

Humboldt County BIPOC surfers find peace, beauty and wisdom on the water

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During this time of year in Humboldt County, surfers eagerly wake up early in the morning and get ready to head into the tides of the Pacific ocean. Fall and winter are prime surfing times.

Veteran body surfer Alejandro Escudero Ochoa, and surfers like Kory Lamberts and Kunal Mehta, put on their wetsuits, wax their boards, fasten the surfboards' leashes to their ankles and jump into the cold morning waters.

What makes these surfers stand out from anybody else is that they are men of color. In a county that is majority white, it is no surprise that BIPOC surfers aren't commonly seen in this area of California.

The event Paddle out for Justice began in 2020 after the death of George Floyd and took place again in the summer of 2021. It was created by local surfer, Melissa Meiris.

“This event aims to make visible the injustices faced by Black & Brown people in our communities and nation,” Meiris said. “To honor the memories of Black & Brown people killed at the hands of police, and to raise money for six amazing local organizations led by and for People of Color.”

Having said that, these surfers aren’t aware of any club or organization that is specific to BIPOC surfers in Humboldt.

Escudero Ochoa, Lamberts and Mehta agreed to speak to El Leñador and express the enjoyment of the sport called surfing.

Alejandro Escudero Ochoa

Years surfing: 41

Favorite surfing spot in Humboldt: Big Lagoon

Escudero Ochoa, now 53, was 12 years old when he was introduced to bodyboarding by his friend while out on the beach one day. A bodyboard is about half the size of a surfboard and instead of standing on it, the surfer lays on it and glides with the waves. After having tried the bodyboard he really liked it and stuck to it. He has been body surfing for 41 years now.

Escudero Ochoa was born in Mexico City but grew up in Acapulco and Los Angeles. He identifies as Mestizo, which is someone who’s mixed with Indigenous and European ancestry. While living close to the beach, his appreciation of the ocean grew the more he surfed.

“It’s really a spiritual practice and people who are really soul surfers understand that,” Escudero Ochoa said. “But people who just want to make a name for themselves, who just want to show off and have fun with it, don’t actually see the real depth of what it is.”

When Escudero Ochoa began surfing in Humboldt County, he was criticized by other surfers who would say “Why don’t you ride a surfboard like a real surfer would.” Escudero Ochoa didn’t pay any attention to the discouraging surfers and would continue to body surf.

“Only the Yurok or the Wiyot can tell me to get out of the water,” Escudero Ochoa said. This doesn’t happen anymore since he has established his presence in the water.

While out bodysurfing, Escudero Ochoa has faced fierce waters and dangerous encounters, such as rescuing a friend who was bitten by a shark. He has saved multiple people and a dog from the rough waters.

“You have to be proficient in understanding how the ocean works to be there,” Escudero Ochoa said.

When Escudero Ochoa isn’t surfing, he’s making art. He discovered his artistic side when he was studying at Humboldt State University. He graduated with an art degree in 1991, but didn’t want to leave Humboldt County, so he became a carpenter.

Escudero Ochoa was recently surfing in Hawaii, a place he often visits because it reminds him of Acapulco.

“I go back to Hawaii because it is untouched in the sense that there is still fish, clean waters and jungle,” Escudero Ochoa said. “It really reminds me of where I grew up.”

Kory Lamberts

Years surfing: 2

Favorite surfing spot in Humboldt: Camel Rock

Lamberts, 26, a HSU student majoring in environmental studies and minoring in scientific diving, started surfing after he had returned home to the Bay Area in 2019, from a full-ride scholarship playing football at Middle Tennessee State University. He was introduced to surfing by a friend of his who is a professional surfer from Japan and took him out for the first time near Oceanview, San Francisco.

“I just got out there and got thrashed but it felt good,” he said. “There was this duality of calmness and raw energy from the ocean that was calming but also humbling and motivating in a way.”

