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Contested spaces: we shall fight on the beaches...

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Abstract
Picture this. It's a beautiful sunny day. You arrive on the beach, find yourself a nice quiet area away from the crowds and set yourself up for a day of relaxation and fun in the sun. But then a large group arrives and sets themselves up right next to you. They're drinking heavily, swearing loudly and leaving their rubbish in the sand. And things are about to get worse. In the distance you can hear the unmistakable buzz of a jet ski heading for your once-quiet part of the beach. The day is lost. You pack up and head home. Australians are a beach-going people and research suggests that the scenario outlined above is likely to seriously annoy at least half of us. A 2014 survey of New South Wales residents found that 58% of respondents considered anti-social behaviour a key threat to the social benefits of the coast. The survey was conducted for the state's Marine Estate Management Authority (MEMA).

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This is the first article in our Contested Spaces series. These pieces look at the conflicting uses, expectations and norms that people bring to public spaces, the clashes that result and how we can resolve these.

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But then a large group arrives and sets themselves up right next to you. They’re drinking heavily, swearing loudly and leaving their rubbish in the sand. And things are about to get worse.
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Australians are a beach-going people and research suggests that the scenario outlined above is likely to seriously annoy at least half of us. A 2014 survey of New South Wales residents found that 58% of respondents considered anti-social behaviour a key threat to the social benefits of the coast. The survey was conducted for the state’s Marine Estate Management Authority (MEMA).

Anti-social behaviour topped the list of community concerns in the survey. This was closely followed by littering, overcrowding and the unsafe behaviour of some recreational boaters and jet skiers.

The strength of this response was somewhat surprising; we tend to think of the coast as a place of fun and relaxation, rather than a hot bed of conflict and simmering tensions. But Australians have always had strong ideas about the right way to behave at the beach.

**A tradition of free public access**

First and foremost we have defended the right of free access the beach. Australians have a long and ongoing history of resistance to any development that might impede public access.

The legacy of this is a relatively “natural” coastal environment, even in our metropolitan areas. This reflects our preference for development set back from the beach and in public ownership.

But while we are keen to keep our beaches open for all, we have a slightly less egalitarian attitude towards how people should use the beach.

Public bathing on the beach only became commonplace and acceptable in the late 19th century. Board riding on public beaches was frowned upon in the 1960s – so much so that local councils in Sydney attempted to regulate surfing through a registration system.

Today, activities such as surfing, swimming and snorkelling are generally agreed to be appropriate. In fact, these are seen as essential components of Australian beach culture.

**The unwritten rules of conduct**

Many beach activities are generally accepted and uncontentious as long as they are conducted within complex, unwritten models of appropriate behaviour. An example is the rules about “dropping in” among surfers.

These unwritten rules are constantly evolving. The rules may be confounding to people not exposed to them from an early age, including different cultural and ethnic groups. Conflict on the coast is often infused with underlying racial tensions, as the 2005 Cronulla riots demonstrated most dramatically.

Today these tensions live on and are particularly acute in relation to fishing. Conflicting cultural ideas about the size, species and number of fish and invertebrates considered appropriate to take is a
regular source of dispute even for common species not covered by catch limits.

When ideas about beaches are in conflict

While racial tensions undoubtedly play a role, these are unlikely to explain all the tensions and annoyances that can emerge during a day at the beach. The MEMA survey indicated that we value the coast for its beauty and as a place for socialisation and enjoyment. This is largely based on the opportunities it provides for a healthy and active lifestyle.

Dominant social norms therefore place the beach as a place of passive recreation focused on relaxation, appreciation of nature and wilderness-based adventure sports (such as surfing or fishing). Resentments appear to build when uses of the beach, and different users’ underlying value systems, come into conflict. In the scenario outlined at the start of this article, individuals or groups are potentially pursuing hedonistic or utilitarian values at the expense of nature-based or passive-use values.

Similar resentments have emerged in reverse. Individuals or groups who value the coast primarily as a place of social interaction, fun and active use often resist attempts to limit this use. An example is some anglers’ opposition to protected areas or restricted-use zones.

A key to managing conflict therefore lies in improving our understanding of beach users’ value systems. This will help planners, policymakers and communities identify strategies that cater for the diverse interests and needs of different users.

In some national parks and council areas, for example, planning approaches have been developed to cater for a diverse range of recreational opportunities. Permitted activities and associated infrastructure are determined throughout the management area based on ensuring there are opportunities along a spectrum of use from active through to wilderness-based experiences. In NSW, government agencies are using the MEMA survey results to identify and manage key threats to the values of the coast.

In many ways, though, the conflict we see on our beaches may be a small price to pay for the free and open access to our beaches, which Australians have fought to preserve on many occasions.

Resolving these conflicts may partly involve planning, partly education and partly regulation. Those rules we consider non-negotiable need to be enforced – for example, the rules that keep us and other beach users safe. To a large degree, however, it also involves building tolerance, patience and empathy within our community so we can all enjoy our day out at the beach.
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