

## Article

# Planning Tourism in Protected Natural Areas: Safety, Soft Law and Conflict Management between Beach Users. The Case of Surf in Aljezur, Portugal

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**Abstract:** The intensification of tourism in coastal areas can increase planning problems, with potential conflicts amongst beach users affecting their safety perceptions and, ultimately, their tourist experience. Therefore, this constitutes an important concern for local authorities. The present study was conducted on an environmentally sensitive tourism destination located in a protected natural area in the Algarve, Portugal, with a quite significant level of surf tourism activities—the Aljezur municipality. In total, 245 surfers and 282 bathers were surveyed as these beach user groups have been observed to have a potential for intergroup conflict. Data were collected regarding their perceptions of personal safety, conflicts between beach users, and conflict management strategies. The respondents were also surveyed regarding how local authorities can provide strategies of soft law for a more sustainable management of surfing tourism. The findings revealed a consensus about the safety of Aljezur beaches and existence of perceived low conflict levels amongst beach users. The strategies more valued by respondents to promote surfing tourism development in the territory include the preservation of the natural resources and the developed of local regulation. Overall, these findings can be useful to the sustainable management of the surfing tourism in the territory.

**Keywords:** tourism planning; surf tourism; beach users; conflict management; protected natural areas; sustainability

## 1. Introduction

Surfing tourism is a commercial activity that combines sports, adventure, and leisure [1–3]. It is regarded by communities and destinations around the globe as an opportunity for tourism development that enhances destinations' economies [4,5]. However, the intensification of commercialized sport activities in coastal areas can also have detrimental social and environmental impacts for communities, especially in terms of nature, beach environments, and local cultures [6].

Beaches constitute a multidimensional system embedded within a wider context formed by coastal zones comprised of subsystems (e.g., physical, natural, sociocultural, managerial, and political, which includes regulations) that interact among themselves [7]. In these settings, safety and security are traditionally considered a quality attribute of a local tourism destination as an evaluation of preference or priority for recreational beach users [8,9] and reputation of a tourism destination [3]. Regarding specifically surf tourism, safety is also an important indicator of sustainable surf tourism [4,10], including as social indicator of sustainability [11].

To solve problems related to safety and conflict management, strategic responses have traditionally included the delimitation of distinctive areas for different users (e.g., surfers, bathers), recreation carrying capacity limits, including in natural protected areas [6,12], and mechanisms to monitor usage and enforce regulations. The policy dimensions of

safety and sustainable tourism in beaches include developing provisions as information for users, signage, citizens and awareness initiatives, beach use and circulation rules, infrastructure and accessibility facilities, first aid posts and potential occupation capacity. These dimensions were considered in recent Portuguese Decree Law 24/2020, published in Portuguese Republic Diary of 25 May 2020, about the pandemic context of COVID 2019, one of the first in Europe, increasing the local authorities' importance and involvement in this comprehensive management of sustainability.

In Portugal, where the present study was conducted, researchers have observed a steady increase in surfing tourism in the last decade [13]. The country has various top surf spots, for example, Nazaré, Peniche, and Ericeira, which means Portugal is listed as one of the leading surf destinations in Europe. Besides these internationally renowned spots, surfing tourism activities have intensified along the country's entire coastline, including more remote seaside areas [14].

Research problems of surf tourism in Portugal are related to the need to identify and assess the conditions, namely the infrastructure and resources, for the practice of outdoor and sport tourism-related activities within the sustainable development pillars [15]. Local authorities and other social actors acknowledge that surfing is a tourism product that can contribute substantially to local economic development, but they are aware of this trend's diverse impacts on local communities and of the need for planning and sustainable management. Information on beach users' potentially conflicting opinions regarding surfing activities and local authorities' involvement can be useful to these actors. The present study focused on the opinions of two interested parties—surfers and bathers—regarding surfing tourism on beaches in the Aljezur municipality. Understanding beach users' attitudes and perceptions is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of sustainable beach management strategies [7], including those regarding beach safety [16].

Located in southwest Portugal in a semi-remote area, this municipality is characterized by a low-density population but high-intensity tourism. Aljezur has excellent environment conditions for surfing and other sport and natural resource-based tourism activities, as it is entirely located in a protected natural park. Natural parks are areas of special interest in terms of habitat and landscape conservation that require special attention because they constitute a major resource for nature tourism or tourism activities linked to natural landscapes [17,18] such as surfing tourism. The Aljezur municipality thus comprises an area in which concerns about sustainability, security and safety are fundamental to ensuring a pluralistic approach to sustainable development.

