

# PULP FACT

WORDS AND PRINCIPLE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILL HENRY

## A meditation on surfing in the waste stream



**I sit atop a rocky sea stack under cold, overcast skies,** gaze out over a glassy rivermouth lineup, and contemplate my options. Head-high waves peel flawlessly down a well-formed sandbar without a surfer in sight. Under normal circumstances I would be in a pre-surf frenzy, scrambling to get into my wetsuit and hit the water. But today I can't ignore the commotion behind me, no matter how hard I try to focus my attention on the surf. Usually I'm more concerned with unknown dangers that I might encounter when

pioneering a new spot, like rocks, sharks, or hostile locals. Yet none of these factors are currently giving me cause for worry. The waves aren't big or dangerous, there is no feeding frenzy, and there's not a local in sight, but my stomach is turning as though I'm heading out for a virgin session at 30-foot Mavericks.

The reason for my hesitation is not one I'm familiar with, although the surf crew during the 1980s in Humboldt County, California, could certainly relate. Behind me looms a massive industrial pulp mill, one of many in this part of

Chile, all of which are notorious for spewing thousands of gallons of toxic waste into the ocean. This particular mill, which occupies the entire beachfront in the city of Constitución, has towering stacks that bellow a foul stench, and a pipeline that spews mysteriously brown liquid less than a cutback away. But damn, the waves sure are good.

I remember a story I was told some years ago by a guy who surfed this place. About 10 years ago, one of the first gringo ex-pats to settle in the area had driven down to this spot. The waves were perfect, and as usual there were no surfers around. The mill's toxicity was already notorious, and local surfers avoided it like the plague. But, as he described it, the waves were just too good to resist. Finally, against his best judgment, he paddled out. He caught a few great waves, but within minutes grew dizzy. After 20 minutes he paddled for shore, overwhelmed by nausea. By the time he reached the beach, he was retching.

His Chilean friends told him afterwards that he was crazy to even attempt it. "If you had seen how good it was," he replied, "you would have surfed it, too." No doubt many of us would have made the same leap of faith, or perhaps you'd call it surf-induced stupidity. And here I am, the next idiot in line, ready to ignore common sense and be a human lab rat.

Constitución is known as "Constipolución" by many surfers, but this is not the only pulp mill polluting the waters of Chile. A company known as CELCO owns the majority of the nation's pulp processing plants, including this one. CELCO has been responsible for numerous environmental disasters over the past five years.



Opposite: Brett Schwartz grinds the coping at one of Region VII's best sand-bottom pointbreaks, not so many miles from Rio Itata, where the new pipeline carrying CELCO wastewater flows out into the ocean.

The pulp mill in Constitución and the pointbreaks that surround it. The area has been so polluted for so long that surfers generally avoid it, despite its obviously high-quality surf.



Above: Keith Malloy engaging in footloose hijinx at one of Constitución's better points. The contrast of natural beauty offshore to the industrial wasteland onshore was striking – enough to make us want to keep our cameras on the ocean.

Here: 'Danger – Contaminated Water' – an accurate sign. But, thanks to the labor of many, a large new treatment plant has been approved for the area, a rare victory for environmentalists and surfers in Chile.



In 2005 the Rio Cruces watershed was devastated by an "accident" that killed thousands of rare black-neck swans after a spill from a CELCO mill flooded a Wetlands Reserve. Then in 2007 the company was responsible for another toxic disaster that killed millions of fish in the Mataquito River and estuary, once a healthy and productive fishery (in fact, the very same river that lets out here, where I am currently considering a potential toxic overdose). Thousands of local fishermen and their families were out of work with no way to

put food on the table. Most worrisome is CELCO's new facility, the largest pulp mill in Chile, at Nueva Aldea. Its pipeline, which is nearly complete, will pump waste directly into the sea near some of the world's best left pointbreaks, just to the south of where I am now nervously biting my nails.

