

## **SSUSA Surf Safety**

by Ben Rayner

Though most people think of surfing as a sport for lone participants and those who want to be free of constraint and authority, there are actually a number of rules and guidelines that not only make surfing enjoyable, but more importantly safer.

Surfing in general is one of the safest pastimes Americans participate in. You are actually more likely to be injured donning or removing your wetsuit than to be injured surfing, but by obeying the few rules of water etiquette, you can avoid injury and conflict in the water.

To start, know your area's rules and regulations. Many beaches have designated sections for surfing and postings/signs as to where it is and isn't allowed. If you are traveling to spots outside your home breaks, take the time to research that area's rules and guidelines.

### **Use a leash.**

A leash keeps your board from running away from you and being damaged and from hitting fellow surfers. Like ski brakes, a leash is vital to safety and at some beaches is a requirement for use of the waves. Though many old timers do not use a leash and some even consider it "cheating", in today's crowded line ups it is essential.

### **Never abandon your board.**

Getting past the breaking waves or impact zone, is one of the most essential surfing skills. A surfer must learn to duck dive under breaking white water in order to get into a surfing position. When doing this never let your board go or allow it to be ripped from your grasp. An eight foot surfboard with an eight foot leash means there is a sixteen foot danger radius around you. Letting go of your board in order to get through a wave endangers fellow surfers just as if you didn't have a leash. If you cannot get past breaking waves without ditching your board, the surf is beyond your abilities and you should not surf that swell.

### **Paddling Out.**

When a surfer paddles out (getting into position to catch a wave in the line up) there are rules that guide how this should be done. Never paddle out through "the pack" of other surfers. This prevents other surfers from taking off on a wave and causes collisions. When paddling out maneuver your surf board away from the take off zone and away from other surfers and then paddle parallel to the shore to get into position. It is the responsibility of the surfer who is paddling out to keep out of the way of surfers who are attempting to catch waves. This often means that paddling surfers must take the breaking part of the wave on them. It is not safe to cut across the path of a surfer on a wave to avoid the breaking white water.

### **Wave Priority.**

There are rules that determine who "gets a wave." The surfer farthest out has priority over other surfers. Never attempt to take off on a wave that another surfer is standing up on or has priority of. This is not only an issue of etiquette, but of safety as well.

Waves break either right or left. This means that the white water of the breaking wave is either moving left or right in relation to the shore (Right or left is from the

surfer's perspective, not from the shore.). The surfer closest to the white water has priority. A surfer should never take off in front of a surfer who is in position. This is called "dropping in" and is the ultimate transgression in surfing. This means that if you are on a wave that is breaking to the right and there is a surfer to your left attempting to take off, it is their wave. In turn the opposite is true. If you are taking off on a wave that is breaking left and there is a surfer on your right, it is their wave and you should stop paddling for it. Sometimes, especially in larger surf, two surfers take off on the same wave inadvertently. In this situation, it is the responsibility of the surfer without the priority to safely exit the wave and allow the surfer behind them to catch the wave. If you are whistled at or shouted at in this situation pull over the top of the wave or into the wave to get out of the priority surfer's way. It is also a good idea to find the surfer you have dropped in on and apologize. This can go a long way toward easing tensions and keeping the line up safe. In some conditions waves will break both right and left. In this situation make sure fellow surfers know which way you are attempting to catch the wave. Shout "going right" or "going left" on waves that break in this manner. These are known as A-Frame waves and there often is a compact take off zone with multiple surfers vying for a wave. In shifting tides and peaks, a surfer may not know until the last few seconds which way they are going. Let other surfers know your intentions and also know when to pull off a wave in this situation if it means stealing priority from another surfer.



The above photo is a classic example of a surfer "dropping in". The surfer on the left of this photo has dropped in on the priority surfer. In fact, though it is not shown, the surfer on the left appears to be so concerned with another surfer out of frame "stealing his wave" that he is not even aware that he has dropped in on someone else. From this photo it is obvious why this is not only rude, but a hazard as well.

#### **Don't "snake" waves from fellow surfers.**

This means don't steal priority from another surfer. Snakes will paddle into a priority position either by going farther out or shifting to the right or left of a priority surfer at the last moment in order to catch a wave. This is also a serious transgression. If you have just paddled out, don't immediately put yourself into the priority position. Other surfers have been waiting their turn and you must as well. If you are in a priority position and for any reason decide that you are not going to attempt to catch the wave, let your fellow surfers know. Shout, "It's your wave" or "take it". Nothing causes more frustration in a line up as when a surfer who has priority backs off a wave at the last second and a wave goes through "unridden". Other surfers will not be inclined to give you priority or to let you have a wave if you do not take your turn.

#### **Who gets priority when there are swimmers and kayakers?**

This is a difficult question that has several answers and which unfortunately water sport enthusiasts rarely follow. Swimmers have priority. Do not paddle out into an area where people are swimming. Conversely, don't swim out into a pack of surfers. This is a

touchy subject as both users typically will ignore the other. If you are surfing and a swimmer comes out into the line up, it is recommended that you ask them politely to leave as their safety is at issue. It is very easy to run over a swimmer on a surf board and not even be aware of it. Another issue that causes many problems in the line up are kayakers and paddle craft. Users of this equipment should not be near surfers. Unfortunately, most users of these craft are not aware of this rule. A kayaker should not be in a line up with surfers. Many ignore or are unaware of this potential safety problem. If a kayaker paddles into a line up, surfers should politely ask them to leave. Surfers are restricted to small areas where waves are ride-able, swimmers and kayakers have a much greater expanse in which to enjoy the water. In the order of priority it is swimmer, surfer, and then paddle craft. Disputes should be managed with politeness and consideration.



This photo of a Long Island surf break offers some excellent advice and a generalization of surfing rules.

**Surfers should also know the danger signs of drowning and emergency situations.**

It is a good idea to learn CPR and resuscitation techniques if you pursue surfing. Keep an eye out for fellow surfers and water enthusiasts. If you see someone who is beyond their abilities say something. It is much easier to avoid an emergency than it is to deal with it after it has occurred. You may get an abusive response or a dirty look, but being sworn at is much easier than performing CPR.

Know the signs of aquatic distress.

When a board “tombstones” this is a signal that someone is drowning. If a surfer has become unconscious and the water is deep enough, their board will often tip up into the air, raising the top half out of the water like a tombstone. The surfer is unconscious and dragging along the bottom and is in need of immediate rescue. Find the leash and pull them to the surface. Unfortunately, surfers have drowned in the middle of a pack of other surfers with no one taking notice. Don’t surf alone if at all possible. Do not surf at night. Do not surf beyond your abilities. Know the currents. It is a good idea to spend a few minutes on the beach watching for currents and rips before entering the water, even if it is at a spot where you accustomed to surfing.

Know what rip currents are and how to address them. In some situations a rip current can be used as a means to easily access the line up, in others it can kill even an experienced surfer.

By Ben Rayner  
Survival Systems USA

**Survival Systems USA offers a wide array of courses for those who are on or over the water. Please go to our course section to find out more, including CPR, AED and first aid courses.**