The present study was part of a larger research project created to satisfy local authorities' need for information. More specifically, this study analyzed and compared surfers and bathers' perceptions of safety, existing conflicts between beach users, and conflict management strategies on beaches. In addition, respondents were asked how local authorities can improve their level of engagement with surfing tourism and manage this activity more sustainably. The information collected provided significant insights into the best way to develop an efficient local surfing tourism plan.

### *1.1. Literature Review*

Territories are living organisms that need supplies, security, and functionality to be viable [19]. The world is currently characterized by space-time compression [20], resulting from the great expansion of consumption across societies, including travel and tourism [21]. In this context, processes that foster multi-party consensus in environmentally sensitive tourism destinations are crucial [22].

Sustainability is a key factor in natural areas, such as Aljezur, with a focus on preserving the environment and natural resources whose quality depends on tourism development strategies [23]. However, development is a political concept [24], and conceptualizations of sustainable tourism development, including those promulgated by international organizations (e.g., the United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO]), are subject to criticism guided by ideological paradigms [25].

Tourism can be viewed as a system which includes some key elements such as tourists, suppliers, tourist products (e.g., natural resources, accommodation, supplementary services, etc.), and the ordering/regulatory bodies that have key roles in planning and management for tourism development (Cornelissen, 2005, cited in [11]).

Some experts have argued in favor of adopting responsible tourism models as a form of tourism that assumes responsibility of its economic, social, and environmental impacts, with the path of achieving sustainability [26]. UNWTO as a major stakeholder in tourism assumes this way as a tourism paradigm not exempted of a neoliberal perspective and the protection of tourism as a consumer industry [27]. In this approach, tourists assume citizenship responsibilities [28], thereby “living and acting like the world is ‘home’” [25] (p. 106). Quoting Young and Nussbaum [29] (p.111) “if tourists contribute to structural or global injustices, even simply by being part of a network or structure that connects them to sources of injustice, then they are responsible to do something about it.”. These models are characterized by the social commitment of consumption of local products, sharing and learning processes rooted in host communities, and contributions to ecosystems’ conservation and regeneration [26].

Consensus between tourist groups as major stakeholders [30] must be improved to ensure sustainable, responsible tourism. Problems frequently arise from the lack of local regulations that reflect this consensus as part of each territory’s system [31]. The world today is further characterized by universal heritages, such as biodiversity and environmental conservation. Education for world citizenship and peace, the fight against poverty, and the strategy of smarter power, therefore, should be based on forms of “soft power” and “soft law” [32]. These call for a shared, committed exercise of power by a plurality of agents through persuasion based on common principles, causes, and values [33].

Some international organizations focused on tourism, the environment, and sustainability (e.g., Institute of Responsible Tourism [34]; UNWTO [35–38]) have issued “soft law instruments” (e.g., charters, recommendations, codes of conduct, and manifests). This approach aims to inspire changes in policies, business practices, and consumer behavior. These manifestations of goodwill have in common being a form of gobermedia (media government) [39].

Promotion and support of sustainable tourism is made more effective by the establishment of appropriate legal frameworks being, as they are particularly important, facilitated by different institutions [40]. International legislative approaches to sustainable tourism law have evolved in response to the ratification of conventions (i.e., binding agreements) mainly generated by the UNWTO (e.g., the Convention on Tourism Ethics [38]). Responsible tourism is seen as a normative principle, so, according to this convention, tourists and host communities should show mutual respect and minimize risks. In addition, public authorities must provide protection for tourists and their belongings, particularly international tourists.

More specifically, governments should facilitate the introduction of specific means that provide information, prevention, security, insurance, and assistance consistent with these visitors’ needs (Art. 1, n° 4). The convention also states that:

All the stakeholders in tourism development should recognize the role of international institutions in the field of promotion and development, and the protection of human rights, the environment or health with due respect for the general principles of international law. (Art. 10, n° 2)

The underlying assumption of this kind of international soft law is that the relevant stakeholders can be linked through social exchange mechanisms that control tourism’s perceived impacts [41] at the community and individual level [42].

According to this approach, perceptions of surfing tourism’s effects in Aljezur should be identified, observed, mapped, and controlled by local authorities as the municipality’s representatives. This must be done with epistemic instruments and data collected on the destination’s attributes and surfing tourism’s impacts, as well as information, safety, and management systems. Bathers and surfers are understood as users who converge

on specific spots for recreational purposes, thereby forming “common destination communities” [43] (p. 330). Thus, procedural mechanisms are needed to reinforce dialogic interactions between producers and sufferers of harm [44] and new ways of relationality (i.e., caring for human and non-human others).

