Surfers dream of the perfect wave, and inventors try to match the ocean

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.24.16
Word Count 791

LOS ANGELES, Calif. — Surfers had never seen a spot like it: head-high waves for more than a quarter-mile without anyone to catch them.

But something about the scene was odd. Between the waves, ducks floated in calm water the color of tea. And the waves didn’t have the bumps, boils and warbles that ruin even the cleanest ocean waves.

That’s because they were not ocean waves. They did not come from a storm out at sea. Instead, these waves came from a machine on a patch of old farmland.

Within a week after 11-time world champion Kelly Slater uploaded video of himself riding the wave in December, it had 9 million views from around the world.
Imagine Perfect Waves, All The Time

Every surfer daydreams about a perfectly shaped wave that he or she can ride again and again. Especially when most surfing spots are pretty crowded. Or, worse yet, when surfers are stuck inland.

Business people fantasize about the cash they could make with ideas that solve these problems. The sport and lifestyle of surfing already have spawned an industry worth tens of billions of dollars. It includes specialized equipment, clothing, media and global tourism.

Rival teams of technological innovators are trying like never before to bring the sport to new places. For 10 years, Slater had been working with a team that includes a University of Southern California aerospace engineer to beat competitors in Spain, Germany, Australia and San Diego.

He hasn’t won the race. It’s not clear how many waves an hour his pool can produce, or how much energy is consumed doing it. But he cleared a hurdle no one else has.

Inventor's "Secret Spot" Discovered

“That wave is exactly the fantasy wave I drew on the margins of my notebooks when I was in high school,” says Surfer magazine editor Steve Hawk.

Slater kept his “secret spot” a mystery. He didn’t say where it was, other than “110 miles from the coast.” But surfers and surf media know his company warehouse is in Los Angeles. So, they did their own detective work. They figured out his secret spot is outside the Central Valley town of Lemoore. This area was used for water skiing.

Surfers from California to Australia traveled to see the wave, only to be turned away by a locked gate and a security guard. Slater hasn’t said if the wave pool will be open to the public.

“When I saw Slater's wave for the first time, it almost made me feel dizzy, like vertigo,” says Matt Warshaw, a surf writer and author of “The Encyclopedia of Surfing.” “This changes fundamental things about how we feel about surfing.”

Artificial Waves Not Very Successful

Surfing is a popular sport. Yet ocean conditions are not always ideal, so surfers have long dreamed of artificial waves. The first wave park for U.S. surfers opened in Tempe, Arizona, in 1969. The wave was formed by the sudden release of millions of gallons of water down a 40-foot column into the pool through underwater grates, creating a pulse that rolled to the other side and broke as the depth got shallower.

The rides were small and mushy. The pool catered mostly to children and non-surfers who enjoyed frolicking in the water on inflatable rafts and boogie boards.
It wasn't until 2011 that the surf world first saw at a decent-size, great-shaped artificial wave. By July 2015, a Spanish engineer and a German sports economist, both surfers, opened their first wave park in Wales. The surf media said it was the best ever. But it had technical problems and closures. WaveGarden is now building a longer lagoon in Austin, Texas, that is expected to open this spring. It is planning two more in Australia.

**Machines Could Lead Surfing To Olympics**

A spokesman for WaveGarden says that although the parks will be capable of making bigger waves like Slater’s, they probably won’t choose to. It would raise energy costs and reduce the number of waves. This would mean fewer surfers could be in the lagoon at a time.

For many in the industry, it stirs hopes of creating big destination surf parks, expanding the market not just to inland spots, but to coastal areas that don’t get decent surf. It might be what gets surfing into the Olympics, possibly in Japan in 2020.

But some surfers don’t think wave parks completely recreate the experience of surfing in the ocean. Many see these pools as places people can take their first surf lessons, where surfers can practice their wave-riding, and where they can take a vacation and be certain of catching a large quantity of excellent waves.

Otherwise, the surfing purists say, just go to the ocean.
Quiz

1. Which section from the article BEST explains why early wave parks weren’t popular with surfers?

(A) "Imagine Perfect Waves, All The Time"
(B) "Inventor’s Secret Spot Discovered"
(C) "Artificial Waves Not Very Successful"
(D) "Machines Could Lead Surfing To Olympics"

2. Which piece of evidence BEST illustrates that Kelly Slater’s video shows something unusual in the world of surfing?

(A) Every surfer daydreams about a perfectly shaped wave that he or she can ride again and again. Especially when most surfing spots are pretty crowded. Or, worse yet, when surfers are stuck inland.
(B) But something about the scene was odd. Between the waves, ducks floated in calm water the color of tea. And the waves didn’t have the bumps, boils and warbles that ruin even the cleanest ocean waves.
(C) “That wave is exactly the fantasy wave I drew on the margins of my notebooks when I was in high school,” says Surfer magazine editor Steve Hawk.
(D) “When I saw Slater’s wave for the first time, it almost made me feel dizzy, like vertigo,” says Matt Warshaw, a surf writer and author of “The Encyclopedia of Surfing.”

3. Read the section “Machines Could Lead Surfing To Olympics.” How is the central idea developed in these paragraphs?

(A) It contrasts the hopes of the businessmen with the mixed feelings surfers have about wave parks.
(B) It compares the older, smaller surf parks with the larger parks and waves being created today.
(C) It contrasts the goals of businessmen to those of surfers who want to go to the Olympics.
(D) It compares the high price of making a wave park to the lower cost of going to the ocean.
Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?

(A) Surfers had never seen a spot like it: head-high waves for more than a quarter-mile without anyone to catch them.

(B) It's not clear how many waves an hour his pool can produce, or how much energy is consumed doing it.

(C) A spokesman for WaveGarden says that although the parks will be capable of making bigger waves like Slater's, they probably won't choose to.

(D) For many in the industry, it stirs hopes of creating big destination surf parks, expanding the market not just to inland spots, but to coastal areas that don't get decent surf.
Answer Key

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