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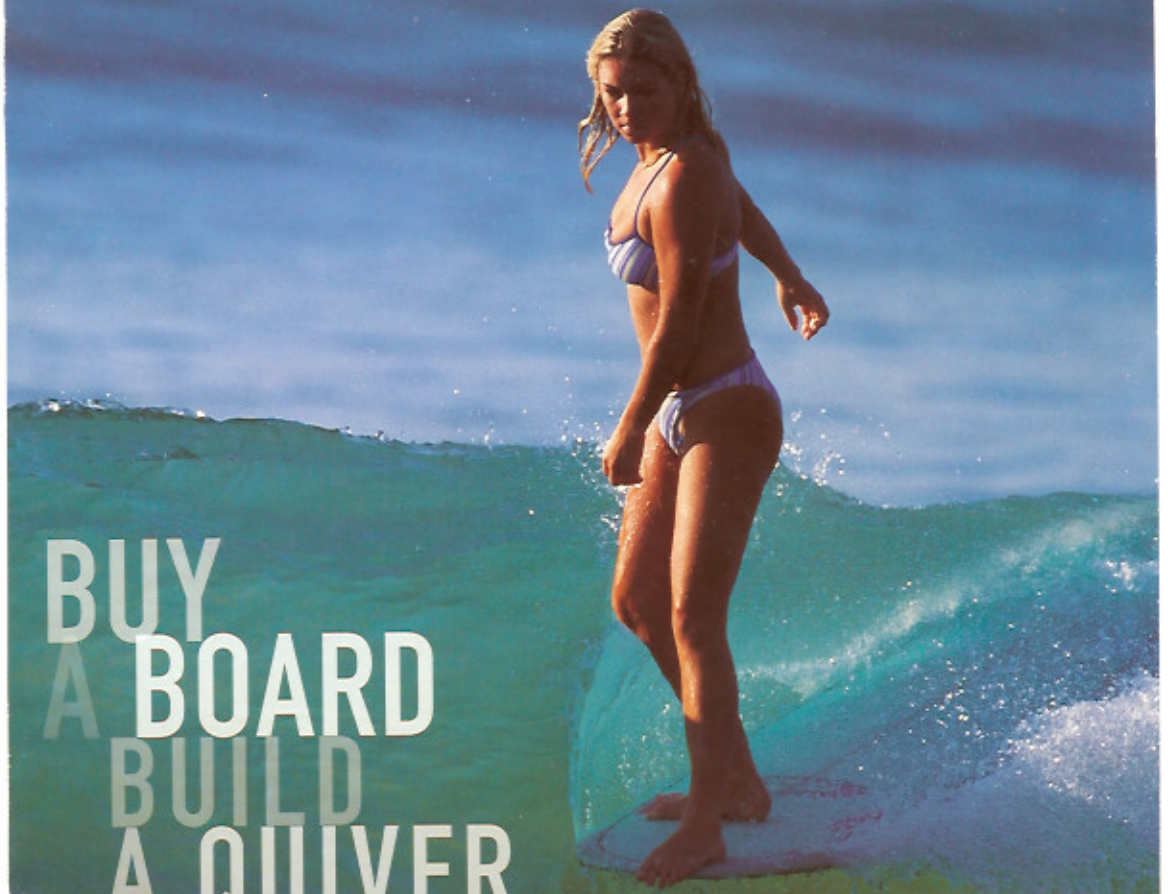