The relevant epistemic instruments are a major focus of academic research. In 2015, many universities in Australia, Argentina, Canada, Chile, Iran, Japan, New Zealand, and Thailand created academic groups concentrating on legal sustainability [45]. These academics have tackled various tasks such as the definition of information categories as a way to promote local regulations and risk assessments. All these groups have expressed support for international adventure tourism standards, including the International Organization for Standardization’s ISO 21103:2014 (see <https://www.iso.org/standard/54861.html>, accessed on 2 September 2021). This is a safety management system approach that encourages providers to analyze adventure tourism activities, understand participants’ requirements, define processes that ensure safety, and keep them under control.

Safety, in this context, is seen from a wider perspective in which the economic, social, and environmental issues that arise are related to worldwide risks [43]. Researchers have specifically considered how tourism consumption in destinations can produce new or enhanced meaning for locals [46]. In addition, scholars have examined the demand for local regulations that arises based on a minimum consensus between stakeholders about the use of space.

In the present study, surfers and bathers on beaches in protected natural environments evaluated issues such as safety, security, perceived conflicts between users, and conflict management systems. These beaches are “invited and created” spaces as opposed to “closed spaces” [47] (p. 35) from a knowledge-power perspective. The relevant spaces are the result of an accumulation of social norms, rituals, and practices embedded in local power relations [48] and epistemic instruments that increase the level of dialogic interaction, participation, and sustainability in tourism. Dialogic interactions are required to ensure the needs are acknowledged by a consensus between all stakeholders who could potentially be affected.

Sustainability is simultaneously a process and value system based on participation, discussion, and accountable public entities that produce results by strengthening democracy and destination communities [43]. In this sense, tourism destinations are also a result of procedural processes of acquaintance, continual improvement, and control mechanisms, which can define epistemic communities [49] and prepare them to face the challenges of a cosmopolitan risk society based on knowledge [43]. Therefore, the present study conceptualized sustainable tourism in protected areas as participative [50]. In this approach, efforts to “care for people and places come first” (Apo, 2004 cited in [25] (p. 66)), which are strengthened by continual methodological improvements of group recognition, user empowerment, knowledge about contextual conflicts, informed relationships, and local control.

## 1.2. Study Context: Aljezur Municipality

Aljezur is a village that is the focal point of a rural municipality located in one of the most important tourism regions of Portugal, the Algarve, in the extreme southwest corner of Europe. This municipality has 5884 inhabitants living in an area of 32,350 square kilometers [51], which is a low population density. The municipality is located entirely in the natural park of Southwest Alentejo and Vicentina Coast, and Aljezur’s beaches are well known in the region for their exceptional surfing conditions. The beaches comprise approximately 50 km of still-intact coastline with a great variety of spots notable for their environmental quality, quality and regularity of waves, and proximity between beaches, thereby facilitating surfing throughout the year.

Because it is a natural park, land use in the municipality is subject to strong environmental restrictions stipulated by Portuguese legislation. Consequently, the beaches on which tourism and recreational activities occur, including surfing, must obey these

regulations and different maritime, tourism, and environmental government authorities. However, the absence of the standard “nature sports charter” creates problems related to institutional voids and a lack of rules guiding local governance.

This charter is governed by Regulation Plan of Southwest Alentejo and Vicentina Coast, which stipulates that the charter defines the places where sports activities can take place (e.g., surfing). The charter also establishes the criteria for how these activities are conducted to control the intensity with which places are used and their recreational carrying capacity and to maintain the compatibility between activities and the park’s nature conservation aims (Art. 52° n° 1 and Art. 81° n° 3 of Regulation Plan n° 11/2011 published in the Portuguese Republic Diary on 04 February 2011). The charter’s absence means the local authorities (i.e., the municipality of Aljezur), surf schools, surfers, bathers, and beach users in general must self-regulate based on their knowledge of practices and solutions regarding the use of space and related management problems.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Procedures

A quantitative method based on individual surveys was chosen to gather data on surfers and bathers’ opinions about surfing tourism in the Aljezur municipality. This method is considered a practical, less expensive way of collecting data from large samples [52]. The survey’s items were developed based on the available literature (e.g., [2,5]). The present study’s data collection procedure meant that the number of questions had to be kept as low as possible. The items were organized into categories based on the three measures discussed below.