There is a growing grassroots movement against CELCO's practices, led by an alliance of fishermen, surfers, and environmental groups. In Mehuin, Mapuche fishermen have twice blocked attempts by CELCO to construct a

## CELCO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR A TOXIC DISASTER THAT KILLED MILLIONS OF FISH IN THE MATAQUITO RIVER AND ESTUARY

waste pipeline into the sea near their village. Using their wits and a great deal of bravado, their small flotilla of fishing boats thwarted both a scientific vessel and an armed naval warship escort, breaking the ships' windows with slingshots and sinking their zodiacs with spears. But one wonders how long the little guys can hold out against such a behemoth of an industry. CELCO's ties run deep within the Chilean government.

The pulp industry is essentially in the business of turning trees into paper. Trees are clearcut from huge monoculture plantations (which have replaced many of the native forests), trucked to the mill, ground into sawdust, then bleached and processed to create the raw material from which paper is made. The bleaching process is generally the most

harmful to the environment, but the tree farms themselves are hugely detrimental to wildlife, causing massive erosion, loss of habitat for many creatures, and negative impacts on rivers, notably the build up of stream-choking silt. Pulp-mill effluent is even worse, a brew of carcinogenic chemicals that contaminates the water, which then enters the food chain and poisons fish, wildlife, and eventually makes its way into the food on our dinner tables.

I contemplate all these horrid facts as I watch another perfect set roll down the sandbar and into the river. My companion, Josh Berry, who has been watching from the beach, gives the thumbs up. "What the hell," I think. "I'm here to learn, so I might as well sample the filth firsthand." Or at least that's my lame excuse. As I'm suiting up, a man walks by and eyes us suspiciously. He waves his finger. "I wouldn't swim in that water," he says. Then he holds his nose.

So we paddle out anyway and the water is smells foul. It has the slippery consistency of soap with strange bubbles floating on the surface – but we manage to exit the water after a fun session and without any strange tumorous growths on our foreheads or other bodily disfigurements. I feel a little queasy, but Josh feels okay. He does point out, however, "I wouldn't want to surf here every day."

So what does this mean to us? Does this pollution have any effect on our lives if we live outside of Chile? And if so, what can we do to help the situation? For one, there is really only one ocean in the world, and it's all connected. What happens in other parts of our ocean inevitably affects us all. Secondly, we as

consumers of paper can force the industry to clean up its act. The United States is the largest consumer of pulp from Chile. So the next time you go to buy paper, think twice about what you purchase. It's not difficult at all. Choose the paper with the highest recycled content possible and, better yet, ask for a product that is chlorine-free. If the store doesn't have any, ask why not and see if they can order some. There are many pulp mills in the world that produce chlorine-free paper, and as we start demanding it, the market adapts. In fact, this magazine is printed on 100% recycled chlorine-free paper – a few

years ago, there were no other mags printed like this, now printers all over the world are offering the cleaner option to the numerous publications that want to make the change.

Paper doesn't cost much compared to the damage the industry is doing to the environment, so make your choices wisely. Someday, the fish will thank you. And so will the next generation of groms who hit the water.

*Founder and former president of Save the Waves, Will Henry is now at-large on behalf of the organization, filing regular "eco-warrior" reports for The Surfer's Path.*



**Clockwise from right: Raph Bruhwiler speed blur at a Region VII pointbreak. Here, the fishery and the fishing community still thrives. Boats enter and exit a lagoon through the lineup.**

**Clear-cut forest plantings in Region VII, smack-dab in the middle of the pulp mill heartland.**

**James Pribram takes a closer sniff at the lagoon in Pichilemu, where you can almost hear the toilets flushing.**

**A forestry worker mills lumber on-site at a clear-cut, Region VII.**

# CHILE

## Simple Pleasures and a Blue Mission

BY JAMES PRIBRAM

**Alone in what seems to be in the middle of nowhere,** driving west on a rugged dirt road, the sunrise in my rearview mirror, the full moon setting straight ahead ... My mind is free as my eyes ping-pong back and forth between the road ahead and the road behind. I've never experienced such a sight ... or such a moment of bliss. I can't begin to describe just how beautiful this moment in life is, perfectly captured in the most amazingly clear and vibrant colors ... and then lost to the next moment.

Reds and oranges blaze the sky behind, as this pure Jesus-like white light of moon screams before me. Somewhere in the world young boys and girls are lying on their backs in the countryside staring up at the sky, dreaming their own dreams. This is my dream ... searching for perfect waves.

