

# Lived Experiences and Career Decision-Making of Surf Instructors in Siargao Island, Philippines: A Phenomenological Study

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## ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences and career decision-making processes of surf instructors in Barangay Union, Dapa, Siargao Island, Philippines. The research aimed to understand how instructors construct meaning, navigate socio-economic and environmental challenges, and make life and career choices within a tourism-driven coastal community. Ten licensed local surf instructors participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, resulting in five interrelated themes: (1) Physical Demands, Fitness, and Motivation; (2) Performance Development

and Skill Refinement; (3) Socio-Economic Realities and Career Motivations; (4) Environmental Sustainability and Psychological Well-Being; and (5) Reflections, Values, and Aspirations. The findings indicate that surf instruction extends beyond livelihood, representing a lifestyle grounded in autonomy, purpose, and connection to nature. Participants reported strong attachment to the ocean, fostering resilience, patience, and environmental consciousness. Despite financial instability and seasonality, instructors remained motivated by cultural identity, community pride, and the fulfilment derived from teaching others. The study concludes that surf instructors function as cultural ambassadors, mentors, and environmental stewards within Siargao's evolving tourism landscape. It recommends structured programs supporting professional development, sustainable tourism initiatives, and cultural preservation. These findings contribute to limited literature on surf instructors lived experiences and provide insights into socio-cultural and environmental dimensions of emerging coastal tourism contexts.

**Keywords:** *phenomenology, surf instructors, lived experiences, career decision making, Siargao Island, sustainable tourism*

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## INTRODUCTION

The motivation to study the lived experiences of surf instructors in Union, Dapa, Siargao Island came from observing how deeply surfing has shaped both the identity and livelihood of the community. While Siargao is celebrated internationally as a surfing capital, little attention has been given to the personal stories of the instructors who sustain this culture and economy. As students from the same locality, we were inspired by how these individuals balance their passion for surfing with the challenges of unstable income, seasonal tourism, and limited career opportunities. This reality, coupled with the lack of scholarly literature focusing on their voices, prompted us to explore and document their narratives. By doing so, we hope to provide a richer understanding of how surf instructors make sense of their lives, careers, and roles within a rapidly changing tourism landscape.

In addition, across the Philippines' more remote coastal communities, surf culture has evolved from a tourism trend into a way of life. It shapes not only the daily rhythms of these communities but also the identities and career paths of individuals who find meaning in the waves. In the pristine shores of Union in Dapa, Siargao Island, which is an emerging surf destination within the growing influence of the island, surf instructors hold a unique and often overlooked role. They are not merely athletes or guides. But, they serve as mediators of local culture, economic providers for their families, and navigators of uncertain futures in a tourism economy driven by short-term engagements.

Despite their important contributions, there is limited scholarly attention on the personal, social, and economic experiences of these instructors. Specifically, little is known about how they arrive at their career decisions, why they choose or continue this path, and how their identity, aspirations, and environment influence those choices (Espinosa et al., 2021). Most of the existing literature on local tourism focuses on environmental sustainability or tourist behavior, which leaves a gap in understanding the human stories of those who sustain the surf industry (Soriano et al., 2023). What does it truly mean to be a surf instructor in this context? More deeply, how does one live, face challenges, and make choices in a setting where the sea defines opportunities?

Moreover, surf instruction is often seen as a casual or short-term job. However, it may represent a deeper connection to lifestyle, independence, and community involvement (Reyes & Antonio, 2021). Many young people in island communities pursue careers that reflect their personal identities and attachment to place, rather than following traditional forms of employment. This perspective challenges the common belief that tourism work is based solely on financial needs, suggesting instead that emotional and cultural satisfaction play an important role in career choices.

Furthermore, the seasonal nature of tourism and the instability of informal work often cause emotional and psychological stress for workers in coastal areas. According to David et al. (2020), tourism workers in vulnerable locations frequently face hidden challenges, such as a lack of social protection, job insecurity during off-seasons, and limited access to formal labor rights. Gaining an understanding of how surf instructors deal with these issues is essential for creating inclusive and supportive labor policies in the tourism industry.

Finally, the presence or absence of institutional and community support significantly influences the career experience of surf instructors. Lagumbay and De Vera (2022) observed that surf instructors and guides in rural areas often feel neglected by both the education system and tourism policies, despite their vital role in the success of the industry. Their voices deserve to be recognized not only as surf professionals but as active participants in the economy, culture, and ongoing development of their communities.

Therefore, this qualitative phenomenological study aims to explore and understand the lived experiences and career decision-making processes of surf instructors in Union, Dapa, Siargao Island. Specifically, it seeks to uncover their motivations, challenges, identity formation, and the socio-cultural factors that influence their career choices through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design grounded in Husserl's descriptive phenomenology (Husserl, 1913/2012) to explore the lived experiences and career decision-making of surf instructors in Barangay Union, Dapa, Siargao Island. Descriptive phenomenology was appropriate because it allowed the researchers to capture the essence of participants' experiences without imposing prior interpretations. Researchers practiced epoché (bracketing) to set aside assumptions, ensuring that participants' voices remained central and authentic.