The data were collected by research team members during August and September 2016 (i.e., summer high season). Surfers and bathers using various beaches along Aljezur’s coastline were approached and invited to take part in a study about surfing tourism in Aljezur. Because of the large influx of international tourists, Portuguese, German, French, and English paper-and-pencil versions of the survey were made available.

A brief explanation of the research goals was included at the beginning of the survey, and the participants were assured of the data’s confidentiality and respondents’ anonymity. The instructions then stated that no right or wrong answers existed, and the respondents were asked to answer the questions as honestly as possible. Some instructions also explained how to complete the questionnaire in order to reduce possible errors.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Perceived Safety on Beaches

The respondents were invited to assess their feeling of personal safety during beach experiences by answering a single question: “How did you feel while you were on the beach?” The responses were based on the following options, which were presented slightly differently depending on the type of respondent (i.e., surfer or bather):

1. I felt secure. There are still few surfers and a lot of available space to surf/for bathers.
2. I felt relatively secure. The number of surfers is appropriate, and there is still space to surf/for bathers.
3. I felt insecure. There are a lot of surfers, and there is little space left to surf/for bathers.
4. I felt totally insecure. There is an excessive number of surfers and no space left to surf/for bathers.

The respondents were also questioned regarding their experiences with accidents or conflicts involving surfers and/or bathers, using the dichotomous question: “Have you had or noticed an accident or conflict involving surfers and/or bathers? (Yes or No).”

A third question regarding safety elicited the respondents’ opinion about how well rules are followed in restricted areas: “Do you think that beach users (i.e., surfers, bathers, and others) respect the rules about restricted areas’ use?” The responses were given on a scale as follows:

- No one respects the rules.



- Very few people respect the rules.
- Most people respect the rules.
- Everyone respects the rules.

### 2.2.2. Support for Risk Management Strategies

To gather the respondents' opinions regarding the resolution and/or mitigation of potential conflicts on the beach, they were asked about the importance of seven strategies based on a five-point response scale (1 = "Not important at all"; 5 = "Very important"). A sample item is "Temporary bans on surfing to manage beaches' carrying capacity during high season".

### 2.2.3. Strategies for Local Authorities' Involvement in Surfing Tourism

The respondents were asked how the local authorities could improve their level of involvement in surfing tourism, using six items (e.g., "Further promotion of surfing as a nature tourism product [e.g., participation in surf trade shows]"; Cronbach's alpha [ $\alpha$ ] = 0.79). The responses were given on a scale ranging from 1 ("Totally disagree") to 5 ("Totally agree"). Higher scores represent a stronger agreement with the strategies proposed.

## 2.3. Participants

A total of 318 questionnaires were collected from bathers and 321 from surfers. After the questionnaires were checked for missing data, 116 were excluded from subsequent analyses. The final sample thus included a total of 527 individuals: 282 bathers and 245 surfers.

Overall, the respondents were aged between 16 and 77 years old, with a mean age of 34.92 years (standard deviation [SD] = 11.26 years). The sample was quite balanced in terms of gender distribution (51% men). Regarding their formal education, 66% had a higher education degree, 27.4% had between 10 to 12 years of schooling, and 4.7% had 9 years of schooling or less. The countries most heavily represented in the sample were Portugal (50.3%), Germany (15.7%), Spain (9.5%), the United Kingdom (5.6%), and France (5.0%). This variable proved to be characterized by great variety as the sample included 23 different nationalities from places such as Australia, Latvia, Russia, the United States, and Canada.

The subsample of surfers ( $N = 245$ ) had ages falling between 18 and 54 years old (mean [ $M$ ] = 31.77 years;  $SD = 8.35$  years), and 61% were women. Most surfers had a higher education degree (74%), and only a fifth of these respondents (21%) were residents of Portugal. Despite not being possible to clearly determine the sample's representativeness, given the lack of official statistics on beach users' profile, the sociodemographic characteristics found by this study are in line with previous research done on surfers' profiles in the Algarve [53]. The present descriptive analysis revealed a relatively young market with higher education degrees, which has also been confirmed by other researchers (e.g., [54]).

The bathers ( $N = 282$ ) in turn were between 16 and 77 years old ( $M = 37.65$  years;  $SD = 12.67$  years), and 43% were men. Most bathers also had a higher education degree (60%). Three-quarters of the respondents were residents of Portugal (75%). Table 1 summarizes the sample's sociodemographic profile. Given the non-probabilistic sampling procedure, the sample used is of a convenience type, which limits the results' generalizability to all members of the populations under study.

