



OPINION  
GUEST ESSAY

# I'm a Big Wave Surfer, and I've Never Seen Anything Like I Did This Year

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The author surfing at Mavericks Beach in California. Audrey Lambidakis

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By Tyler Fox

Mr. Fox is a professional big wave surfer.

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SOQUEL, Calif. — Throughout my 20-plus years of surfing big waves, I've experienced some amazing moments in and around the ocean. I've witnessed carnage and chaos, joy and jubilation, events that have been seared into my subconscious and that I believe will stay with me until my dying day.

A majority of these experiences have taken place at a spot called Mavericks in Half Moon Bay, Calif. It is notorious in the big-wave-surfing world as having some of the heaviest waves on the planet. It's a spot where life has been lost. Boards, bodies and egos get disassembled every winter. I remember my very first session out there at the ripe age of 20 like it was yesterday. This particular day was unique in that the swell went from 20 feet to 50 feet in a matter of three hours and had an energy like I've never seen. I was so anxious to get a wave under my belt that my impatience eventually got the better of me. I went for an inside wave no one else wanted, only to miss it and turn around to see the horizon going black. A solid 40-footer was marching my way looking for fledgling rookies like me to devour. I remember paddling up, up, up the face of this wall of water and barely squeaked over the top in a torrent of stinging spray. I don't think my heart rate has ever been higher than it was at that moment.

Fast forward past a lot of learning, a handful of injuries and dozens of memorable sessions, and I'm now 41. I still love the rush of big waves and feel like I possess a tad more patience. I own a surfing and lifestyle magazine and am happily hunkered down in the Santa Cruz Mountains with my wife and our adopted blue heeler, who goes everywhere with us. One thing that has remained consistent these past 20 years is my deep respect for the power of the ocean and my quest to better understand the effects climate change has on our waves, our coastline and our communities, and how we can collectively protect these special places.

From the time I caught my first wave at 10 — or, I should say, “was pushed into” by my legendary surf coach, Richard Schmidt — I've been hooked. Not just on the act of riding waves but all aspects of being in and around the ocean. I've seen storms of all levels and swells from waist high to five stories. I've admired the juxtaposition of land and sea and how these colossal giants clash heads again and again. My love for surfing has led me to freediving, spearfishing, sailing and paddle boarding. I've seen kelp forests disappear at an alarming rate and be replaced with carpets of zombie sea urchins that devour the kelp at its root before it can mature. I've witnessed worsening storms throttle the S.S. Palo Alto, more commonly known as the Cement Ship, year after year. Built for World War I and later used as a pleasure boat before its abandonment, the Cement Ship and the pier that connected it to the coast were for decades a favorite hometown landmark and a scenic space to watch wildlife, fish with friends or simply soak in some salt air. This latest onslaught of violent surf was so relentless and powerful that it caused a collapse of almost the entire pier. The ship now sits marooned like a forlorn island.

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Sea level rise is having a profound effect on our coastal communities up and down the California coast. It's been a slow decay, and it's hard to even realize what is happening, but when I look at old photos or start to reminisce about times at a particular beach or surf break and visit those same spots today, the issues become much clearer. Mavericks's deepwater giants haven't changed, but local breaks close to shore are suffering because of coastal erosion.