Chile has come a long way in the world of surfing, a sport now anchored here by big-wave superstars Ramon Navarro and Diego Medina. With these two guys leading the charge, surfing is big and certain to go bigger. Just last year the country hosted its first WCT event in perfect, grinding, hollow lefts – an extreme showcase of surfing in the rugged crux of this lower east corner of the South Pacific wild.

Rugged ... to say the least. And, yes, the water is cold. It's May, which corresponds to November in the Northern Hemisphere. It's been said that if you can surf well in Chile, you can surf well anywhere. Just getting used to wearing a 4/3 full-suit was a good start for me ... then the booties. Some wear gloves and a hood. I remember my first trip to Chile in 2000. I was with Hawaiian Roy Powers, who absolutely hated surfing here because of the frigid waters, but to me the cold is only a part of what makes Chile rugged.

At most spots you have to scale down huge cliffs, often to get to an extremely treacherous beach. Then you have to negotiate the paddle out through exposed reef with cross-currents running like Class-5 rivers. At some spots the paddle out can take all your energy leaving very little for catching a wave. Then, when you finally catch one, you have to contend with kelp so thick it can stop you dead in your tracks and pitch you into those monstrous black rocks that loom straight ahead.

All in all, there are so many variables in surfing here ... it's unbelievably challenging. Despite this, the crew of surfers I'm with on this trip will likely have less of a problem than most who come here. Will Henry, founder of Save The Waves, has put together an all-star cast of surfers who rip and are environmentally active. We're here to begin filming a new documentary entitled *All Points South*, which aims at detailing the sensitive environmental issues at the crux of today's surfing in Chile. In this spirit, I'm honored to be traveling with well-seasoned journeyman Keith Malloy, Canadian coldwater king Raph Bruhwiler,

surfer/filmmaker extraordinaire Timmy Turner, and Huntington Beach hero Brett Schwartz. Huge. Flat. Warm. Freezing. Hollow. Mushy. Hey, if there are waves, these guys are out there, no matter. With smiles on their faces, too – which is probably what I admire most about them.

We often try to split into two groups to soften the crowd factor and to show respect towards the local surfers. Actually, at this precise moment, cameraman Vince Deur and I are driving west towards the coast and a little secret spot we happen to know, while the rest of the crew heads for more points south.

### THE MISSION

Chile will always be a special place for me. It was only a year before this that I commenced my first 'eco-warrior' project with Save The Waves and *The Surfer's Path*. Since then I have been to Panama, the Canary Islands, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, and Japan, reporting on the environmental issues that threaten their coastlines. I have traveled with Will Henry on most of those trips, and along the way we've met rare individuals, like Josh Berry and Dave



Left: Racing into the inside section of this wave, Jamo ricocheted off the lip, crumpled, and felt a jolt of pain in his neck. Things, as they were flowing along, were interrupted.



Left: In this part of Chile, fishermen still use oxen to haul their boats into the ocean. It's small-time, old-school fishing in a place that's being overwhelmed by industry.

Here: Cristian Merello and Favian Farias head back to their cabaña after yet another long and lonely session, somewhere in Region VII. Alfredo Escobar

## IN FACT, SOMETIMES LESS REALLY IS MORE, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COMES TO CONSIDERATIONS OF OUR ENVIRONMENT.

