



## The First European Adaptive Surfing Seminar compiled know-how and experiences to ‘spur the worldwide growth of Para Surfing’

- **Representatives of the International Surf Association, the International Paralympic Committee and other well-known organizations spoke at the Seminar**
- **ISA has already started the process for adaptive surfing to become a Paralympic sport**

### **Fuerteventura, 8<sup>th</sup> of November of 2017**

Accessible tourism, surfing competitions, occupational theory and Paralympic classifications. These four topics might not seem to have much in common at a first glance; but for two days, on the Spanish island of Fuerteventura, they walked hand in hand around a common denominator: adaptive surfing. The island hosted the First European Adaptive Surfing Seminar. The event –that had amongst its goals to lay the foundations for adaptive surfing to become a Paralympic sport- gathered Paralympic athletes, representatives of the International Surf Association, the International Paralympic Committee and organizations such as Play and Train, host of the Seminar and devoted to granting people with impairments access to sports. The participants explained some of the accomplishments achieved in the accessibility of para surfing and also shared ideas on how to face the many remaining challenges. All of it aiming one main goal: ‘to spur the worldwide growth of para surfing’.

### **Adaptive surfing as a way to improve health and wellbeing**

Play and Train International Projects Manager, Mariona Masdemont, opened the seminar. During her intervention, Masdemont welcomed all the participants and explained one of the Play and Train Erasmus+ Project related to surfing. Partly funded by the European Union, this project combines the efforts of three organizations from Spain, Portugal and Italy to foster the access of youngsters with disabilities to surfing.

“Boys and girls with disabilities do not enjoy the same opportunities to practice sport as their able-bodied peers”, Masdemont explained. The project, she said, tries to bridge those difficulties by providing support with the cost of equipment, offering trained staff and adapted facilities to people with disabilities who wish to practice sport. Masdemont also stressed the “improvement on health and wellbeing” that the participants get from surfing. “Surfing improves physical aspects. Surfing improves psychological aspects. Surfing, beyond being a sport, is a lifestyle”, she said.

That very philosophy is shared by Joao Zamith, member of the Portuguese organization Surf Clube Viana, who is also part of the Erasmus+ Project. This organization puts its emphasis both on surf and accessible tourism. For people with impairments, Zamith said, “travelling can be a real challenge”, since most of them





have “access needs that can become a huge obstacle when going on holiday”. “Finding information on accessible services, checking luggage on a plane, or booking a room with special access needs often proves to be difficult, costly and time consuming”, Zamith underlined.

On this point, Zamith said that “accessible tourism is about making it easy for everyone to enjoy tourism experiences”. And he particularly stressed that “making tourism more accessible is not only a social responsibility: there is also a compelling business case for improving accessibility as it can boost the competitiveness of tourism in Europe”. “Evidence shows that making basic adjustments to a facility, providing accurate information and understanding the needs of disabled people can result in increased visitor numbers”. “Improving the accessibility of tourism services increases their quality and the enjoyment of all tourists. It also improves the quality of life in local communities”, he added.

It is under all these premises that both the Surf Clube Viana and their High-Performance Centre are run. Since their foundation in 1989, Zamith explained, they offer facilities with “full handicap accessibility” and accessible tourism itineraries, they conduct studies on accessible tourism and provide courses of surfing, body boarding, stand up paddle, skate and adaptive surfing. The non-profit aspires to be “the perfect destination for ALL surfers”, Zamith said.

### **ISA aspires to “create a global platform for universal access to the sport”**

For their part, Alex Reynolds and Jon Richards –Associate Membership and Development Manager and Adaptive Surfing Technical Director of ISA- put into numbers both the surfing and the para surfing global phenomena. While the association has already attained great numbers for surfing (120 million surfers worldwide, 103 member federations, programs in all 5 continents that encompass all disciplines of surfing), adaptive surfing still has room for development. Although there are no data regarding the global adaptive surfing population, the ISA has 22 nations represented in this discipline.

