

Life is a Beach: San Diego Thinks About its Beaches
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Last November's KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll discovered that county residents feel the weather and the coastline are San Diego's best attributes. These two things make our beaches a tourist destination. But what do locals think about San Diego area beaches themselves?

San Diego County residents are generally pleased with their beaches. Over three-quarters rate them positively. Most residents visit a beach once a month or more with one-in-five hitting the shores at least weekly. On the other hand, despite the fact that most residents live within 25 miles of the coast, 20% go to the beach less than once per year or never visit it. Indeed, the beach is less attractive than it once was. When asked if they now go to the beach more often or less often than in the past, the vast majority say beach usage has dropped. Why? It seems that, as with so many San Diego features, the beaches are a little *too* attractive. The biggest culprit is overcrowding as 30% say they go less often or not at all due to the crowds. Ocean pollution is another substantial concern.

The survey also finds that beach-goers break into equal camps of active and passive visitors. The more passive group – which makes up 43% overall -- includes 18% who mainly take the kids, 16% who go to socialize, and 9% who go to sunbathe. The more active group (41% overall) includes 23% whose main activity is walking or running, 11% who go to swim, and 7% who surf. Boating and fishing are uncommon activities with less than 3% identifying these as their main beach activities.

Frequency of Beach Visits

Twenty percent of residents would be considered beach “junkies” showing up at local beaches at least once a week. On the other hand, 11% never go to the beach.

A number of factors are driving beach visitation. The most important is not a resident’s location or how much someone likes the beach but his or her age. Over two-thirds of San Diego adults under the age of 35 go to the beach at least once a month. Among 35 to 44 year-olds, half go at least once a month. But after age 45 monthly visitation drops precipitously until just 14% of those over 74 make it to the beach on a monthly basis. It is interesting to find that older beach-goers are actually *not* less active than younger ones. Elderly folks who hit the beach are just as likely as others to engage in swimming, or walking as younger folks. The difference is that fewer older residents go to the beach at all. The survey also finds that serious concerns about sun exposure cause many seniors (those 65 and older) to avoid the beach.

Another major factor impacting visitation is a resident’s proximity to the coast. Not surprisingly, those who live in coastal zip codes are far more likely to visit the beach regularly and nearly half visit at least once a week. Only 15% of those residing in inland zip codes make it to the beach as often. The question is whether people who happen to live near the beach become attracted to it and therefore make more use of it or whether people who like the beach move to coastal communities. This chicken and egg question cannot be entirely answered via the polling data. However, in view of the high degree of local transience, it is logical that people move to where their interests lie.

Those who rate the beaches highly are more likely to be frequent beach visitors than those who give them less than stellar ratings. In fact, among the few who give San Diego beaches a poor rating, 31% say they never go and another 46%

say they only go once or twice a year. On the other hand, 56% of those who say area beaches are excellent go once a month or more. The paradox here is that better beach maintenance makes beaches more attractive which in turn draws larger crowds and results in higher maintenance costs.

Income is a fourth factor that impacts beach visitation. While going to the beach would seem to be a cheap leisure activity, beach visitation is relatively infrequent among the lowest income households. Thirty-nine percent of those earning less than \$20,000 annually do not visit the beach in a given year and 24% making between \$20,000 and \$40,000 are not beach-goers. In contrast, only 6% among those making more than \$150,000 fall into the same category and over one-third hit the beach at least weekly! Now you know why you see so many people with metal detectors combing the sand: there is money at the beach.

When it comes to beach activities, surfers are the most prolific beach-goers. This is not a surprise to most San Diegans who know how religiously surfers will hit the beaches looking for the next wave. The data show that an amazing 56% of surfers hit the waves once a week or more and 15% can be found at the beach every day!

Interestingly, those who are registered to vote are slightly more likely to visit the beach. Previous KPBS/CERC polls have shown that voter registration is key to civic involvement and this is another variation on that theme. Perhaps this also reflects Councilmember and clean water activist Donna Frye's voter registration efforts.

Lastly, those who reside in the city of San Diego are more frequent beach-goers than those who live outside the city. Many of the county's most well-known beaches including Ocean Beach, Mission Beach, Pacific Beach, and La Jolla Shores are in the city of San Diego.

Visitation Trends

This Poll endeavored to find out whether visitation is trending up or down. The survey finds that by more than a 2:1 ratio folks say they are going to the beach less often than they did a decade ago. That ratio does not change among those who have been in the county less than ten years.

More than two-thirds of those over the age of 45 say their beach usage has dropped and well over half in the 65 and older crowd saying they now go *much less* often. The results for adults under the age of 45 tend to be mixed as substantial numbers say they are hitting the beach more often now. In fact, parity exists among residents in the 25 to 34 year-old age group as 45% claim to be going more often and 45% say they are going less often.