### **Research Setting**

The study was conducted at Paradise Surf Spot, Purok 1, Barangay Union, Dapa, Siargao Island. Unlike commercialized surf areas, Union offers a community-centered environment where surf instructors maintain strong local ties. Its sandy shores and moderate reef breaks create ideal conditions for beginner and intermediate surfers, making it a natural hub for surf instruction.

Union experiences a tropical climate with two main seasons: the dry months (March–May) favor smaller waves, while the surf season (August–November) produces larger swells. These seasonal changes influenced participants' work opportunities, income stability, and career decisions. Beyond environmental conditions, Union's culture of bayanihan and hospitality shaped social dynamics, reflecting how surfing serves as both livelihood and community identity.

### **Participants and Sampling**

Participants were licensed local surf instructors residing and working in Barangay Union. A purposive sampling technique was used to select instructors who were actively teaching, had at least one year of professional experience, participated in local surfing competitions, and resided in Barangay Union. The sample included both novice and experienced instructors to capture diverse perspectives.

A total of ten participants were recruited, with sample size determined based on data saturation, consistent with phenomenological research standards (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes, conducted in settings familiar to participants to ensure comfort and authenticity. An interview guide was developed with the research adviser's guidance to maintain clarity, focus, and neutrality.

Prior to formal data collection, pilot interviews were conducted with non-participant surf community members to refine questions. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and detailed field notes captured non-verbal cues. Member checking was performed to validate the accuracy of transcriptions and interpretations.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Due to limited access to qualitative software, analysis was conducted manually. Steps included:

*Transcription and Familiarization:* Interviews were transcribed verbatim and read multiple times.

*Coding:* Recurring patterns and meaningful statements were highlighted and assigned codes.

*Category Formation:* Related codes were grouped into broader categories.

*Theme Development:* Overarching themes were identified to capture the essence of participants lived experiences and career decision-making processes.

To enhance credibility, findings were triangulated with existing literature on surf tourism, coastal livelihoods, and lifestyle sports.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical standards were strictly adhered to. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality procedures. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect identities, and all data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. The study followed ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

*Trustworthiness* was established based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria:

*Credibility:* Achieved through member checking and prolonged engagement with participants.

*Transferability:* Rich descriptions of context and participants allow readers to assess applicability to other settings.

*Dependability:* Transparent documentation of procedures ensured consistency and replicability.

*Confirmability:* Reflexivity and an audit trail minimized researcher bias and enhanced objectivity.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study presents the key findings from interviews with ten surf instructors in Barangay Union, Dapa, Siargao Island. Their stories revealed five major themes describing their lived experiences, challenges, and motivations as surf instructors. The discussion connects these themes with related literature to illustrate how surfing shapes their identity, livelihood, and sense of purpose.

**Table 1: Summary of Emergent Themes and Supporting Insights**

Theme	Description	Supporting Insights / Participant Reflections
1. Physical Demands, Fitness, and Motivation in Surfing	Surfing is both a passion and a livelihood that promotes physical fitness, discipline, and emotional fulfillment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “I just tried surfing for fun, and it turned out great.”</li> <li>- “Surfing gives me freedom. It’s not like other jobs full of pressure.”</li> <li>- Surfing brings pride and social acceptance in the community.</li> </ul>
2. Performance Analysis and Athlete Development	Surf instructors develop endurance, patience, and mental resilience through constant exposure to the ocean’s rhythm.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Life is simple—teach, surf, eat, sleep, repeat—but I’m happy.”</li> <li>- “The more you surf, the stronger you become.”</li> <li>- Instructors gain emotional rewards from helping students succeed.</li> </ul>
3. Socio-Economic Realities and Career Motivations	Instructors face financial challenges but find purpose and belonging through surfing and teaching.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Sometimes it’s tough, but when there are many students, it’s okay.”</li> <li>- “Siargao is home. I was born here, and this is where I want to continue my life.”</li> <li>- They aspire to open surf schools and mentor the youth.</li> </ul>
4. Environmental Sustainability	Surfing promotes mindfulness,	- “Surfing helped change my

and Psychological Well-being	ecological awareness, and community solidarity.	attitude—I’ve become more patient.” - “Our family taught us to care for the sea.” - “It’s more than work—it’s like family. We help each other.”
5. Reflections, Values, and Aspirations	Surfing represents peace, purpose, and life philosophy; instructors act as community role models.	- “Every student who stands on the board feels like my own achievement.” - “Kids look up to surf instructors, so we have to set a good example.” - “Success for me is peace and being near the ocean.”

