

# Biz Buzz EXTRA

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# Ocean recreation outfits buoyed by economy, drought

The decline of water levels in bodies of freshwater in California is drawing more tourists to the sea

By Sally Buffalo Taylor  
Special to The Tribune

Vincent and Emily Shay opened Avila Beach Paddlesports in 2010 with just eight kayaks. Five years later, the couple and their crew of 10 are putting over 500 people in the water on busy weekends. Waitlists for their 45 paddleboards and 126 kayak spots sometimes creep to an hour or more, and the business is bursting at the seams of its 130-square-foot office.

“Recreational paddling has just exploded,” Vincent Shay said. “We just got busier and busier and busier.”

They aren’t the only ones. Ocean-based outfits spanning the San Luis Obispo County coast report a strong upturn in businesses recently, buoyed by an improved economy and higher tourist spending, which hit \$1.5 billion last year.

**JONI SANTA ANA**, left, Camille Dionisio, Dan Ando and Shannon Ando cruise the waters around Port San Luis on the standup paddleboards they rented from Avila Beach Paddlesports.

TRIBUNE PHOTO BY JOE JOHNSTON











**STACKED KAYAKS** are ready for rental at Avila Beach Paddlesports at Port San Luis, top.

**MIKE TAYLOR**, left, Nate Ayers and Andre Gower wait to climb aboard a Patriot Sportfishing charter for a morning of fishing out of Port San Luis, center.

**CAPT. MICHAEL PERVIN** guides the Tiki Boat while Thomas Pauley speaks to the cruise patrons about local landmarks and history as the boat pulls away from the dock in the Morro Bay harbor, bottom.

TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY JOE JOHNSTON (TOP, CENTER) AND LAURA DICKINSON (BOTTOM)



"People just have more money to spend," said Annie Clapp, one of the owners of Chablis Cruises, a two-story riverboat in Morro Bay that offers champagne brunch cruises and private charters for weddings and other events.

## AN OCEAN FULL OF WATER

There's another, somewhat unexpected, factor driving the uptick in tourism here — the state's extended drought. People who might normally recreate or vacation at a lake or river now have to head to the coast to find water.

"You're not going to sit by a dry lakebed and have a water experience," noted Steve Hennigh, owner of Good Clean Fun, a 40-year-old surf and paddle shop in Cayucos that's busier than ever, both in retail sales and rentals, lessons and tours.

Among the biggest beneficiaries of low lakes and dry rivers are the county's ocean sportfishing operations.

"People are coming here to get their fishing fix," said Bruce Harwood, manager at Virg's Landing, which began in Morro Bay in 1954 and came under new ownership last year.

With the season opening a month earlier than last year and rockfish limits raised to three — thanks to rebounding populations from the establishment of marine protected areas and the elimination of trawling — sportfishing operations are poised for a successful year. The improved economy is icing on the cake.

"People are spending more money on jigs, fishing lines and the like," Harwood said. "They have more disposable income."

But a confluence of favorable circumstances doesn't necessarily ensure smooth sailing.

On Easter Sunday, just five days into the season, Patriot Sportfishing's largest boat caught fire and burned to the waterline before the Coast Guard arrived from Morro Bay.

"All we could do was sit on the dock and watch it burn," said manager Debi Wood.

The operation lost half of its capacity, a



reality they'll likely face for the rest of the season.

Bay Cruisers/Lost Isle, which rents electric boats and runs Tiki Boat Tours in Morro Bay, couldn't reopen as planned after months of upgrades because of complications over licenses with the Coast Guard.

"They can hold you hostage," said manager Emily Pauley.

Then there are all the typical challenges of running a small business, as most of these are.

"We're always dealing with one thing or another," Vincent Shay said.

For outfits in Avila Beach and Morro Bay, there's also the cost of operating in the harbor districts — 6 percent of the receipts in Port San Luis and 3 percent in Morro Bay.

## EXPANDING HORIZONS

Still, many of these businesses are seizing the opportunity to grow, physically or in what they offer.

Virg's Landing recently remodeled its

tackle shop and added online reservations, increasing retail sales and bookings.

"Sometimes I'll come in and there will be 25 to 30 reservations from overnight," Harwood said. "It makes it real easy."

They're also planning to launch sunset dinner cruises in the near future.

Chablis Cruises is starting to offer school trips and outings targeted at senior bus tours as a way to use the vessel outside private charters and weekend cruises.

