

What to Do with Your Toxic Surfboard

By Patrick Daugherty | Published Wednesday, Sept. 22, 2010



"I didn't know there was a problem." That's me speaking.

"Surfboards are toxic — they're incredibly toxic. The nature of surfing is, you have a board, you break it, you chuck it, and then you get a new one. Many surfers have multiple surfboards. It's a big problem."

On the telephone is Lisa Carpenter, 33, cofounder of Rerip, a North County outfit that started life four years ago as a proto-Craigslist for used surfboards and is mutating into a nonprofit with an eye toward greening surfboards.

"What makes a surfboard so toxic?"

"You have fiberglass, polyurethane, and PU [polyurethane foam]. It takes a trillion years to biodegrade," Carpenter laughs. "I'm not sure how long, but it's a long time.

"There's the process of glassing the surfboard: you put fiberglass on, put resin on top of that. Now, the entire system is non-recyclable: chemicals from glass and resins seep into the foam, which can't be separated or reused and doesn't biodegrade, so it sits in landfill forever.

"It's bad for the person who shapes the board; he's exposed to carcinogens, dust in the air that's going to be inhaled, the resins and fiberglass...it's not a clean activity."

"What's going on to clean it up?"

Carpenter says, "There are soy-based surfboard blanks [a blank is the rough shape of a surfboard, traditionally made of polyurethane foam]. So, instead of polyurethane there is a plant alternative. They're not perfect: they're still toxic to a certain degree, but they're better. People are using agave wood, balsa is coming back, some people are using bamboo."

"What is it about surfboards that makes it so hard to create a biodegradable model?"

Carpenter says, "A lot of it is finding materials that will perform the way surfers are used to materials performing. A lot of it is cost. If you get an agave board — which is completely biodegradable — or a balsa board, you're looking at \$1000 per board."

“If I’m living in El Cajon and I’ve never surfed, why should I care about this?”

“Well, it’s your landfill too,” Carpenter says. “We have limited resources, we have limited space in landfill. Even if you live in El Cajon you like coming to the ocean. It’s our communal water. A dirty board affects everybody.”

I wonder, “Since surfboards aren’t recyclable, what is it that you do with them?”

“We use the term ‘recycle,’ but it may be more appropriate to say ‘reuse,’” Carpenter says. “We have surfboard-collection spots set up around North County. If they’re rideable, we’ll fix them and get them to a young surfer who can’t afford a new board. If they’re not rideable, we have a ton of artists doing art with surfboards. If they’re broken beyond that, we’re working with companies doing research and development. They can use those surfboards.”

Carpenter was born and raised in Encinitas, attended undergraduate and graduate school at San Diego State, finished with a master’s in public health. “Tell me about your work background.”

Carpenter says, “Ten years of lifeguarding, four of which were full-time lifeguarding. I’ve been surfing since I was 14.”

“What was the moment that you got into this?”

“When I was still lifeguarding, we had a big swell — a big winter — and I looked at the boards that were getting thrown in the trash, looked at my coworkers who owned 18 boards apiece, and thought, There has to be a better way. My business partner Meghan Dambacher and I decided to create an online venue like Craigslist focusing on what surfers are looking for.”

“I’ll be the middle man for people buying and selling surfboards.”

“Exactly, a Craigslist for surfers. But then we evolved. There’s so much toxicity, so much trash, and people don’t get it. I didn’t get it when we started. I didn’t understand the extent of it. Now, we’ve filed paperwork to become a nonprofit so we can grow the surfboard-recycling program. Still have the online classifieds, but our focus is on environmental issues facing the industry.

“In the end we’d like to see the right materials being used in surfboard production, so that the surfboard, when it’s done being a surfboard, can have a new life as something else. A complete cycle where we’re not putting anything in the trash. Whether that means the surfboard is completely biodegradable or that means the surfboard’s components are perfectly positioned to be insulation in a house, we want to see a cycle that instead of being cradle to grave is cradle to cradle.”

Readers are invited to Solana Beach on Saturday to enjoy Rerip’s fourth annual “Future of Surfing” event featuring music, giveaways, art, green surfing paraphernalia, and more. Hie thee to rerip.com for particulars.