Geography also plays a role. The ratio of folks in north coastal areas who are going more often is about equal to the number of people going less often, indicating less attrition here. Proximity to the beaches that are usually less crowded than city beaches may be part of the explanation. The results from residents of the east suburbs are the exact opposite. Here, the less often/more often ratio is 5:1. Traffic and concerns about overcrowding may be leading to this decrease.

Again, overall beach ratings play an important – though secondary -- role. Clearly, county residents who determine that the beaches do not measure up are opting out of the beach experience. But it is a sign of the times that beach usage is apparently on the wane even among those who give local beaches good or excellent grade. For instance, though 32% who rate beaches as excellent admit they are going to the beach more often, 62% say they are going less often with 45% saying they are using the beach *much less often*.

Proving that riding the waves is addictive; surfers tend to buck the overall trend as half are now going to the beach more often.

San Diego County General Beach Rating

When asked how they would rate local beaches, residents tend to express pride as over three-quarters of residents rate them positively. In fact, as many residents rate beaches as excellent (20%) as the negative categories of “poor” and “only fair” combined (20%).

How residents evaluate beaches is only driven by one significant factor: income -- and even it is fairly weak -- indicating that impressions of beaches are fairly stable among various demographic groups. As for income, those making less than \$20,000 tend to give beaches more negative ratings than others as 26% rate them as only fair or poor. Although it should be noted that almost two-thirds of these residents still give beaches a positive rating, this reinforces the sense that the beach experience is at least partially tied to affluence.

While age and geography were major factors related to beach visitation, they are not statistically significant when it comes to rating county beaches. The data even shows that, while those who regularly make it to the shore think more highly of beaches, even more than half who never or rarely go to the beach give them good or excellent evaluations.

Favorite Beach Activities

The survey asked residents what they mainly do at the beach. Though there is no runaway favorite, four activities get into double-digits. Walking or running is the main beach activity of 23%, followed by taking the kids to the beach at 18%, socializing at 16%, and swimming at 11%. The two main activities that perhaps most folks think of regarding to the beach--sunbathing and surfing-- scored

relatively low at 9% and 7% respectively. Boating (2%) and fishing (1%) are the main choice of relatively few San Diegans.

Walking or Running

If you live near the coast, chances are relatively good that you are a beach walker or runner. Over one-third living in coastal zip codes identify this as their primary beach activity. Evidently, if you live near the beach, why not get your exercise there as well?

Take Kids

Not surprisingly, a resident's age largely determines whether they take kids to the beach. This is the main beach activity for 41% of San Diegans between the ages of 35 and 44, the main child-rearing years.

It is interesting to find that ideologically conservative residents take their kids to the beach far more often than moderates and liberals. Over a quarter of moderate conservatives and just over 20% of very conservative residents cite this as their top motivation for going to the beach.

Socialize

It is notable that 27% of adults between the ages of 18 and 24 identify this as their primary reason for going to the beach. This age discrepancy also explains the gap between registered voters who pick this as their top option (14%) and non-registered residents (21%), in that younger adults are less likely to be registered to vote.

Swim

This athletic activity seems to have a big following in the north suburbs (communities along the north I-15 corridor). Swimming is the main reason 20% of north suburb residents head to the beach, eclipsing walking or running as the top choice for this geographic region.

Swimming also seems to be preferred by younger adults. Sixteen percent of those under the age of 35 identify this as the main reason they go to the beach. After age 45 this figure drops into the single digits. Because ocean swimming requires more strength and stamina than pool swimming, older residents may not feel as up to taking on the challenge as their younger counterparts.

Sunbathe

While only 9% overall say they mainly go to the beach to catch some rays, a startling 26% of those in the east county give that as their main beach activity. Apparently, it is too hot to comfortably get a suntan in Descanso, Jamul and other backcountry locations.

Fourteen percent of adults under the age of 24, 13% of women and 13% of those earning more than \$100,000 annually cite sunbathing as the main reason they go to the beach. All these rates for tanning are significantly above average.

Surf

Traditional stereotypes win out here. The survey not only finds a gender gap in sunbathing with women preferring to go to the beach to tan but also a gender gap in surfing. While 11% of men surf, only 3% of women do.

Coastal proximity also plays a role as beach area residents identify surfing as their main beach activity much more often than others. While this may speak volumes about surfing's pull (i.e. people who surf tend to locate near the waves), it could also be that children who grow up near the water learn to surf and never move away.