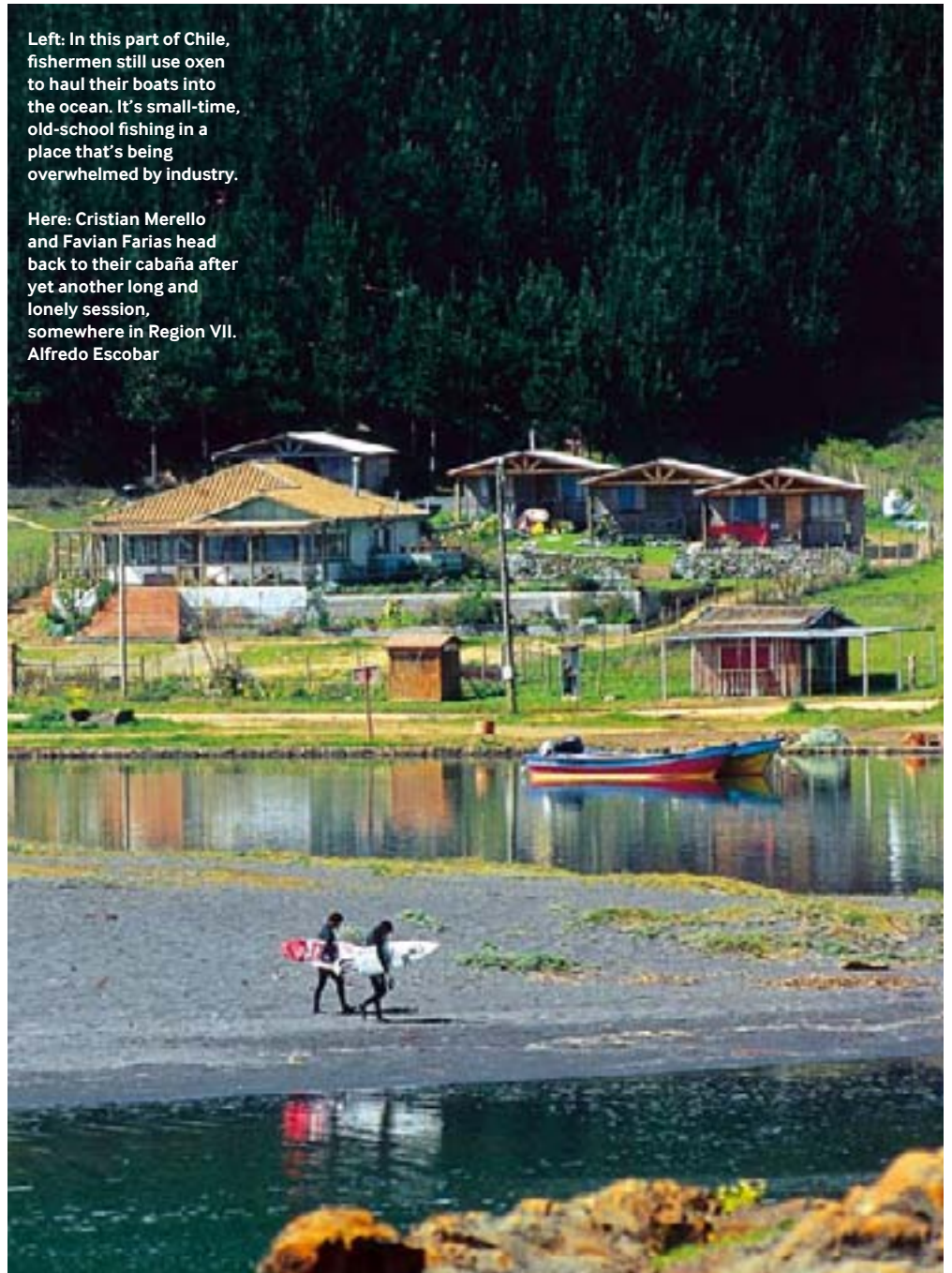
Rastovich, who are out there fighting the good fight on behalf of surfers everywhere. We've been to parliament in New Zealand, marched for the Rio Itata, met with government officials in the Canaries ... all for the same cause: saving the waves – for this generation and for every one thereafter.

A couple of years ago the film *Blue Horizon* featured a segment on Rasta surfing in Chile. I remember watching in awe – not because of his surfing ability (extraordinary; he reveled in the empty lineups choosing to surf on any board except a conventional thruster) but because he seemed so inspired by all that rugged wildness and Chile's unique character.

Watching Rasta surf Chile in *Blue Horizon* re-motivated me – not so much in the act of surfing, but by catalyzing a new appreciation in me of this South American land and its people's way of life. Watching the fishermen work the seas and the rivers, using oxen to pull their boats in and out of the water, witnessing this simple but intricate way of life ... it makes me want to live more like that, enjoying the simple pleasures of life. It reminds me that we don't always need more. In fact, sometimes less really is more, especially when it comes to considerations of our environment.