**Theme 1: Physical Demands, Fitness, and Motivation in Surfing**

***Intrinsic Passion and Joy in Surfing***

“I just tried surfing for fun, and it turned out great, that’s why I continued.” (R1)  
 “At first, it was just a hobby, but later I realized this is where I want to stay because it’s peaceful and makes me happy.” (R3)

Surf instructors often described surf work as beginning with intrinsic curiosity and enjoyment before evolving into meaningful livelihood. This aligns with research indicating that intrinsic motivation and enjoyment are key components of sport participation and long-term engagement, contributing to both psychological well-being and sustained involvement in physically demanding activities (Román et al., 2022; Wheaton, 2004).

***Freedom and Lifestyle Preference***

“Surfing gives me freedom. It’s not like other jobs that are full of pressure.” (R4)  
 “I want to be under the sun, near the sea, and see people smiling every day.” (R7)

Participants emphasized the lifestyle freedom and joy they derive from surf instruction. Studies on leisure sports and place-based occupations highlight that lifestyle preferences and autonomy play significant roles in career choice and satisfaction, especially in professions tied to natural environments (Manero et al., 2024; Elmahdy et al., 2024).

### ***Community and Family Acceptance***

*“At first, they weren’t sure because they thought there wasn’t much money in it. But now, they’re proud of me.” (R1) “The community is happy because we promote Siargao. They support us because surfing brings tourists and jobs.” (R8)*

Support from family and community reinforces instructors’ career commitment. This finding reflects literature showing that social endorsement and recognition of cultural-economic contributions strengthen local identity and professional persistence in tourism and sport occupations (Hritz, 2018; Bandoles, 2021).

## **Theme 2: Performance Analysis and Athlete Development**

### ***Rhythm of Daily Life by the Ocean***

*“I wake up early, check the waves, then prepare for lessons. Here in Union, every morning feels so lively.” (R1) “Life is simple, teach, surf, eat, sleep, repeat but I’m happy.” (R6)*

Daily routines shaped by environmental conditions reflect how place and natural rhythms inform work patterns. Lifestyle sports research emphasizes that engagement with nature and structured daily activity influences well-being and professional identity (Román et al., 2022).

### ***Endurance and Adaptation to Physical Demands***

*“When I’m tired, I just take a short rest. You can’t force your body too much.” (R2) “Surfing itself is the exercise. The more you surf, the stronger you become.” (R3)*

Participants framed physical challenge as part of their embodied work. Surfing research documents that repeated physical engagement enhances endurance and adaptation over time, supporting both performance and occupational identity (Secomb et al., 2015; Lorimer et al., 2013).

### ***Growth through Human Connection***

*“They teach me patience and kindness. Not everyone learns at the same speed.” (R2) “When students say thank you, it makes me proud it’s worth my effort.” (R8)*

Interactions with students and tourists were described as emotionally rewarding and growth-enhancing. This resonates with literature showing that interpersonal connection in outdoor sport professions contributes to emotional resilience and a sense of accomplishment (Elmahdy et al., 2024).

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### **Theme 3: Socio-Economic Realities and Career Motivations**

#### ***Decision-Making and Opportunity Management***

*“It depends on the waves and weather. If it’s safe and in good condition, I’ll accept it.” (R1)*  
*“You don’t have to accept every opportunity you should know how to manage your time.” (R6)*

Surf instructors make pragmatic decisions based on environmental conditions and workload management, reflecting broader findings that livelihood strategies among coastal tourism workers are highly adaptive and contingent on natural and market conditions (Hritz, 2018).

#### ***Financial Stability and Resilience***

*“Sometimes it’s tough, but when there are many students, it’s okay. I just save for the off-season.” (R2)*  
*“If I have budget problems, I take side jobs, but surfing remains my main work.” (R6)*

Participants acknowledged economic fragility but emphasized resilience strategies. Research on informal tourism labor notes that seasonal income insecurity is a common constraint, yet workers often balance multiple income sources to sustain livelihoods (Mach, 2021; Román et al., 2022).

#### ***Future Aspirations and Commitment to Place***

*“Siargao is home. I was born here, and this is where I want to continue my life.” (R1)*  
*“I stay because I’m proud to be from Siargao. This is where I found my purpose.” (R6)*

Strong attachment to place and cultural identity emerged as central to career persistence. Place-based identity theory suggests that emotional bonds to landscapes and community can influence occupational resilience and long-term commitment (Román et al., 2022; Bandoles, 2021).

### **Theme 4: Environmental Sustainability and Psychological Well-Being**

#### ***Personal Growth and Emotional Resilience***

*“At first, I was shy to approach tourists, but now I’m confident guiding them.” (R2)*  
*“Surfing really helped change my attitude; I’ve become more patient.” (R3)*

Participants described personal development and enhanced emotional stability tied to their work. Studies show that prolonged engagement with nature and sport practices enhances psychological well-being, self-efficacy, and emotional regulation (Manero et al., 2024; Moreton et al., 2021).