**Table 1.** Sample profile.

	Surfers	Bathers	Total Sample
Number	245	282	527
Mean age	32 years old	38 years old	35 years old
% Men	61%	43%	51%
% Higher education degree	74%	60%	66%
% Resident of Portugal	21%	75%	50%

### 3. Results

The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 software. Descriptive and comparative analyses were conducted on the various variables, comparing the surfers and bathers' opinions to identify any consensus and divergence in their perspectives. The results are organized according to the three main measures discussed previously.

#### 3.1. Perceived Safety on Beaches

Tourists' feelings of safety are crucial to their experiences, evaluation of destinations, and intention to return in the future. Various questions were included in the survey to understand how surfers and bathers visiting Aljezur's beaches feel about their safety there. The results show a favorable perception of risk and safety among bathers and surfers on Aljezur's beaches. Most respondents felt safe during their beach experiences (77.2%), although nearly a quarter gave a negative evaluation of their safety on these beaches (see Table 2). The performance of a chi-square test revealed that the difference in the surfers and bathers' positioning is marginally significantly (chi-square [ $\chi^2$ ] (3) = 7.510,  $p = 0.06$ ). This indicates that, although the respondents' evaluation of perceived personal safety was generally positive, bathers tended to feel more secure (79.3%) than surfers did (74.8%).

**Table 2.** Perceived safety on Aljezur beaches (%).

	Surfers	Bathers	Total Sample
I felt secure. There are still few surfers and a lot of available space to surf/for bathers.	25.6%	34.6%	30.4%
I felt relatively secure. The number of surfers is appropriate and there is still space to surf /for bathers.	49.2%	44.7%	46.8%
I felt insecure. There are a lot of surfers and there is little space left to surf/for bathers.	21.0%	14.7	17.7%
I felt completely insecure. There is an excessive number of surfers and no space left to surf/for bathers.	4.2%	6.0%	5.2%

The respondents were also questioned regarding their experiences with accidents or conflicts involving surfers and/or bathers. A little more than a third of the sample (36.5%) had been directly or indirectly involved in accidents or conflicts involving surfers and/or bathers. Only 8.5% had been directly or indirectly involved in more than three situations. Notably, this question was not limited to their beach experiences specifically in Aljezur, so these situations could have occurred in other destinations. Surfers reported more experiences with these types of situations than did bathers. This difference is easier to understand through a comparison of the percentages in Table 3, which show that a lower percentage of surfers (57%) reported not being involved in any accidents or conflicts versus the percentage of bathers (69.2%) ( $\chi^2$  (2) = 14.936;  $p < 0.001$ ). A higher percentage of surfers were also involved in accidents or conflicts more than three times.

**Table 3.** Direct or indirect involvement in conflicts or accidents (%).

	Surfers	Bathers	Total Sample
No	57.0%	69.2%	63.5%
Yes, 1 to 3 times	30.0%	26.4%	28.0%
Yes, more than 3 times	13.0%	4.4%	8.5%

Regarding whether tourists follow rules for restricted areas as a top-down approach, the respondents expressed positive opinions about the behavior of those using beaches (see Table 4). Most respondents considered that the majority (64.9%), if not all tourists (5.1%), respect the rules for using restricted areas. A different opinion was given by 26.8% of the respondents, who felt that extremely few tourists respect the rules, and a further 3.2% believed that no one respects them. The chi-square test performed revealed that the

difference in the surfers and bathers' positioning is marginally significant ( $\chi^2(3) = 6.518$ ;  $p = 0.09$ ).

**Table 4.** Respect for rules for restricted area use (%).

	Surfers	Bathers	Total Sample
1: No one respects the rules.	3.0%	3.3%	3.2%
2: Very few people respect the rules.	32.2%	22.1%	26.8%
3: Most people respect the rules.	60.2%	69.0%	64.9%
4: Everyone respects the rules.	4.7%	5.5%	5.1%

This indicates that, although the respondents' evaluation of tourists' respect for rules was generally positive, bathers tended to be more positive (74.5%) than surfers did (64.9%). This tendency might be due, as seen above, to surfers having experienced more conflicts or accidents than bathers in the beaches.