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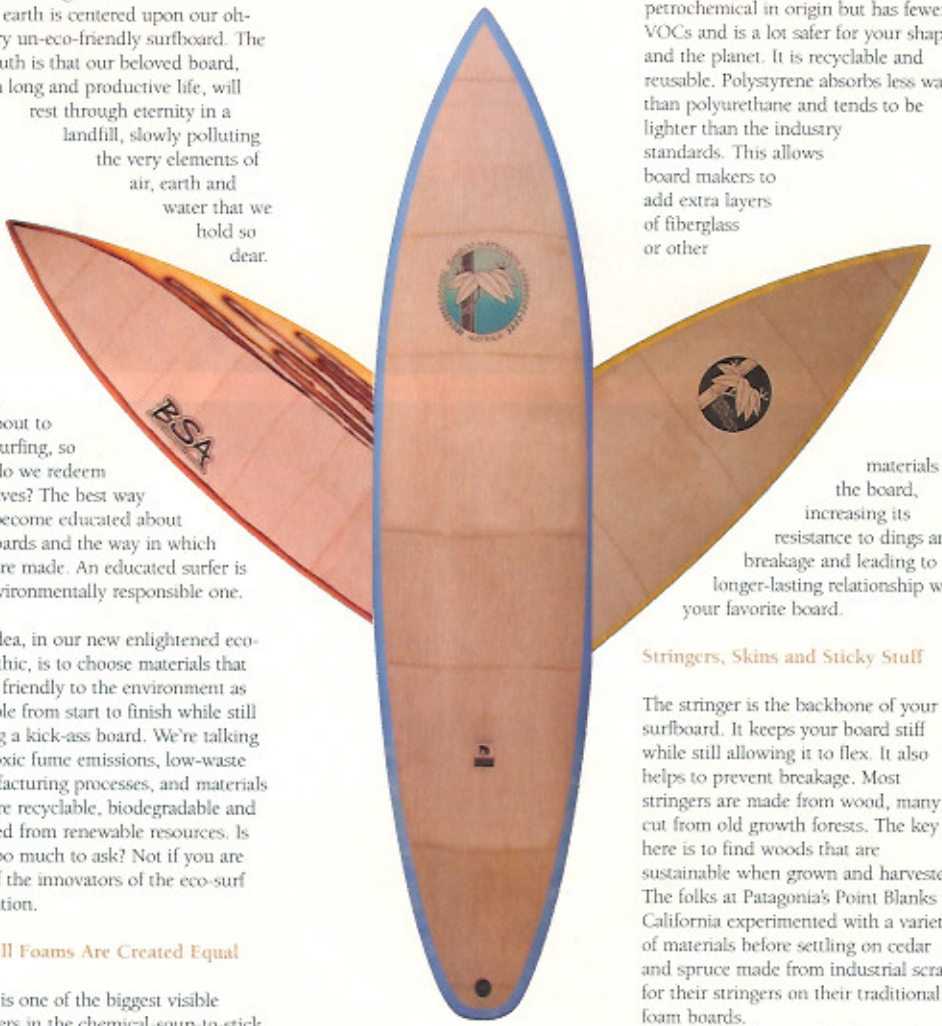
ECO-SURFBOARDS

By Anne Sasso

What's an environmentally conscientious surf diva to do? The very activity that brings such joy, freedom and well-being in the oceans of our sweet earth is centered upon our oh-so-very un-eco-friendly surfboard. The sad truth is that our beloved board, after a long and productive life, will rest through eternity in a landfill, slowly polluting the very elements of air, earth and water that we hold so dear.



We're not about to stop surfing, so how do we redeem ourselves? The best way is to become educated about surfboards and the way in which they are made. An educated surfer is an environmentally responsible one.

The idea, in our new enlightened eco-surf ethic, is to choose materials that are as friendly to the environment as possible from start to finish while still getting a kick-ass board. We're talking low toxic fume emissions, low-waste manufacturing processes, and materials that are recyclable, biodegradable and sourced from renewable resources. Is that too much to ask? Not if you are one of the innovators of the eco-surf revolution.

Not All Foams Are Created Equal

Foam is one of the biggest visible polluters in the chemical-soup-to-stick process. Most boards that you can buy off the rack are made from polyurethane foam, one of the nastier products of the petrochemical industry. There's not much to love about this stuff. Its fumes, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), are highly toxic. When dinged, it soaks up water like a foam sponge. It's not recyclable, and you can forget about any biodegradation happening anytime in the next several million years.

Several companies have begun experimenting with and successfully producing boards from polystyrene foam. This is the stuff that you find in coffee cups, packing peanuts and fast-food burger containers. It is still petrochemical in origin but has fewer VOCs and is a lot safer for your shaper and the planet. It is recyclable and reusable. Polystyrene absorbs less water than polyurethane and tends to be lighter than the industry standards. This allows board makers to add extra layers of fiberglass or other materials to the board, increasing its resistance to dings and breakage and leading to a longer-lasting relationship with your favorite board.