### THE EXPERIENCE

This particular day of surfing was one of the most beautiful and stunning that I have experienced. First off, the wave is one of the few in this part of Chile that you don't have to scale down high, precipitous cliffs to get to. And it's sheltered from the vicious Humboldt Current. In fact, it's like a playground – a left that breaks just offshore and ropes for a couple hundred yards down the beach. And on this



day, the waves that peeled down the beach were a dazzling, pure cobalt blue. Simply amazing.

On the point above the wave stood a huge white cross. The cross was connected to a seawall, which had been colorfully painted by local artists. With 4-6ft peeling perfection, it was a scene just made for the surf movies. The weather was fine: 78 degrees, a slight offshore wind blowing.

During my epic (and marathon) five-hour session, I met an Australian surfer. He and his girlfriend had been traveling all around South America and landed at this spot some three months earlier. They found themselves unable to leave – the beauty, the way of life, the perfect

waves. They had hopes of returning some day to live there full-time.

### THE ADVENTURE OF TRAVEL

In life, you never know what the next day might bring, and, for me, the very next day nearly brought me a lifetime of sorrow. We were surfing a double-overhead wave that was reminiscent of a left-breaking Makaha, complete with backwash at the end of the ride. It was a blustery cold offshore day, we were all out surfing together – one of the few times on this trip – and for me it would be my last. Trading waves with the likes of Timmy, Brett, Raph, and Keith was like surfing in full-on

expression session. On each successive wave each surfer seemed to push it a little further ... and a little further ... and a little further.

While there were actually better waves elsewhere this day, this spot was the one deemed best for our photo needs. In my mind, you should always try to surf the best waves, but when traveling with photographers, it's always about the most photogenic location, and this was one of those times and places.

I had just gotten a wave all way to the beach and was running up the point, when Will (who was shooting stills) shouted, "On your next wave go as fast as you can and do a big floater across the lip." Okay boss!

So on my next wave, which wasn't really big or gnarly (alas) but did have a lot of backwash, I came flying across the face as fast as I could and went for a highline speed turn into a floater. Somewhere between making it and doing it, I got swatted by the backwash and came unstuck, got bucked hard off my board then reconnected with it. When I landed, my legs buckled and instantly I felt a sharp, knifing pain running from the right side of my neck all the way down into my right foot. Not good.

I wasn't wearing a leash, and my board had washed in. My legs were already somewhat numb because of the cold, and my main concern was that I could move my legs. Luckily I could, and I washed in.

Timmy Turner (who recently underwent his own near-death experience and arduous recovery) was the first to help, then came Will.

The level of pain was insane, and I can take a lot of pain. Turns out I had compressed two vertebrae and separated some ribs, all which still bother me today. Perhaps the most bizarre part of the subsequent ordeal was the ambulance ride and the ancient hospital I was taken to. The nearest one wasn't equipped to handle the severity of my injury, so I was loaded up into another ambulance and taken to

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another hospital, where the doctor thought my pain was feigned, as in some sort of scheme to procure pain medication.

Personally, I don't even like recalling this story, so I'll leave it at this: make sure the people you travel with are people you can count on in a crisis. Thankfully, my mates had me covered.

#### THE PATH OF LIFE

The more I travel, the more I look back on my trips with clarity. Clarity being the sense that the whole trip just seems like a dream, because in some real sense it is.

In this particular dream, I enjoy watching men and woman holding hands, walking and picking grapes off a tree with smiles. (You don't see that in Orange County.) I see men wearing big sombreros, riding magnificent horses, traveling from here to there in the most ordinary way. I see a man in his 70s, trying with all his might to herd his sheep back together after a car had spooked his flock. These moments I vividly recall and can continue to watch in awe, watching and knowing that in some parts of the world life is still lived in a very sincere and simple way, and Chile is one of those places.

Peace.

