



Sands of time clog up Kirra

Surfers, done with being laid-back, are standing up for their lost break, writes **Greg Stolz**

ITS golden sands have been trodden by everyone from Aborigines hungry for a feed of mullet to developers in white shoes with dollar signs in their eyes.

The 42km strip that is the Gold Coast coastline has seen a tidal wave of change during the past 150 years. From happy hunting grounds for the Kombumerri and Yugambah tribes to international tourist playground, the coast has been a place of ever-shifting sands.

Modern highrises tower over Surfers Paradise beach where characters such as John the Mutton Bird Man and Al the Suntan Man once plied their spray-on tanning oil trade; beach shacks at Mermaid Beach have given way to millionaires' "sandcastles", and the guesthouses and hokey-pokey dance parties of 1950s and '60s Coolangatta have long been consigned to history.

Sand-strewn and salt-encrusted surf clubs of old have been transformed into hip hang-outs with fancy bistros, bars and cafes; lifesavers have ditched the reel, line and belt rescue device for jet skis, inflatable rescue boats and quad bikes, and women strut the beaches in swimming costumes so skimpy as to make even the Gold Coast's broad-minded bikini pioneer, Paula Stafford, blush.

On the Gold Coast in 2009, surf rage is even more prevalent than road rage as hundreds of boardriders battle for a wave at Snapper Rocks or Burleigh Heads. And therein lies one of the most dramatic changes the Gold Coast has experienced.

Never in their history have coast beaches had so much sand.

The opening of the Tweed River sand bypass eight years ago has created a surfeit of sand so immense it has smothered one of the world's top surf breaks, Kirra Point, and destroyed what was once a prime Gold Coast dive spot.

Further north, drifting sand has clogged Currumbin and Tallebudgera creeks and at low tide, you could almost walk across the Southport Broadwater.

So wide are some of the beaches, particularly on the southern Gold Coast, locals joke that you need a camel and a packed lunch to reach the water's edge.

It's a far cry from the 1960s, '70s and '80s when Gold Coast beaches were consistently ravaged by erosion.

In 1967, beachfront homes were left teetering on the edge of huge sand cliffs after cyclonic seas pounded the coast.

The disaster prompted the construction of a boulder wall, stretching from Surfers Paradise to Coolangatta, to protect the beachfront from savage storms.

Although acting as a buffer against a repeat of '67, the wall has been left exposed by wild seas many times since.

But not in recent years.

Having spent tens of millions of dollars on beach erosion measures, the State Government and Gold Coast City Council were looking for a more permanent solution. They found it in the sand bypass.

In a happy coincidence, the NSW Government had a surplus of sand it needed to get rid of from the Tweed rivermouth. The bypass was established in 2001 with the dual aim of keeping the river navigable and replenishing Gold Coast beaches.

At first, surfers — to use their jargon — were "stoked".

The bypass created what became known as the "Superbank" — an incredible continuous break from Snapper Rocks all the way through to Kirra.

In July 2002, local boardrider Damon Harvey rode into surfing folklore when he caught a seemingly endless wave from outside Snapper to North Kirra. The leg-burning, heart-pumping 2km ride lasted almost five minutes.

The epic wave, believed to be the longest ever ridden on the Gold Coast and probably in Australia, attracted international publicity. Surfers jetted in from around the globe to ride the Superbank, which also became the site for the Quiksilver Pro world championship surfing tournament.

But the surfers' joy was short-lived.

The Superbank reached a peak and broke up, and much of the sand drifted north into Coolangatta Bay.

Kirra Point, renowned worldwide for its long "barrels" through which surfers would thread and weave their boards for the ultimate ride, was swamped with sand.

Millions of tonnes buried the rock groyne where surfers would once take off for tube rides.

The Kirra reef, once popular with divers and fishermen, was also choked.

Today, Kirra beach resembles a desert. The sand bypass contract that has led to 10 million cubic metres of sand being pumped into Coolangatta Bay since 2001 is scheduled to run for at least the next 19 years.



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Locals such as former world surfing champion and Association of Surfing Professionals president Wayne "Rabbit" Bartholomew say the lack of a serious cyclone in the past decade has exacerbated the problem, allowing the sand to build up to unprecedented levels.

They say the death of Kirra has increased pressure on other breaks such as Snapper Rocks, leading to an upsurge in surf rage.

Today, surfers including professional stars Mick Fanning, Joel Parkinson and Mark Occhilupo, will stage an Australia

Day rally at Kirra to step up pressure on authorities to do something.

A committee comprising surfing luminaries, coast scientists and affected local business people has been formed to lobby for a new pumping outlet so sand is deposited north of Kirra.

The international Surfrider Foundation has joined the battle, promising to make it a major campaign in 2009.

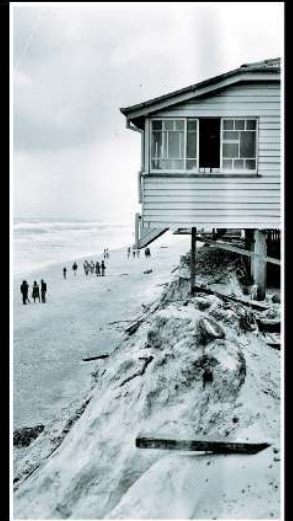
"Kirra really is a lost wave wonder of the world," Surfrider's Australian director Matt Butel says. "Surfrider recognises the importance of Kirra not only as a surf

break but as a significant asset to the city, both economically and environmentally."

Stuart Ball, president of the 46-year-old Kirra Surfriders Club whose members include 2007 world champion Fanning, says the club's home break has been largely unrideable since the bypass came on line.

"We want our break back," he says.

"We badly miss it and would like to see something done to restore the famous Kirra 'kegs' and 20 second tube rides."



A FAR cry ... from today's Kirra, the beach was eroded during the 1950s and '60s to the point that houses washed away, *left and bottom left in 1967 and above in 1951*, prompting measures like the dumping of cars in 1967, *bottom middle*, so that bathers could return as in 1956, *bottom right*.



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