Some locals, such as fishermen, were in a position to control their own earnings, whereas others, like the workers in hotels and restaurants must rely on the fixed wages they earn.

Clearly, some local Nicaraguans are able to take advantage of the tourism boom taking place. For example, fishermen and boatmen can capitalize on their experience in the ocean to take surfers to the surrounding breaks, and have a significant economic advantage over those who lack boat skills and knowledge of the surrounding sea. Other Nicaraguans, such as women or younger men, improve their economies by working in local hotels and restaurants that cater to the traveling surfers. These jobs that Nicaraguans fill (such as bartender/waiter/waitress, cook, house keeping and management jobs) can help supplement their income, especially given that many of these younger people might not be employed were it not for the presence of hotels and other tourism establishments. For the majority of Nicaraguans who live outside this small tourism zone, their daily lives are dedicated to subsistence farming, or artisanal fishing. These are jobs they carry out with the main goal of putting food on their tables, with no hope of earning a wage surplus. However, once these tourism establishments are opened, they create venues where revenue can be created for those who were previously unable to hold jobs due to lack of fishing experience, lack of available alternatives to earn wages, or because they must devote time to other household tasks.

For those Nicaraguans who are entering the job market for the first time, such as women or younger males, these jobs can present the first opportunity to earn a steady income. Fishermen and boatmen are able to use tourism trips as a way to supplement the

income that is earned from their primary occupation of fishing. Of all the fishermen who were interviewed, none of them claimed to be tourism guides; they were all fishermen first and foremost, and occasional tourism guides second as an income annex. The young men and women on the other hand, were happy with their jobs and looked forward to being able to earn income on their own, many of who were doing so for the first time. Many of them were starting to make purchases that would have been unheard of before they entered these jobs. Some of the items that had been recently purchased by interviewees included new cellular telephones, computers, motorcycles (one of the most popular means of conveyance, and a sign that one has started to earn steady income), household appliances, and new clothing. Had these people not been working in the tourism sector, and not earned a steady wage in their jobs, these are items that would have fallen very low on the list of purchasing priorities. The fishermen, on the other hand, were used to having the ability to purchase luxury items from the money that had earned from fishing, and the tourism trips were another way to solidify their earnings.

These are the kind of economic benefits that can bring change to a small community such as Playa Gigante. It changes the dynamic of the town from one group of people having the majority of the purchasing power (fishermen), to a wider group of people having some economic prosperity. This allows the community as a whole to lift themselves out of the subsistence living standards that is so common in rural Nicaragua. And the catalyst that started this change in Gigante was the fact that it has easy, public access (on foot or by boat) to the five surrounding surf waves in the area. Had it not been for these five waves that straddle this tiny section of coast, there may not have been the

initial push that the pioneer surf tourists made, and subsequently helped put Gigante on the map as a destination for all tourism groups. There are plenty of small villages along the Southwestern coast of Nicaragua that have no tourism because there are no surfing waves in their vicinity or because of poor beach access. Towns either to the North or the South that have no surfing waves, or difficult coastal access, have seen a much smaller effect from tourism. Gigante has come a long way and started to cater more to other travelers (other than surfers) in recent years, but had it not been for the great waves and easy public access to them, it is possible that it would still be a quiet fishing village – and not the tourism boom town that it is today.

## **7.2 Intercultural Relations and Intercultural Exchange**

Of the academic works that were reviewed during this study, some demonstrated that tourism in developing countries could create a degree of animosity between the tourists and the nationals where the tourism is taking place (Krause, 2013; Usher & Kerstetter, 2014; Young, 2000). It was also noted that specifically with the case of surfing, those surfers who are native to the area where surf tourism is taking place can feel especially dispossessed, as it can lead to increased numbers of surfers on local waves and exhaustion of the local “wave space” (Evers, 2009). This however, seems to be less of the case in Gigante. While it would be incorrect to assume that Nicaraguan surfers in general are pleased with an increase in the number of people at their home breaks, from the interviews that were conducted with Nicaraguan surfers, there did not seem to be a great deal on animosity between the two groups. The local Nicaraguan surfers claimed to be able to share the wave space with traveling tourists, and that they were glad the waves

in the area had seen such high praise among the surfing community. They felt that these waves near Gigante were some of the best in all of Nicaragua, and that they deserved the international praise they had received in surf periodicals and in surf competitions held in the area. Many of the interviewees stated that this particular piece of coast had some of the best surfing breaks in the whole world, and that they were pleased with the fact the waves were getting the respect they deserved by those who were familiar with other high-quality waves around the world.

