



Most of the children's parents avoided the ocean, afraid of Siargao's powerful waves. But surfing with Balikbayod has created a relationship between the children and the sea. They have learned to navigate their home breaks and respect the ocean.

BALIKBAYOD: RETURNING WAVE

NYX MARTINEZ discovers how a group of balikbayans was able to surf to their hearts' content while teaching local kids about respect for nature.

"Have you ever traveled to surf in other countries and noticed that the local children have an interest in surfing but don't have access to surf boards?" asks Mercy Cormier, one of the volunteers with Balikbayod, a California-based nonprofit organization. "We did notice, and our goal is to begin in the Philippines by bringing donated surfboards to the youth of the Siargao Cloud 9 area."

Siargao, an island in northeastern Mindanao, is a popular destination for traveling surfers. Known for its quality "world-class wave breaks," it hosts yearly international surf competitions. But like so many tourist destinations in the region, one can't ignore those who call Siargao home. Kids often wander the beach, watching surfers, and wanting to ride those waves, too.

Balikbayod (literally translated to "returning wave") promotes giving back to the local community by donating surfboards and time surfing with the village children.

Filipino-American founder Lynn Bryant started it all in 2007 when her first surfing trip to Siargao brought her into contact with the locals. She called on her surfer friends in California to figure out a way to help. They collected old surfboards and created a "library" for Siargao youth to borrow the boards.

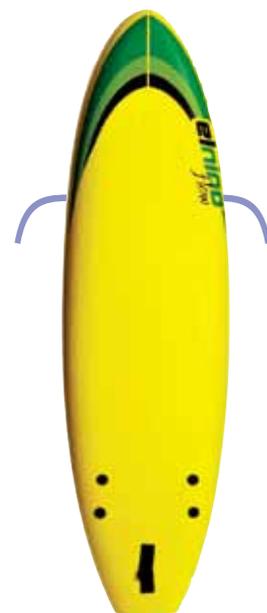
But with surfing becoming such a popular and lucrative pastime for local kids, many of them

were dropping out of school to surf. The solution came from local teachers. "Why not incorporate an incentive to stay in school?" they suggested. With this insight, Balikbayod improved their library program, allowing only kids in school to borrow the boards—and to surf after school hours only.

"We feel it's a good start to encouraging the kids to stay or re-enroll in school," says Mercy. "But it will be an ongoing challenge. We promote that school is just as important as surfing. Children can live their lives as surfers, but [they] should also have other goals and aspirations, which [education] can help them achieve."

As far as recent success stories, Mercy tells us that four of the Balikbayod participants passed the ALS Accreditation and Equivalency tests, and are now moving up to high school. The ALS (Alternative Learning System) is a re-enrollment program that children can attend if they have dropped out of school. Besides acing the exams, these kids have also developed greater respect and self-confidence from learning to share and work with their peers.

"Volunteering while traveling is a responsible way of giving back to a community, as well as connecting with our Filipino ties," beams Mercy. "We share languages with the kids—English, Visayan, Tagalog, and Surigaonan. But best of all, we share a passion for surfing and sharing the waves."



HOW YOU CAN HELP

Although the surfboards are donated, shipping them to Siargao costs a considerable amount. Plus, the cost of materials for repair and accessories, adds up. Contribute your time or donations by getting in touch with Balikbayod at www.balikbayod.wordpress.com or www.facebook.com/groups/returningwave/. Balikbayod is affiliated with the San Francisco-Filipino Cultural Center.



A 2011 German study has shown that active participation in sports not only makes children healthy and smart, but also reduces their emotional and peer problems (www.voxeu.org).