And after four years of renting electric boats, Bay Cruisers/Lost Isle added the tiki boat and tour two years ago and recently expanded its tiki-themed retail shop.

Shell Beach Surf Shop, following a huge increase in lesson bookings, started a summer surf camp last year that's already expanding this year.

Many kayak and surf shops are adding stand-up paddleboards to take advantage of the rapid rise of the sport, the fastest growing in the country, according to the Outdoor Foundation, with participation increasing al-

most 40 percent from 2013 to 2014.

Two million people went paddleboarding last year, according to the Outdoor Industry Association, which didn't track the activity before 2010. That's more than went surfing — a sport that's been around far longer.

Avila Beach Paddlesports began renting paddleboards a few years ago, after ear surgery prevented lifelong surfer Emily Shay from getting in the water. They started with five boards, often called SUPs, and couldn't keep them in.

The 45 they have now still aren't enough some days, and the business is aiming to expand significantly to accommodate demand and their ever-growing fleet of boards and kayaks, one of the largest in the area.

But expansion, especially around busy waterfronts with limited space, doesn't come without growing pains.

The Shays, like others who run harbor-based businesses in the area, have worked hard to create space for recreation in a port

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**STU SILVANI**, left, owner of Shell Beach Surf Shop, used travel to the coast from the Central Valley on weekends to surf before he bought the surf shop. Above, a Patriot Sportfishing charter boat heads out to the waters off Port San Luis with a full load of passengers looking forward to good fishing.

long dominated by fishermen.

The couple has collaborated closely with the fishermen and the harbor patrol to make the area safe and welcoming for all parties. They created a wind map for the harbor now used by the harbor patrol, boaters and fishers and also worked to open up Fisherman's Beach for kayak launches.

"We created recreational paddling here," said Vincent Shay, whose business earned TripAdvisor's Certificate of Excellence. "It didn't exist before."

Dennis Krueger, who owns the Kayak Horizons rental shop with wife Debby, remembers when Morro Bay was almost the sole province of the fishing community.

"Now on weekends, it's full of people enjoying the bay and having a lot of fun," he said. "I feel blessed to be able to do this at this time of my life."

## SHARING THE STOKE

It's a feeling shared by many of the people who have carved out a living helping others enjoy something they love, and a number of them have started or joined efforts to share their passions with those less fortunate.

Van Curaza, who owns the eponymous surf school in Avila Beach, founded Amaz-

ing Surf Adventures seven years ago to help people overcome challenges through surfing. The nonprofit has helped hundreds of wounded veterans, at-risk youth, and disabled children and adults through programs such as Operation Surf.

The organization also runs Stoked 2 Surf, a program for kids with cancer, in partnership with Surfing for Hope, another local nonprofit that counts four area surf shops among its supporters: Shell Beach Surf Shop, Central Coast Surfboards, Moondog-gies Beach Club and Pancho's Surf.

The Shays started the Pay it Forward Paddling Project to introduce underprivileged and at-risk youth to paddling and let them experience the ocean and its wildlife. Inspired by the Tom's Shoes model, the couple sets aside \$10 from every kayak or stand-up paddleboard tour booked to cover the costs.

Vincent Shay recalls one group they brought over from Raisin City, a small community near Fresno: "Only two kids had ever seen the ocean before."

Even business as usual is a labor of love for most of these proprietors.

Stu Silvani used to drive out here from the Central Valley on weekends to surf. When he found out the Shell Beach Surf

Shop was closing in 2009, the wine and liquor salesman took the plunge, quitting his job, moving out here and buying the shop to see if he could make a go of it.

By working hard to develop ties in the community and forge relationships with area hotels to drum up business, Silvani is now able to support himself as well as four part-time shop employees and five surf instructors. But it's not really about the financial rewards.

"It's a lifestyle business," he said, one that allows him to live the way he wants, sharing his love of surfing through lessons and talking to folks in the shop, holding surf movie nights in the nearby courtyard, and taking off on exotic surf trips, often with customers in tow.

"I get to meet board shapers from all over the state," he said. "I wouldn't get to do that if I didn't have the shop."

Up the coast a bit in Avila Beach, the Shays echoed similar sentiments.

"This is like our living room," Emily Shay remarked as she swept her arm around the sparkling bay, full of paddlers, boats, otters and all kinds of marine life.

Vincent Shay added, "We have to pinch ourselves, we feel so lucky every day."