Stringers, Skins and Sticky Stuff

The stringer is the backbone of your surfboard. It keeps your board stiff while still allowing it to flex. It also helps to prevent breakage. Most stringers are made from wood, many cut from old growth forests. The key here is to find woods that are sustainable when grown and harvested. The folks at Patagonia's Point Blanks in California experimented with a variety of materials before settling on cedar and spruce made from industrial scrap for their stringers on their traditional foam boards.

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Shale Gordon, of Bamboo Surfboards in Australia, decided to forego the stringer altogether in his innovative boards. He wraps the foam core with thin layers of bamboo impregnated with epoxy resin. Bamboo is a fast-growing, all-natural, renewable resource. It is twice as strong as fiberglass, which is made from sand but requires oil to produce. By eliminating the stringer and using bamboo, Shale placed the strength of the board in the skin by shifting the weight distribution away from the core. This translates into a lighter board with better floatation and improved flex characteristics.

dripping on the shop floor. That translates into earth-friendly savings all down the line by using fewer materials and minimizing discarded shop droppings.

Walking the Walk

Unfortunately, board makers and pro surfers are at the heart of the disposable surfboard phenomena. Pros want super-lightweight boards that allow them to pull off big tricks. The best way to lose weight on a board is to shape it wafer-thin and go light on the glass. This translates into a powerful rocket ship that is almost as ephemeral as the wave it rides. If you're a sponsored surfer with an ample quiver of sticks, it is never a problem. Break a board and there's always another one to take its place. Surfboards used to be made to last a long time, now they are disposable. Many don't even make it through a season.

back of the shop and give it away to whoever wants the stuff. Schools, artists and hobbyists use it for various projects, and Point Blanks supplies all the foam for a local model airplane club. At Bamboo Surfboards, Shale and company use the foam as packing material for shipping boards, as fill in landscaping and even as road base material.

So what's the bottom line? What do you want to look for in a surfboard and its manufacturer? Environmental awareness and the honesty to say, "Hey, making surfboards is a dirty business but we love the sport and we're doing all we can to minimize their impact on the health of shapers, surfers and the planet." Companies like Point Blanks and Bamboo Surfboards are walking their walk. Others, like Trixie Surfboards and Greg Loehr's Resin Research are incorporating more earth-friendly materials and practices in the manufacture of their boards. We can also do our part. Help to keep the soul in surfing by ordering a board from your local shaper. Ask for extra glass. Most of us can't tell the difference, and the board will last much longer.

Bamboo is a fast growing, all-natural, renewable resource.

Traditional boards use a polyester resin to hold it all together. Yet another VOC-rich petrochemical, nasty, polyester resin has been blamed for all kinds of shaper ailments from chronic sinus problems to chronic fatigue syndrome. Epoxy emits one-third the VOCs of polyester resins and is getting better and better all the time (see epoxy article in issue #1 of SLW, or online at www.surflifeforwomen.com). Both Point Blanks and Bamboo Surfboards use epoxy resin in their boards.

Shawn Ambrose, shaper for Trixie Surfboards, keeps a tight lid on VOC emissions on his girls-only boards by using a UV cure method - a polyester resin that hardens under the sun's rays. The method gives him greater control of the application process, VOCs are reduced, and there is less goop

When you buy a board, equally important to what goes in the board is the philosophy of the company. It is all good and well to say that their foam is recyclable, but if no one is recycling it, what's the point? Patagonia has long been committed to the environmental cause, so it is hardly surprising that they are at the forefront of the enviro-surfboard swell. They recycle their waste foam whenever possible, but it has become increasingly difficult to find places willing to do it. In the meantime, they keep piling it up in the

Let's face it, producing surfboards is a business. If we as surfers speak with our wallets, ripples will make waves, and the mainstream companies will be sure to follow. Then we can all dance among cleaner waves and share the stoke.