California State Parks,
Atten: Office of Historic Preservation,
Carol Roland-Nawi, Ph.D.,
State Historic Preservation Officer,
P.O. Box 94296,
Sacramento, CA 94296-0001

12/12/12

Dear Sirs,

This letter is written in support of the Trestles/San Onofre surfing area being included in the National Register of Historic Places.

That particular stretch of beach and coastline has long been significant for its historical role and importance to the surfing culture as an invaluable and unique recreational resource. That role began prior to the explosion in popularity that took surfing from thousands to millions of enthusiasts in 1959-1963. In 1934, the surf clan from Corona Del Mar was displaced by the extension of the Newport jetties which changed the waves there. They explored south and discovered a new home at San Onofre, then part of a large cattle ranch, then later the Marine Corp base. The entire set up at 'Nofre was so perfect, encompassing a half dozen different reefs that produced shapely relaxed waves, and so seemingly isolated from all else, that it became California's Waikiki. Gradually, over the following decades, the additional grade-A breaks a 10-15 minute walk to the north were growing increasingly popular. At first their waves were considered too critical for the early planks and hollow boxboards of the period, but they came fully into play as surfboards modernized. From the 1950's on, Church, Lower Trestle, Upper Trestle, and Cotton's Point quickly earned status as premiere high performance surf breaks, with the totality of that mile or two stretch between San Onofre and Cotton's providing a wide range of quality and quantity surf breaks, rare within so short a span of coastline. From soft family waves at San O to more vigorous waves to the north, for over eight decades that specific wave zone has provided one of the most diverse and high value specialized public recreational resources in Southern California.

In the post-war years before San Onofre/Trestles became State Park, it was a functioning part of Camp Pendleton's marine training mission. It mattered not that it was off limits to civilian personnel; surfers snuck in along the beach from the north, south from San Onofre, and through the undergrowth between the highway and the beach to surf waves that could enticingly be seen from the
highway overpass a half-mile inland. Throughout the 1960s, surfers and Marines engaged in a game of cat and mouse. Both largely comprised of teenaged players, one side in uniform and under orders to keep them out, the other in surf trunks and just having fun. The contest between Marines and surfers often became a funny and even poignant. During Vietnam, Marine sentries that only a few weeks earlier had been guarding an ammo dump in enemy territory found themselves guarding a beach from invading surfers. It could be a hard change over. To say the least, it was a colorful chapter in the story of that place. The Marines would raid the beach, confiscate surfboards, and disable surfer’s autos illegally parked in the trees and bushes behind the beach. The surfers would refuse to come in when the Marines demanded that they do so, or if caught on the sand, run up the beach to hide in the reeds. A board lost and washed up onto the rocky shore would become the object of a foot race over the rocks and urchins between barefoot surfer and a boot clad Marine, who, when they won, would confiscate the board. The Marines even sent swimmers out to pursue the surfers. Meanwhile, back on land, the surfers circled around and disabled the MP cars parked out on the dirt road, while the MPs were doing the same to their cars hidden in the undergrowth. Much of the time both sides maintained a humorous perspective, but shots were fired more than once. In 1971, the State Park designation ended that jousting match and the use factor began to swell.

In the early 1970s, the Army Corp. conducted a survey of recreational coastline uses from San Francisco to the Mexican border. They identified all uses and attached a monetary recreational value to each, ranging from passive sightseeing to fishing, and more intensive uses such as beachfront golf courses, boat harbors, and surfing (unique in that it relies solely on the presence of specific natural attributes). The passive uses were valued at the low end and most active at the high end. As it turned out, of all the activities that existed, surfing provided the highest return on investment by far, in that it provided an extremely intensive, involved, and rewarding recreational activity, while the resource itself existed naturally and required relatively little expense to maintain. At that time, all the highest value activities were valued at $1.75 an hour. Forty-years later, surfing, compared to the per-hour cost of a comparable high value recreation like golf or snowboarding, might well be valued at $30 or $40 per hour. State Parks currently estimates the average daily surf break use at San Onofre State Park at 600 per day throughout the year. Figuring that each surfer spends an average of four hours there when they come to surf, it computes to 2400 recreational hours a day times 365 days a year times $30, for a total annual recreational value well over twenty-five million dollars. Though this study was evidently never published, the logic rings true.

When surfing began its rapid growth in 1959, California became a center stage for the sport on all levels. The skills associated with high-level wave riding were best developed at high quality breaks such as Malibu, Rincon and Trestles. The surfboard building industry, due to proximity of new materials developed
by the aircraft industry, became centered in Southern California, and in particular, much of it nearby Trestles/San Onofre, which attracted surfboard craftsmen from a broad range of beach towns, including Hawaii and far beyond. Such iconic surf industry names as Hobie Alter, Dale Velzy (surfboard builders), Gordon “Grubby” Clark (inventor of Clark Foam surfboard cores), Walter and Flippy Hoffman (major fabric suppliers to the surf wear industry), Bruce Brown (maker of “The Endless Summer”) and John Severson (founder of Surfer Magazine) were just a few of those who built homes and located their businesses to be close to that surf resource.

Today, surfing has grown worldwide as a sport and industry, exerting a significant cultural influence on modern western civilization, and representing an important financial engine to many communities, ranging from tourism, fashion, hard goods, boardsports, X-games, to hospitality and service sectors. The unique Trestles/San Onofre wave complex continues to host countless recreational surfers and to provide an arena for professional and amateur surfing competitions each year. That San Onofre State Park is one of the most visited CA State Parks is largely due to that very special cluster of wave breaks that have been providing a compelling natural experience everyday for decades, and will continue to do so.

Sincerely,

Steve Pezman
Publisher, The Surfer’s Journal