Local residents repeated the fact that Nicaraguans and North American tourism operators often worked together on projects in order to combine the knowledge of both parties for mutual benefits. Many Nicaraguans seemed to appreciate help they received from North Americans with regard to business practices and management policies. On multiple occasions, Nicaraguans described how North American operators had helped to improve their businesses operations through past knowledge that might have been unfamiliar to Nicaraguans. It was also noted that through a combined effort (Nicaraguans using their knowledge of the local bureaucracy and North Americans using their knowledge of tourism operations) the two groups were able to assist each other and create businesses that provided benefits for both tourism operators and the Nicaraguans who would be employed within new establishments. For example, a North American might have the idea for a new business and the capital with which it could be started, but they were helpless without the insight of how to start a Nicaraguan business – insight that was provided through a local counterpart. If the two were able to work together and start a tourism business it was due to a combination of specializations that each possessed.



There was a degree of animosity towards tourism outfits owned by North Americans expressed in one of the interviews with a Nicaraguan owner of a tourism establishment, but none of the animosity was aimed specifically at the surf tourists themselves. From participant observation and prior experience with the local politics of Gigante, it can be said that some of the ill-will that was reserved for North American tourism operators could have had more to do with personal issues between the two parties, rather than a general resentment towards North Americans. Many of the Nicaraguans who I interviewed expressed optimism and were content with Gigante's growth in popularity and the subsequent increase in tourism that resulted. As one of the respondents claimed, "let the whole world come to Gigante." From the data that were collected, many of the Nicaraguans with whom I spoke seemed to enjoy the fact that Gigante was growing in popularity amongst North American and European surfers – and many explained that there was little, if any, trouble between the two groups. Multiple interviewees explained that the two groups lived their lives in Gigante "tranquilly" and that there was seldom a problem that drove the two groups apart. That is not to say that there has never been a problem between the two. Of course, there are occasions where tempers flare, but for the most part tensions between the two groups are minimal and Nicaraguans seem to be happy about sharing their community with traveling surfers – even those Nicaraguans who surf, and are forced to share wave space with traveling surfers.

### 7.3 Potential Negative Effects of Surf Tourism

Numerous academic works that were examined for this study point to the negative effects of tourism, especially when that tourism takes place in LDCs. Some of the specific problems that were highlighted in these studies include: animosity towards foreign actors in the tourism market, the contested wave spaces of local surfers when traveling surfers are in their line-ups, gender gaps in the development process, and tolerance levels of tourists being tested (Krause, 2013; Young, 2000; Preston-Whyte, 2002; Beneria & Feldman, 1992; Diedrich & Garcia-Buades, 2008, respectively). Interviews and data from this study also revealed some of the negative aspects of surf tourism in Playa Gigante.

The first problem, which was raised by several interviewees, was the idea that North American surf tourists were acting as a negative influence on the younger Nicaraguans of Gigante, in terms of promoting the use of drugs and alcohol. From observed trends and much time spent in the study area, it is fair to say that many of the tourists who travel to Gigante drink alcohol and occasionally some will smoke marijuana. Many of these tourists are simply celebrating the fact they are on vacation. The young people of Gigante, however, often interpret this as everyday and normal behavior. This had lead to some interest among the local youth in drinking and smoking; to “be like the *gringos*,” some suggested during interviews. There is no denying that some of the young people have picked up these habits, but as to where those habits came from is up for debate. It could be said that those habits might have been picked up from surfers, but it could also be said that in a hardscrabble town like Gigante, habits could have been picked

up from the local fishermen as well, especially the prevalence of alcohol consumption. What can be said with certainty is that there is almost always more young people at the adjacent beach surfing, than there are in town drinking or smoking, simply because these activities are too expensive. For these young Nicaraguans, surfing and surfers can be a great model on which to base decisions about how to spend their time. If the Nicaraguan youth see that surfing is a sport that takes skill, concentration and practice, they will usually opt to try and improve upon those skills, rather than sit idly. Also, from talking to many of the young *Nicas* while out surfing, many of them realize that surfing can be a way to elevate themselves, and possibly to move on to bigger and better things. They know that if they practice enough, and try to enter some surfing competitions, that it could eventually lead to a career in surfing (and possibly moving out of Gigante). I can say with certainty that there are more young Nicaraguans in Gigante who desire to become professional surfers than who want to remain in the town in an intoxicated state.