Once Lamberts left the Bay Area to come to Humboldt for school, he bought a used board online and began cruising with the waves.

“I was living in Eureka at the time, and I was driving up every morning, going to surf. I didn’t even check the waves or anything really. I was just going and I was getting absolutely thrashed,” Lamberts said. “I just really fell in love with the ocean, and learning to respect it.”

While surfing can be relaxing there’s an awareness of being Black in these spaces that he keeps having every time he’s in the water. A thought only a person of color can understand, as Lamberts said, “I can be in the most beautiful expanses of nature. I can be in the ocean. I can be in the canyon somewhere. But due to living in this system and being traumatized by the system, and having to deal with this system, it’s like those things can’t escape.”

During the summer of 2021, Lamberts was invited to join the Santa Cruz Black Surf Club for their Juneteenth paddle out. There were 50 people in attendance who paddled out into the ocean, many of them for their first time.

“We went out and held a healing space in the water, reclaimed the space to find some healing in these spaces that are really Indigenous and African people,” he says, “Colonization has displaced us, and these places hold that trauma.”

For Lamberts, surfing is just one of the few things that he does in the ocean. He has been invited to the 30th annual National Association of Black Scuba Divers conference in Saint Lucia which he hopes to make contact with Diving with a Purpose, an organization that dives for sunken slave ships in the transatlantic slave trade route, to apply his scientific diving skills there.

Kunal Mehta

Years surfing: 1

Favorite surfing spot in Humboldt: Moonstone Beach

A beginner in the waters of Humboldt County, Kunal Mehta, 27, from the East Bay, began surfing local beaches about a year ago. The outdoors became this mystery for him.

“I don’t know how people get attached to doing things like skiing or snowboarding, I was attached to the water and the beach because it looked super fun,” Mehta said.

Mehta goes to College of the Redwoods where he is working on getting his construction and drafting certification. Prior to coming to Humboldt, he went to school in Pomona in Los Angeles County.

“In LA, the music and the culture really helped my music taste but my outdoor taste grew later in life,” he said.

Mehta was part of The Seas Backcountry Program, where they took him into the forest for six months to build trails. That’s when he found Arcata and fell in love with the area.

He got a used surfboard from a friend of a friend and got his wetsuit in exchange for a six-pack of beer. Now, Mehta works on his surfing skills whenever he gets the chance.

“I’m still exploring the area and I don’t want to go by myself because it’s dangerous,” he said.

Despite this, Mehta describes his experience surfing saying, “You get transported to another world — it’s otherworldly — I feel spiritual and connected to the world.”

How to get started surfing:

Equipment: HSU’s Center Activities rents surfing equipment such as boards and wetsuits to students and community members. People can rent a surfboard with a leash for \$10 a day or \$20 for the weekend. HSU students can also take advantage of the “surf package,” which includes a surfboard, wetsuit, booties and a leash for \$20 a day or \$32 for the weekend; non-students will need to pay \$26 a day and \$45 for the weekend.

Lessons: For people who want to get an instructor to go with them in the water, Pacific Outfitters offer a surfing class that includes a surfboard, wet suit, hood and booties (\$179.99+).

Tips regarding equipment: Benji Conrad, owner of Seven Seas Surf & Cycle in Sunnybrae, shares a few things people should keep in mind when out surfing in the waters of Humboldt county:

Invest in a 5mm wetsuit with a hood – the waters in Humboldt county are really cold.

Get a high volume board – they are easier to paddle and to catch waves

Always carry surf wax – this will keep the surfer from slipping off there board

Check the conditions of the beach you want to surf at – use websites such as magicseaweed.com to plan ahead

Don't be afraid to ask other surfers – strongly recommended if your new to the area because you might learn something you didn't know

Be aware of your surroundings – there are sharks in the waters and if you see one, get out of the water or if the waves are looking rough stay out.

To see images of the surfers in action visit www.ellenadornews.com

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