

# Study claims surfing creates \$1 trillion wave for global economy by improving mental health

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New research led by Griffith University on Australia's Gold Coast and Andrés Bello University in Chile, has shown that surfing contributes about US\$1 trillion a year to the global economy, by improving the mental health of surfers.

For the Gold Coast alone, the research team estimated the benefits to be valued at ~US\$1.0–3.3 billion per year. Mental health benefits from [surfing](#) comprise 57–74% of the total economic benefits of surfing. The mental health benefits are 4.4–13.5 times direct expenditure by surfers, and 4–12 times [economic effects](#) via property and inbound tourism.

The research, "Mental health contribution to [economic value](#) of surfing [ecosystem services](#)," has been published in the journal, *npj Ocean Sustainability*.

## **Why look at surfing as a mental health cost saver?**

Professor Emeritus Ralf Buckley, from Griffith University's School of Environment and Science, said the study's aim was to estimate the large-scale economic value of mental health benefits across the entire representative population of individuals who took part in recreational surfing, which is a similar approach Professor Buckley has adopted in previous estimates for visitors to national parks.

Mental health benefits may differ in degree, from occasional to frequent surfers. Outcomes may sometimes be perceived as negative, with injuries and overcrowding as principal causes. As with many thrill+skill adventure activities, surfing can act as a behavioral addiction: at least some surfers suffer substantial withdrawal symptoms if deprived of surf.

"The reason why there are such big numbers in the value of recreational activities like surfing for mental health benefits is that for almost every kind of job, you have to pay attention: for safety, skill, service, or decisions," Professor Buckley said.

"If you are stressed and not paying proper attention, your job performance suffers, and that costs money for your employer or your business.

"Outdoor activities such as surfing reduce stress, as long as you can get a few good waves. Surfing has a powerful psychological effect and that has a substantial value."

## **Why study the Gold Coast?**

Professor Buckley said that for economic valuations, mental health benefits acquired via surfing may also lead to large-scale lifestyle choices, such as residential location and work preferences, and these can create secondary economic effects, e.g., via property prices.

"The economic value of surf amenities also overlaps with beach amenities more broadly," Professor Buckley said.

"Taking all these factors into account, we estimated the mental health value of surfing for our case study site, the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia.

"The Gold Coast is a beach tourist destination, and its economy is driven largely by real estate, tourism, and trade and professional services such as building, health care and education.

"Its 2023 resident population is estimated at ~732,000. In 2008, there were 65,000–120,000 surfers.

"Surfer numbers have doubled over the past five years, so we can estimate >130,000 surfers currently.

"The mean number of beach visits per capita in Australia is six per year. The mean number of surf sessions per Gold Coast surfer is reported at ~100/year."

## How do you calculate the mental health value of surfing?

"The economics are straightforward," Professor Buckley said.

"We simply took existing health economics calculations for parks and greenspace and applied them to surfing."

Professor Buckley and co-author Dr. Mary-Ann Cooper from Andrés Bello University in Chile, triangulated the economic value of mental health benefits from surfing using the two different estimation methods currently available.

Using the productivity + health care estimation method, if surfing reduces stress from high to low levels, it creates an estimated ~10% improvement in per capita workplace productivity, plus ~10% reduction in costs of mental health care. The Australian mean per capita GDP is ~\$45,500, and mental health care costs are ~10% of GDP<sup>4</sup>.

The value of that stress reduction via surfing is estimated at ~\$5000 per person per year. Surfing therefore contributes an estimated ~\$0.65–2.10 billion per year via surfer [mental health benefits](#).

This can be injected directly into the Gold Coast economy via both employment and health care.

## Where to from here?

Professor Buckley said this study provided an approximate top-down estimate, and for more accurate estimates at local scales, the team needed to track mental health measures and possible influential factors for large panels of surfers, over multiple years.

"Our research also makes a contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG14, which is Oceans.

"Therefore, the economic value of surfing is an argument for the conservation of our coastlines."

**More information:** Mental health contribution to economic value of surfing ecosystem services, *npj Ocean Sustainability* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s44183-023-00027-5](https://doi.org/10.1038/s44183-023-00027-5)

Provided by Griffith University

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