### 3.2. Strategies for Risk Management on Beaches

One of this study's aims was to gather information about surfers and bathers' opinions regarding the resolution and/or mitigation of potential conflicts on beaches. The respondents were, therefore, questioned about the importance of strategies related to the local authorities' provision of more information and their inspections and practices related to the strict regulation of the use of space.

Exploratory factor analysis revealed that the seven strategies evaluated by respondents could be organized into two factors (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin = 0.739; Bartlett's test  $p < 0.001$ ; total variance explained 62.07%).

The first factor comprised three strategies regarding more information, best practices, and enforcement of rules (e.g., "More information for users [i.e., surfers and bathers] about beach use regulations [e.g., signs and best practices]") (variance explained 31.46%). The second factor included four strategies based on defining more restricted areas and carrying capacities for users (e.g., "Divide the beaches according to user type, that is, one part of the beach for surfers and another part for bathers") (variance explained 30.61%). Reliability estimates for factor 1 was 0.62 and for factor 2 was 0.80. Despite Cronbach's alpha values higher than 0.70 being preferable [55], values above 0.60 can still be acceptable in social sciences if results are interpreted with caution [56,57]. Therefore, both factors were considered in subsequent analysis. Higher scores represent stronger support to the strategies proposed. Table 5 presents the relevant results.

Most respondents gave importance to the practices included in the first set of strategies, that is, the provision of more information about beach use rules (60.3%). The respondents also supported citizenship and sensitization initiatives directed at surfers and bathers with regard to beach rules (60.3%) as bottom-up approaches and more inspections by the authorities (55.3%) as top-down approach. This set of actions was perceived as more significant for the management of potential beach conflicts ( $M = 3.68$ ;  $SD = 0.94$ ) than for the implementation of strict rules for the use of space ( $M = 2.59$ ;  $SD = 0.96$ ;  $t$ -test for paired samples  $t[521] = 22.305$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, these initiatives should be given strategic priority by the municipality in order to manage beaches as community spaces.

The second set of strategies includes the division of beaches into separate spaces for surfers and bathers (46.6%) and limitations on the number of individuals on beaches during the summer high season (22.9%). These strategies also include the establishment of exclusive beaches for surfers and others for other beach users (21.8%) and bans on surfing activities during the high season (19.9%). All these strategies somewhat limit surfers and bathers' freedom to use beach resources as top-down perspectives. The percentages reveal clearly that most respondents do not agree with these strategies or at least have serious doubts about their efficacy in terms of conflict management.

Notably, a consensus existed among surfers ( $M = 3.61$ ;  $SD = 0.90$ ) and bathers ( $M = 3.74$ ;  $SD = 0.97$ ;  $t[520] = -0.149$ ; n.s.) about the perceived importance of information and



inspection practices as a mix of bottom-up and top-down approaches. On the question of implementing strict rules of beach use, surfers proved to be less opposed to these practices ( $M = 2.77$ ;  $SD = 0.96$ ) versus other beach users ( $M = 2.44$ ;  $SD = 0.94$ ;  $t[525] = 4.007$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 5.** Strategies for managing risk on beaches.

	M	SD	Not Important	Neutral	Very Important
Factor 1 <sup>a</sup> Information and inspection practices	3.68 <sup>b</sup>	0.94	–	–	–
More information for users (i.e., surfers and bathers) about beach use regulations (e.g., signs and best practices)	3.74	1.13	13.0%	26.7%	60.3%
More citizenship and awareness-raising initiatives for surfers and bathers regarding beach use rules	3.69	1.07	12.6%	27.1%	60.3%
More and improved inspections by authorities to enforce beach use rules	3.59	1.16	16.3%	28.4%	55.3%
Factor 2 <sup>a</sup> Enforcement of strict rules for using beach spaces	2.59 <sup>c</sup>	0.96	–	–	–
Division of beaches according to user type (i.e., one part of the beach for surfers and another part for bathers)	3.25	1.36	27.7%	25.7%	46.6%
Limits on the number of users during high season	2.62	1.21	46.7%	30.4%	22.9%
Creation of exclusive beaches (i.e., beaches only for surfers and other beaches only for bathers)	2.31	1.33	59.5%	18.7%	21.8%
Temporary bans on surfing to manage beaches' carrying capacity during high season	2.16	1.3	62.9%	17.2%	19.9%

Notes: M = mean; SD = standard deviation; <sup>a</sup> items presented by decreasing mean values; <sup>b,c</sup> statistically significant differences.