The association’s mission, Reynolds and Richards explained, is “to create a better world through surfing”. “Surfing is a sport with incredible youth appeal that transcends all barriers of wealth, status, race, creed, gender, or physical ability”, ISA’s President Fernando Aguerre said. In line with that goal, “the ISA has taken an active role in the development and advancement of Para Surfing to create a global platform for universal access to the sport and enable para surfers the opportunity to achieve sporting excellence and inspire others”, they explained. “The ISA’s leadership has spurred the worldwide growth of Para Surfing by unifying efforts across the globe and encouraging each of our National Federations to adopt this discipline”.

In order to do so, the ISA has launched a Coaching and Instructing Program for Adaptive Surfing. Amongst its goals, this program aims “to create an adaptive surfing Coaching Manual and International Accreditation, to gather content from adaptive surfing organizations and National Federations and compile it into a manual as required by the international standards, training for volunteers and adaptive coaches and instructors” as well as to “increase accessibility for adaptive surfers to receive coaching when they wish”. Furthermore, ISA has not only fostered several World





Adapting Surfing Championships, but also aims to “lobby for para surfing to be included in the 2024 Paralympic Games in Paris”.

### **On the path to become a Paralympic sport**

In order to achieve so, the ISA set different goals for this year, such as “ensuring ISA adaptive surfing classifications are IPC Code compliant”, “further defining Adaptive Surfing Eligible Impairments and Minimum Impairment Criteria” and “align with IPC Standards and Rulebook”, the ISA members detailed. On May 2017, the association applied to obtain IPC’s recognition as the International Federation for the Para Surfing, which was granted by IPC in July.

Reynolds and Richards explained some of the ISA positive aspects when it comes to that lobbying. The ISA leadership has a “strong relationship with the organizing committee” and it has a “well-organized National Federation with the support of the French Paralympic Committee”, who has a good “understanding of the value that Para Surfing will bring to the Games”, and there is a “long history of surfing in France”.

In this regard, IPC’s Media Director Craig Spence indicated that in order to become a Paralympic sport, the first step is to be an IPC “recognized international federation”, which ISA has already achieved. The discipline must also have an anti-doping program, an athlete classification system, a worldwide participation in terms of countries and continents (a minimum of 32 countries in 3 IPC regions for individual sports), a quadrennial competition program and rules and regulations. Moreover, the IPC also takes into account “where the sport is regularly practiced” and “the initiatives undertaken to make that sport more attractive”.

Once an International Federation has been recognized, they must complete several steps to apply for Paris 2024. The IPC’s Governing Board will have the last word and approve Paris 2024 program on January 2019.

### **“The best kind of therapy is beach therapy”**

Finally, the occupational therapist Joao Taborda Lopes commented on the benefits of surfing in disabled people. Persuaded that “the best kind of therapy is beach therapy”, Taborda is devoted to “promoting social inclusion of people with disabilities through leisure, sports and cultural programs”.

First off, the therapist pointed out the benefits of water sports in the process of “functional reeducation”. Water, he explained, has a “stimulating and relaxing effect”. It also “improves mobility” and “balance”, due to the “absence of gravity” -which also provides a “comprehensive muscular work”- and “offers a wide range of sensorial stimuli”. Taborda also delved into the psychological and socialization benefits of adaptive surfing. This sport helps people with disabilities to “find healthier ways to interact with their surrounding world”, “develop social skills and concepts like leadership, mutual respect or self-help”, he added.





Taborda's therapeutic focus, he said, intends to foster "basic principles such as equality and opportunity, social justice and respect for human dignity". His activities aim to promote a "business culture around the new opportunities associated to the surfing industry", as well as to carry out "research and divulgation" of technical and scientific knowledge to trainers and other personnel involved in the monitoring of people who practice para surfing. But through adaptive surfing Taborda explained he also seeks to enhance "voluntary work and social cohesion" and provide "equality of opportunities to people with risk factors of social exclusion".