A second problem that was only minimally addressed in the interviews, but I feel is going to be one of the potential problems for Nicaraguans living in Playa Gigante, is the rising cost of land that is associated with tourism booms. As the town grows in renown, more outsiders will want to buy property in the area (this trend has already caught on as more North Americans have purchased land in recent years). As more of this land is bought and sold at North American prices, it will be less common for the nationals to compete financially with the North Americans, especially in key tourism locations along the beachfront. During the interviews, both sides of this issues were brought up by Nicaraguans – one felt that the rising price of land would lead to natives

being disposed of their land, and the other felt that Nicaraguans would be able to capitalize on current land holdings and sell them at a substantial profit. It is unknown how the Nicaraguans will deal with these rising land prices, but prices have already risen and they will continue to do so. Of all the negative effects that can spawn from tourism booms in LDCs, this seems to be one that is both duplicitous (in that it can sneak up on locals quickly) and detrimental for Nicaraguans. If the prices continue to increase, it will not be long before North American tourism operators own the entire *plaza central* and the Nicaraguans are relegated to the periphery.

## **8. Conclusion**

Based on the data that was collected for this study, through in-depth interviews and participant observation, I can say that this tourism boom occurring in Playa Gigante is something that will set locals up with a new means of livelihoods – livelihoods that were absent prior to the arrival of the first pioneer surfers in the community. True, the time of surf tourist being the only group to travel to Gigante has come and gone, and now the town has been opened up to almost anyone who can find the place, whether their goal is to find surf or to simply spend a few days relaxing on the beach. But had it not been for that initial push of the original surf tourists to the area, those who were willing to go through hardships and stay in rustic hotels, this section of coast may have never experienced the explosion of tourism that is now taking place.

The town now appears on many of the Nicaraguan guidebooks, can be easily located on the Internet, and can provide lodging for all sorts of tourists who now flock there, no matter what type of accommodations they may seek. And for the Nicaraguans who were born there, or moved there as a result of the tourism boom, these tourists and the money they bring with them can open up new opportunities for the community – new ways to improve their lives financially. Like many issues within the scope of academia, there remains a debate as to who the main beneficiaries of the tourism that has moved into Gigante are. Is it the tourists, who can find cheap lodging, food and activates here in the quiet corner of the world? Or is it the Nicaraguans who are now earning a living

beyond subsistence agriculture and fishing? Or could it be that both groups are benefitting? The goal of this study was to answer those questions in as unbiased a way as possible.

It is the opinion of this researcher that the last of these questions is true – that both parties now involved in the tourism boom are mutually benefitting from it. That both groups are finding the beauty of this place, and using their own set of skills to make their lives better. In the case of the Nicaraguan community, however, I think that the boom of surf tourism is providing them with opportunities that can help them rise to a new standard of living and provide many of its members with a new outlet with which living can be earned. Now, it is no longer necessary to be a successful fisherman, or to try and find work on larger community projects in order to have some financial prosperity. These employment opportunities that are available via tourism establishments can now provide ample opportunities for those who wish to enter the work place in Gigante. There is no longer the fear of not being able to afford luxuries that were previously unavailable – or dismissing financial worries that might have dominated their lives prior to tourism's arrival. Now, in partnership with the surfers who originally came to this place for its waves and natural beauty, those Nicaraguans have a hope for a better future.

Like other places around the world that have benefitted immensely in an economic sense from surfing (and the associated tourism that it brings with it. e.g. the surfers at Mavericks and the crowds that they draw to watch them), the local population of Gigante is in agreement that the five waves that surround them and the money that those waves bring in, benefits them.

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## End Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Toña, the national beer of Nicaragua, is made by the same family that produces the famous Flor de Caña rum – the Pellas. The Pellas family, which is one of the wealthiest in the country, also has a large stake in car dealerships around the country, banks (including BAC), sugar plantations, and massive real estate holdings. They were also one of the main investors in the Guacalito de la Isla resort, which sits about four kilometers to the south of Playa Gigante. The family has been one of the most influential in the country since well before the revolution. During the revolution, when many of the country's elites were driven from the country, the Pellas remained in prominence, possibly due to political connections to Sandinista party members.

<sup>ii</sup> One of the many signs of economic stability that has appeared in this section of Nicaragua is the omnipresent red Claro satellite dishes that seem to be on top of almost every house in the area. Even though there are very few Nicaraguan television channels, the unmistakable glow of television sets can often be seen while driving through towns at night.

<sup>iii</sup> Even though many of the waves remain uncrowded today, some of the more popular ones have become just as saturated as waves in Southern California. One day while surfing at a break to the north of Gigante, I counted 57 surfers in the water.

<sup>iv</sup> Throughout the paper, I will refer to the study site as both Playa Gigante and as Gigante. For the purpose of this paper I will be using both names to refer to the study site of Playa Gigante.

<sup>v</sup> Guacalito de la Isla was a five hundred million dollar project that was completed in 2011. The funding for the construction came from both the Pellas family (who ponied two hundred and fifty million dollars) and the InterAmerican Development Bank, who gave the remaining two hundred and fifty million dollars needed for the project. The hotel includes a world-class eighteen-hole golf course, a spa, and multiple restaurants. The cheapest rooms in the hotel will run about \$450 USD, but the private house of Carlos Pellas can also be rented on a nightly basis, supposedly for \$6,000 USD per night.