### 3.3. Strategies for Local Authorities to Improve Their Involvement in Surfing Tourism

This study's final aim was to gain insights into how the local authorities can improve their level of involvement in surfing tourism from the relevant stakeholders' point of view. Table 6 presents the respondents' opinions regarding six possible strategies.

The results show that the protection of the natural environment is the most valued initiative (73.6%), but the participants also gave importance to developing more regulations and planning and managing infrastructure and beaches' accessibility (71.6%). The majority of respondents further perceived improvements in the qualifications of personnel working in the surfing tourism sector (54.5%) as vital. The participants also supported making more information available on surfing tourism and its further development, but their opinions were less homogeneous. That is, their SD was greater than 1, which reveals more differences between perspectives and less of a consensus among respondents.

**Table 6.** Improvements in local authorities' level of involvement in surfing tourism.

	M <sup>a</sup>	SD	Totally or Partially Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Totally or Partially Agree
Greater protection and safeguarding of natural resources	4.02	1.00	8.2%	18.2%	73.6%
More regulation, planning, and management of infrastructure and accessibility (i.e., parking areas, changing rooms, restaurants, showers, and trailer parks)	3.95	1.04	8.2%	20.2%	71.6%
More human resource training and qualifications (e.g., training plan for instructors)	3.59	1.00	11.9%	33.6%	54.5%
Improved cooperation, support, and participation in activities	3.47	0.99	12.2%	38.9%	48.9%
More information on surfing tourism products (e.g., website, brochures, or maps with beach characteristics)	3.38	1.23	23.5%	25.8%	50.8%
Further promotion of surfing as a nature tourism product (e.g., participation in surfing trade shows)	3.15	1.21	27.7%	31.4%	40.9%
Support for set of strategies	3.59	0.76	–	–	–

Notes: M = mean; SD = standard deviation; <sup>a</sup> items presented by decreasing mean values.

The surfers and bathers' mean scores given to the set of strategies under evaluation were again compared. The results indicate that, although the two groups agreed with the strategies, the bathers ( $M = 3.74$ ;  $SD = 0.68$ ) were more favorable toward the city council's involvement in the proposed set of initiatives than the surfers were ( $M = 3.43$ ;  $SD = 0.81$ ;  $t[478] = -4.692$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). These findings may be the result of greater institutional trust in local authorities' interventions by bathers, who are mostly residents of Portugal.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study sought to contribute to a deeper understanding of beach users' perceptions of safety, conflict management strategies, and local authorities' involvement in tourism management in the context of surfing tourism in protected natural areas. The research focused on the perceptions of two significant tourist stakeholders—bathers and surfers. Clarifying the respondents' concerns about safety is fundamental to developing a pluralistic approach, a top-down and a bottom up perspective in this context, so these aspects were analyzed in order to identify any points of consensus. The current study's findings contribute to a better understanding of the relationships that these two beach users have between themselves and with territories that present tourist, recreational, and sports functions in protected spaces with environmental rules. Hence, they can inform local authorities' approaches to surfing tourism planning and management.

The results showed that most respondents feel safe during their beach experiences in Aljezur, so this is a point of consensus shared by surfers and bathers. In addition, most respondents believed that the majority of tourists respect the rules for using restricted areas, and only around a third of the sample have been directly or indirectly involved in accidents or conflicts with surfers and/or bathers. Surfers tend to evaluate the level of risk more harshly than bathers do, but, in general, the results indicate that these two stakeholder groups have had positive experiences on Aljezur beaches in terms of user safety [16]. These experiences are relevant for the reputation of this tourism destination as a safe destination [3,8,9].

Regarding conflict management strategies, the results revealed a consensus among surfers and bathers about the importance of clear information and beach inspection practices to resolve and/or mitigate any potential conflicts on beaches, as opposed to any enforcement of strict beach use rules by local authorities. In other words, beach users want more information about best practices and regulations that do not require dividing up beaches between surfers and bathers or applying maximum usage limits. More and better information oriented to safety rules, good practices, and transparency in their dissemination will value the relationship of bathers and surfers and their coexistence in a shared common space, with a certain sensitiveness in terms of environmental risk. These findings support previous literature that emphasizes the importance of participatory governance in the management of spaces with environmental relevance [7,17,22,47,48]. A consensus exists around the need for citizenship- and awareness-raising initiatives regarding beach rules and for improved inspection and management by the authorities. The municipality should place more confidence in beach users to follow informal rules of conviviality, sociability, and shared common spaces. These findings are key points for beach user safety and sustainable local environmental governance based in the idea on citizenship responsibilities [25,26,28].