*James Pribram of Laguna Beach, is an award-winning environmental activist and a roving surfer who goes wherever the eco warrior's path leads him.*

*Thanks to XS Energy Drinks for putting Will and Jamo out there for us.*



**Above: James Pribram in the local hospital, getting a real taste of socialized medicine. The doctor eyed us suspiciously. He was convinced we'd made it all up to get cheap pain medication.**

**Left: Chilean charger Ramon Navarro biffs a rarely surfed beachbreak near Pichilemu on a north wind day.**

# One Battle Is Won

By Nicolas Recordon

Our pristine Chilean ocean is in danger due to an archaic, egotistical, and underdeveloped environmental norm forced on its citizens by an entrenched political machine. The government bureaucrats of Chile see the ocean as a bottomless receptor of industrial waste, and the local mining, forestry, and manufacturing industries take advantage of this national weakness to produce at full speed and lowest cost. Historically, we as Chileans have not been sufficiently involved in the political process to be able to demand that our public authorities – and the world at large – must remedy the problem. Our global competitiveness as a nation is largely indebted to the vile practices of environmental abuse.

In effect, we are being dishonest with the earth. In general, we have been too carefree with our ocean and its environment, not merely polluting its waters with industrial waste, but also defacing our shoreline with garbage and poorly planned cities.

But all is not lost. The ordinary citizens of Pichilemu creatively and peacefully reclaimed the art of political wrangling and harnessed the power of the press to succeed at rejecting the sexily misnamed development project “The Underwater Outflow for Pichilemu Wastewater” (more commonly known as a raw sewage pipeline emptying into the ocean). The activists, surfers, fishermen, and common citizens of Pichilemu were able to unify and demand the construction of a modern tertiary sewage treatment facility, hence avoiding an ecological disaster for Chile’s Surf City.

Chile’s central coast is often referred to as the California of the Southern Hemisphere. It’s an endless coastline of points, bays, rocky cliffs, and gray beaches fed by



ALFREDO ESCOBAR

Above, clockwise from top left: Cristian Merello, Leo Acevedo, Diego Medina, and Ramon Navarro – four moments of rippage by a quartet of Chile’s most talented carvers.

sand from large rivers that drain the mountains.

The Humboldt Current bathes the entire length of Chile in cold water from the Southern Ocean, and the added force of constant swell from the Roaring Forties is a potent vehicle in the transportation of enormous volumes of sand that constantly feed the points and bays of Chile, resulting in continuously changing sandbanks and forcing the local surfer to be a nomad, searching for the best waves. This perfect union of sand, rock, and point attracts thousands of local and foreign surfers to ply the cold waves of Chile.

Pichilemu, Chile’s surf capital is a small city of 12,000 permanent residents with three excellent waves: La Puntilla, Infiernillo, and, the most famous, Punta de Lobos. In the summer months thousands of Chilean and foreign tourists invade Pichilemu, and its population reaches 100,000. The outdated sewer system collapses every summer, and the sewage overflow gets dumped into the Laguna Petrel, a small wetland rivermouth that empties with rain storms into the

shorebreak directly inside of La Puntilla and the town’s most popular tourist beach.

Worried more with the image this creates than with water quality, public health and aquatic life, the authorities and the water company decided to construct a sewage pipeline to bypass the mess on the beach and dump everything into the ocean less than a mile offshore. The government’s environmental “regulation” allows this to happen, so construction of the pipeline was begun. But local citizens reacted with outrage and excellent organization, making authorities and government understand that the future of this beach town is in its coastal beauty, its waves, and the friendliness of its people. As a grassroots union of citizens, we demonstrated that waves cannot be environmentally mitigated, and that they are an irreplaceable inheritance for humanity. The proponents of the pipeline could not prove that the pipeline wouldn’t pollute the water and the health of local fishermen, tourists, and surfers. Pipeline proponents also failed to demonstrate that the sand bottom

and the wave would not be destroyed by the pipeline construction. The battle was won. (SAME PAR) Indeed the water company, ESSBIO transformed itself, offering a truly environmentally friendly alternative that not only improves ocean and freshwater quality but also generates more local employment than a brutish pipeline. It was, in short, a politically correct decision.

But can we as Chileans stop the myriad other pipelines being built? Can we eradicate this corporate environmental blackmail that declares, “if we don’t build polluting industries, your people won’t be able to make a living?”

Up to date environmental rules and a system to oversee developments is urgently needed in Chile. Are transnational companies interested and capable of supporting this rapid change?

We need help.

*Nicolas Recordon is a Chilean surfer activist. To assist, go to [lafkenmapu@gmail.com](mailto:lafkenmapu@gmail.com) (translated from the Spanish by Josh Berry)*