#### ***Cultural Identity and Community Connection***

*“Surf culture gives Siargao its identity not just for tourism but also for local pride.” (R4)*

Surf culture was framed as integral to community identity. Cultural tourism research supports that shared practices and meanings contribute to local pride and collective identity (Mach, 2021).

### ***Environmental Awareness and Sustainable Values***

*“Our family taught us to care for the sea, that’s what I pass on to students.” (R5)*

Environmental care was described both as value and practice. Literature on coastal sports identifies pro-environmental stewardship among participants as part of their engagement with natural settings (Wheaton, 2004).

### ***Social Belonging and Collective Well-Being***

*“It’s more than just work, it’s like family. We help each other, in the water and in life.” (R6)*

Social cohesion and collective support were highlighted as sources of well-being. Research indicates that strong social networks within sport and tourism foster community resilience and mutual support (Elmahdy et al., 2024).

## **Theme 5: Reflections, Values, and Aspirations**

### ***Finding Purpose and Joy in Teaching***

*“Every student who learns to stand on the board feels like my own achievement.” (R3)*

Teaching was perceived as personally meaningful. Education and sport literature suggests that mentorship roles in outdoor settings can enhance life satisfaction and meaning (Moreton et al., 2021).

### ***Role Modeling and Inspiring the Youth***

*“The kids here look up to surf instructors, so we really have to set a good example.” (R5)*

Participants positioned themselves as role models, reinforcing community values. Community identity research supports that visible local practitioners can shape youth aspirations and cultural continuity (Román et al., 2022).

### ***Redefining Success and Contentment***

*“Before, I thought success was about money. Now, I see success as being happy with what you do.” (R2)*

Instructors redefined success through wellbeing and satisfaction rather than financial gain, consistent with studies on lifestyle sports and subjective well-being (Wheaton, 2004).

### ***Dreams for the Future***

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*“In five to ten years, I hope to have a small surf business and a family.” (R4)*

Future aspirations combined economic goals with personal and familial values, reflecting how occupational identities are integrated with life trajectory and community belonging (Román et al., 2022).

## CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study provided an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and career decision-making processes of surf instructors in Barangay Union, Dapa, Siargao Island. Through semi-structured interviews with ten licensed local instructors, the study revealed that surf instruction extends beyond economic livelihood, representing a way of life rooted in freedom, purpose, and connection to the ocean. Participants demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and environmental consciousness, navigating challenges posed by seasonal work, financial instability, and the physical demands of surfing.

The analysis highlighted five interrelated themes: (1) physical demands, fitness, and intrinsic motivation; (2) performance development and skill refinement; (3) socio-economic realities and career motivations; (4) environmental sustainability and psychological well-being; and (5) reflections, values, and future aspirations. These themes collectively illustrate how surf instructors construct personal and professional identities, foster community pride, and contribute to Siargao’s cultural and environmental landscape.

Findings underscore that surf instructors act as cultural ambassadors, mentors, and environmental stewards, shaping both the local tourism industry and community cohesion. Their commitment to place, attachment to surf culture, and dedication to teaching others reveal the complex interplay between identity, livelihood, and lifestyle in coastal tourism contexts.

The study recommends that local government units, tourism councils, and educational institutions implement structured programs to support surf instructors’ professional development, ensure financial and occupational stability, and integrate environmental stewardship and cultural preservation. Such initiatives can enhance sustainable tourism practices, reinforce community identity, and empower future generations of surf instructors.

Overall, this research contributes to the limited scholarly literature on surf instructor’s lived experiences in emerging tourism destinations, providing insights into how individuals negotiate meaning, career decisions, and well-being in tourism-driven coastal communities. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing surf instructors not merely as workers but as integral participants in the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental fabric of Siargao Island.

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## IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have several important implications for coastal tourism management, community development, and educational programs. First, surf instructors play a crucial role as cultural mediators, mentors, and environmental stewards, highlighting the need to integrate their perspectives into tourism planning and policy-making. Recognizing their contributions can strengthen community identity, enhance visitor experiences, and promote sustainable tourism practices.

Second, the study underscores the significance of place-based career satisfaction and well-being in lifestyle professions. Support mechanisms such as structured training programs, financial planning resources, and safety guidelines can enhance instructors' professional resilience and reduce occupational stress associated with seasonal and informal work.

Third, the narratives reveal a strong emphasis on environmental awareness and sustainability. Tourism councils and local governments should develop initiatives that encourage ecological stewardship, such as community-based beach clean-ups, environmental education for students, and sustainable surf tourism certifications.

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