Concerning the overall improvement of local interventions, the stakeholders surveyed believe that the municipality should play a greater role in the regulation of the area's surfing activities, including planning and managing infrastructure. This finding is in accordance with the importance given by the literature to local government authorities' interventions in tourism planning [5]. The municipality in question can intervene through the disclosure of information about beach use and safety, the development of more supporting services for beaches (e.g., facilities and hygiene), and an improved management of infrastructure and accessibility (e.g., parking areas and roads). A consensus also exists that surfing is a key product in the municipality, to which the institutional dimensions of regulation, planning, management, and human resources' qualifications are fundamental. The environmental

dimension is, however, the “core” of this common destination community [43]. The present results suggest that local authorities need to protect and safeguard natural resources more extensively as this is seen as the municipality’s most fundamental intervention.

Regarding local authorities’ social interventions, the findings indicate that beach users emphasize the importance of respecting rules for areas’ use as a necessary condition of safety and of strengthening human resource training. In addition, awareness of beach functions is fundamental to the success of sustainable tourism development in this destination, as discussed in the literature [4]. The assumption made is that surfing promotes the municipality’s development by improving infrastructure and local services and by determining and increasing the need for the local population to acquire qualifications. Notably, the safety-related support, rescue, and surveillance of surfers is not only characteristic of surfing tourism products but also a key sustainability factor for other users of beach spaces. Given the growth of surf tourism and intensification of its impacts, beach users must become involved in the preservation of these natural spaces and their surroundings through citizenship initiatives, among other possible programs.

Overall, findings highlight the need for a stronger local commitment to assessing potential conflicts between users of public spaces and the degree to which stakeholders’ perceptions converge. This kind of evaluation helps ensure the creation of the conditions needed for a shared destination community [43] in which local development strategies are the result of a consensus about how to promote tourists’ awareness, responsibility, and safety.

#### *4.1. Limitations and Future Research*

This study contributes to advancing knowledge about the opinions of two important stakeholders—surfers and bathers—on the topics under study, but some limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the research was based on a case study of a low-density municipality located in a protected natural area, so any generalization of the results must be done with all due caution. Because five years have passed since the data collection, it would be interesting to replicate the study and assess the stability of current results. The findings add appreciably to the ongoing discussion regarding sustainability and tourism in protected natural areas, with special attention given to safety and conflict management strategies regarding surfing tourism. However, this topic is still an under researched area, an upgraded priority with the COVID 19 pandemic, so future studies could complement the current results by examining other tourist destination with similar characteristics. Similar studies in this sanitary COVID context could also be useful since data were collected before the pandemic.

Second, when collecting data with surveys, future studies in similar research contexts need to use more representative samples, which was not possible in the current study because no data were available on the target populations (i.e., surfers and bathers on Aljezur beaches). This research relied on a non-probabilistic sample, and thus the results cannot be directly generalized to the populations in question. The data were collected during summer high season to facilitate access to respondents, particularly bathers, but future studies could opt for collecting data in a larger period.

Lastly, the study assumed a quantitative approach to data collection. Future studies can apply a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative analysis with qualitative ones, such as conducting interviews or forming focus groups of surfers and bathers to deeper analyze their views regarding personal safety, conflict, and surfing tourism management strategies. Other stakeholders’ perspectives can also be considered to gain a broader understanding on these issues, including the local community and the tourist operators.

#### *4.2. Final Remarks*

With the COVID 2019 pandemic, the need for public policies that assure safety in beaches and other tourism spaces has gained renewed importance. The recommendations of the UNWTO [58] about the impacts of the COVID 2019 pandemic include the unifying

messages in support of consumer confidence, the communication with transparency to restore confidence among consumers and the development of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) for an effective and sustainable development of tourism at the local level. Part of this confidence is based in the perception users have of the safety of the destination [3,8,9].

Policies and regulations for sustainable management practices in beaches must consider users' attitudes and perceptions about these issues [7,16]. Local tourism regulations need to go beyond the simple conceptualization and monitoring of generic models and application of formal legal rules and batteries of global international indicators [4,10]. The best approach is achieved through local participation, which implies the use of indicators and dialogical analysis [25,28]. The results should clarify the social, economic, and environmental convergence of perceptions among users of territories, as constructs of common destination communities [43]. These conceptions, procedures, and techniques, as well as their evaluation and supervision, help local authorities to achieve higher levels of institutional sustainability based on epistemic instruments, thereby providing a favorable context for tourism development.

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