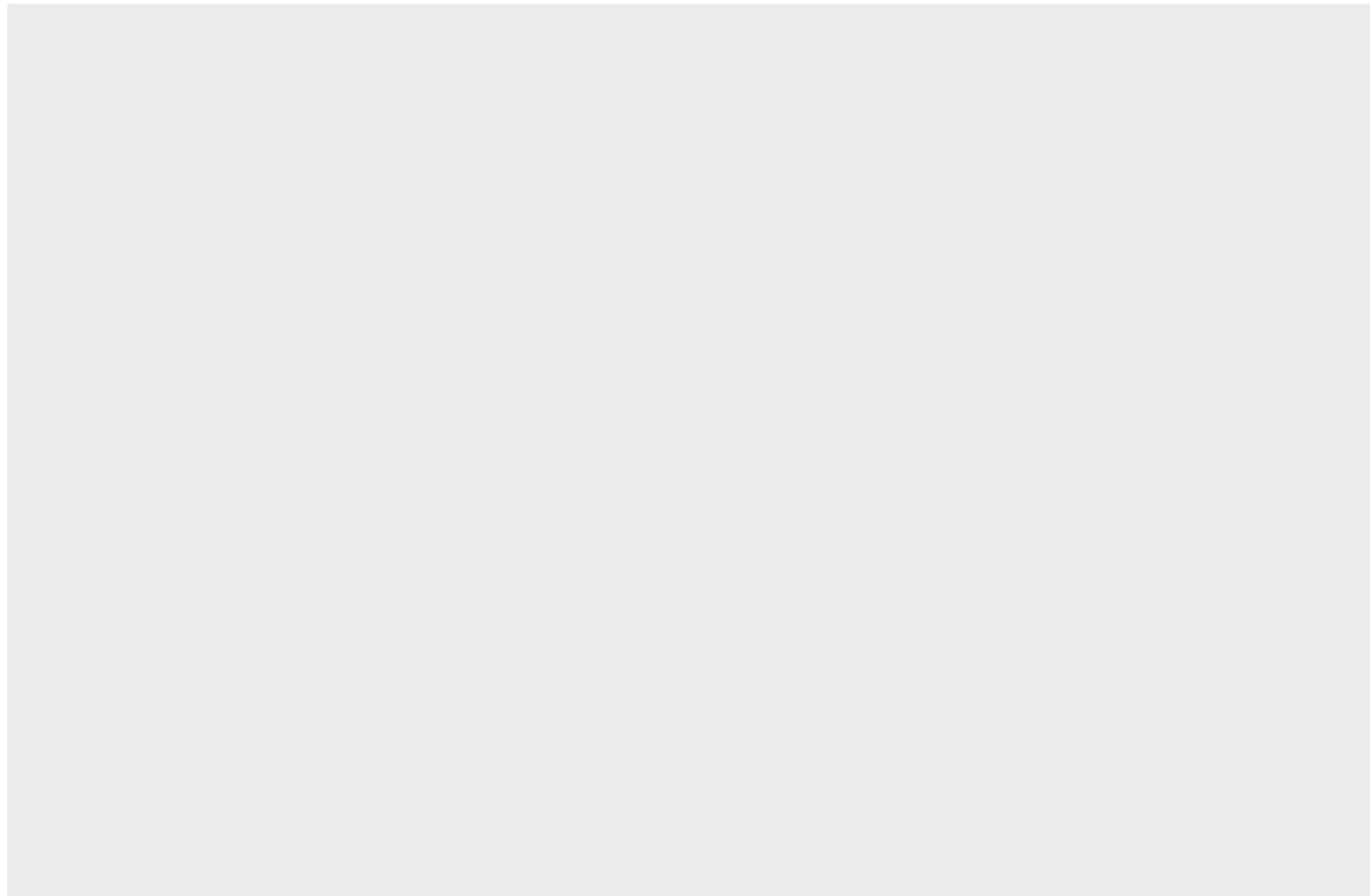
A changing climate, a changing world

Climate change around the world: In “[Postcards From a World on Fire](#),” 193 stories from individual countries show how climate change is reshaping reality everywhere, from dying coral reefs in Fiji to disappearing oases in Morocco and far, far beyond.

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In my 30 years as a fanatic ocean-goer, I've never seen anything like I did on Jan. 5 of this year. They called the storm a bomb cyclone, and the thing was a *bomb*. The swell measured as much as 30 feet and produced surges so powerful that they washed over roadways, flooded beach homes and caused sections of our iconic coastal roads to collapse. The power from these waves broke piers as if they were twigs and flung at least one massive wooden piling into a nearby restaurant. A friend had basketball-size rocks tossed through the front windshield of his parked car from an exploding wave. Numerous roads collapsed, and several people lost their homes from the relentless surge. I'm not sure it will replace my inaugural session at Mavericks as my go-to campfire story, but it's close.

The wreckage was so bad that our little surf town captured national attention with even the president stopping by for a visit and vowing to provide assistance to those affected. It was a trip to watch how much of a production a presidential visit is. There was security everywhere and I even spotted three Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft fly over the valley where I live. The commotion and craze is long gone, but even with a promise of support, many residents and business owners are left with substantial damage and thousands of dollars in clean up costs, not knowing when or if that support will come.



Crews working to repair the California coast after major storms in January. Shmuel Thaler/The Santa Cruz Sentinel, via Associated Press

While I'm hopeful our community will get some much needed federal support, I'm also left pondering: Is this just putting a bandage on a much deeper wound that will inevitably fester? Sea level rise and the storms associated with a warming planet will continue to threaten our way of life here in California, but we are definitely not alone. As much as 80 percent of the Maldives, an archipelagic nation in the Indian Ocean, could be uninhabitable by 2050, according to projections from NASA and the U.S. Geological Survey. By 2100, it is possible that the entire country could be submerged. That represents over half a million people who are likely to lose their homes and their way of life. This is just one of the low-lying nations that will be asking itself, “Where do we go now?”

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When I read about things like this and the fact that whole communities will get wiped off the map, it bums me out. I have to continually remind myself that amazing work is being done to address these problems, and my seemingly small actions right here in my hometown can make a difference. For instance, I support SeaTrees, a group that works to restore kelp forests, mangroves and coral reefs around the world.

Humanity may have set off a ticking time bomb, but that doesn't mean we should just give up and stick our heads in the sand. Adapting to rapidly changing conditions is what we surfers do every day.

Tyler Fox is a professional big wave surfer, an environmental advocate and publisher of Santa Cruz Waves Magazine.

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