<sup>vi</sup> This search for uncrowded waves has literally brought people to the edge of the Earth. Some of the newly explored surfing spots around the world include parts of

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Antarctica, countries around sub-Sahara Africa, parts of the Middle East (including Yemen). With the technologies that are available to surfers now, there is almost no place on Earth that surfers haven't traveled looking for waves.

<sup>vii</sup> Even within the country there are waves that are much less well known than those that are close to Gigante, which are some of the most published in the country and can be found on the Internet quickly. There are whole new portions of coast to the north that are starting to be discovered, have good waves, and have almost no surfers in the waves.

<sup>viii</sup> Each of the surfing breaks further up the coast to the north have groups of hotels that provide access to them. This way, surfers can stay in front of different waves on different parts of their trips. What is common for surfers to do is to spend a couple days at each spot. This way surfers can spend a couple days surfing one spot, back up their things and head up the coast to surf another spot for a few days before moving again.

<sup>ix</sup> All of the interviews for this study were conducted by the primary researcher (who has a high degree of fluency) in Spanish translated to English, again by the PR. Please see the appendix for full transcriptions of all of the interviews that were used for the study.

<sup>x</sup> In the interest in maintaining anonymity for all of the interviewees who were used for the study, their real names have been changed in favor of pseudonyms.

<sup>xi</sup> EcoGigante is one of the non-profits that has opened recently in Playa Gigante. Their goal is to try and maintain the cleanliness of the town by picking up trash in the town and along the beach, recycling any materials they find and by organizing beach cleanups in the community. It is one of two non-profits that have emerged in Gigante in recent years, the other being *WOO* (Waves of Optimism) which does community outreach programs for the youth in town, trying to get them involved in surfing and maintaining the beauty of their community. Both of these non-profits were set up by North Americans and are run with the help of a local Nicaraguan staff of volunteers.

<sup>xii</sup> The cheapest of the surf taxis that runs from Playa Gigante cost eight USDs and only includes a ride to one of the close waves and an arranged pick-up time (usually around two hours from the drop-off). As the taxi gets more involved the prices will go up, for example, if you want a full day trip, with snacks and drinks included, and where the guide will wait for you while you surf, the cost will go up. Depending on how far away the wave you want to surf is, and how long the trip duration is, the cost can be as high as two hundred USDs per person.



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<sup>xiii</sup> This taco stand, *Tacos Banditas*, which has subsequently closed down since the end of the research period, was a point of contention for many Nicaraguans of the town. Many of the Nicaraguans were upset that a North American has set up shop in the central plaza, and some felt that they were taking away vital business from Nicaraguan owned restaurants in the same area. Even though this was a place that many tourists chose to eat for their low-priced, high quality food, many of the Nicaraguan business owners in the area were happy to see them close their doors.

<sup>xiv</sup> Dale Dagger is one of the many mythical characters that make up the fabric of Playa Gigante. There are many stories as to how he discovered Gigante, and when it occurred. The most accurate story involves Dale running aground on a local beach in the early 1970s while on a voyage through the Panama Canal. He was supposedly rescued by some Nicaraguan fishermen in the area, found that there was some excellent surf, and decided to set up a surf camp. The Dale Dagger surf camp, located just off the central plaza, now offers all-inclusive trips for North American surfers who pay a flat fee to get daily boat rides to and from the local waves.

<sup>xv</sup> The Nicaraguan Canal is one of the most contested issues in the country right now, with many people strongly opposed to the construction. The plans, which were laid out recently include the western portion of the canal exiting at Punta Brito, about ten kilometers to the south of Playa Gigante. The resulting fiasco has led to protest around the country as many Nicaraguans feel that this is a way for the ruling elite to consolidate power, to generate huge profits, and to throw many poor Nicaraguans off their land for paltry sums of money well below the actual value of the land. As of right now, there have only been minor amounts of construction completed, such as access roads to future construction sites. Many feel that if the project is completed, the line of container ships off the coast will stretch to the western horizon and the environmental quality in the area will be greatly reduced by trash, oil and waste from the passing ships.

<sup>xvi</sup> While this repaving of the main road is not specifically for Playa Gigante, it has been a signal of change for the region. The paved main highway (which is actually being laid with *adoquines*, or small tiles that are individually laid out to form a road) is a part of the main “Nicaraguan Rivera” project. The goal is to make transportation between the coastal tourism zones easier for foreign tourists. The trip from Rivas to Playa Gigante, which used to take well over two hours, now only takes about twenty minutes, and travel times in the area have been slashed since the construction was completed.