The survey also clearly shows that surfing is more popular with the young. "Old guys rule" may be a popular expression at local beaches, but only 4% in the 35 to 44 year-old age range and 2% over the age of 55 are surfers. In contrast, more than one-in-ten among the 18 to 34 year-old crowd mainly go to the beach to surf. Looking at it another way, 80% of the surfers are under the age of 45.

Beach Concerns

The Poll explores four potential concerns that may limit beach visitation. Overall, we find that most people are either not concerned with the dangers or problems posed by the beach, or they deal with them and go anyway. Few San Diegans have not learned to deal with the problems in some way.

Crime

Of the four concerns tested, crime generates the least concern by far. Only 11% say they go less often because they are worried about crime and none are so concerned about crime that they do not go at all. On the flip side, 64% say crime does not worry them at all.

Beach proximity is a factor here, although not in the way that many might think. Conventional wisdom is that most crime happens at night and crime's greatest impact is felt in nearby neighborhoods. The survey finds though that those folks who live in coastal zip codes are *less* worried about crime at the beach than those in the rest of the county. This suggests that crime concerns related to the

beach are more media driven. Those outside the beach areas tend to get their news about the beach second hand and that news can tend to cast the area in a poor light. Still, while 14% say crime keeps them from hitting the beach more frequently, even 62% in the inland areas are not at all worried about beach crime.

Sun Exposure

A bit less than half admit that sun exposure is a concern. However, 31% say that, despite their concerns they hit the beach anyway. This probably reflects not only the heightened awareness of sun-related skin problems like premature aging and skin cancers, but also the rise of the use of sun block. Only 6% say they are concerned about sun exposure to the point that they do not go to the beach at all.

While women may be more likely to visit the beach to sunbathe than men, they are also more concerned about sun exposure at the beach. Two possible explanations come to mind: health organizations may have targeted women with their education efforts or women may be more intentional about tanning than men and therefore are more likely to self-educate about the risks.

Liberals are also more likely to be concerned about the risks of sun exposure than conservatives. This interesting finding may be driven by environmental concerns such as ozone depletion. It also may be that liberals tend to think more about social issues such as skin cancer awareness campaigns, etc.

Beach Overcrowding

As San Diego's population has increased and with beaches being a limited resource, crowds are now a major concern. Thirty percent say the prospect of crowds affects when they go to the beach with 4% saying they will not go at all to

avoid crowds. Only 40% say they are not concerned at all, leaving 27% expressing the “I-don’t-like-crowds-but-they-won’t-stop-me” attitude.

The one variable to rise above the noise is whether or not residents are paying attention to San Diego issues and politics. Those who are paying no attention are much less concerned about overcrowding. As noted in prior poll analysis, these folks are largely disconnected from civic affairs and see the world in a very different way and this is one more example of that.

Ocean Pollution

Ocean pollution generates the most concern as two-thirds say they worry about it. Just 20% are not concerned at all about ocean pollution. Again, however, residents generally work around these concerns (by reading posted alerts, not entering the water, etc.) and hit the beach anyway. Only about 8% are so concerned about pollution that they avoid the beach entirely.

Age is significant in determining concern levels with beach pollution in San Diego County. Adults over the age of 55 are not very concerned compared to adults under the age of 45. This may reflect the fact that environmental education in schools is a recent development.

There is also a significant ideological difference here with liberals significantly more worried about ocean pollution and conservatives less concerned.

Conclusions

San Diego residents are proud of their beaches. More than 75% of us rate them positively and half of us visit them at least monthly. Our beaches help to define us as a region and they ensure that San Diego will never be seen as just another metropolis.

It is surprising to find that age is such a key predictor of how often we go to the beach. Stronger than coastal proximity or even beach satisfaction, it appears to be an iron law that, as we age, we metaphorically distance ourselves from the beach. Our age not only impacts how often we go to the beach, it also impacts why we go to the beach. Younger folks go there to sunbathe, socialize, surf, and swim. Adults in their 30's and 40's take their kids, and older adults, when they do go, tend to walk or run.

There appears to be plenty in this research to support the realtors' notion of location, location, location as being preeminent when selecting a home. The beach is clearly a draw for many folks as those closer to the coast get far more use and enjoyment from the beach.

Gender also plays an interesting role as beach stereotypes are confirmed. Men tend to surf and while women tend to be working on their tans. While women like to soak up the sun they are also more worried about its effects.

As we have observed in other KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Polls, the growth pressures San Diego experiences manifest themselves when considering the beach. While the beach is popular, it is becoming less of an attraction and some of that is due to overcrowding. The trick is for San Diego to maintain and improve its signature resources in the face of larger and larger beach crowds.