

AS SUMMER rolls in, it might be worth reflecting on the different beach cultures that have come to define East London as a seaside city.

The most striking recent development has been the growth of the popular ebuthlanthi (the kraal), also known as Mauritius, and situated in the parking lot behind Eastern Beach.

But to understand the East London seaside scene one must go way back to the turn of the 20th century.

The focal point then was Orient Beach and the famous Beach Hotel, built in 1906. A Victorian esplanade with bandstands, Punch and Judy stalls, bathing boxes for women and sheltered tidal pools was created.

In this era, the middle classes generally went to the beach fully clothed and women avoided tanning, which was seen as a sign of being lower class and rough.

Indeed, while working class men frolicked in the waves on the beaches, often in the nude, the middle classes "promenaded" on the beach front, taking leisurely strolls, drinking tea and listening to music.

In the 1950s, as the city suburbs had spread along the coast, a new kind of beach culture emerged which was driven by new ideas about nature, healthy living and family fun. These ideas came from Australia and the US rather than Britain, where the seaside was always associated with funfairs, pleasure palaces and entertainment and less with swimming or bathing.

The new image of the beach was associated with new forms of leisure. Glen Holland's great little book, *The Reef*, describes how this unfolded in East London with life-savers, paddlers and surfers staking their claim of the coastal turf.

At this time caravan parks became national institutions offering white suburban families access to the wilderness and wild beachscapes away from the centre city at places like Nahoon, Blue Bend, Bonza Bay and Gonubie.

Beach apartheid consolidated beach access for whites and re-enforced the idea of beaches as places for family fun and the pursuit of nature.

What the suburban revolution did was to create and entrench an image of the beach as pristine, unspoiled and natural – as a place where you dressed down rather than up (into a bikini or a speedo) and lay in the sun for hours to get a tan that would make you look exotic, young and middle class.

It is this idea of the beach which has underpinned the drive to ensure a place like Nahoon Point is declared a fully-fledged nature reserve, which cannot be destroyed by property developers or beach revellers. The same instincts define many other struggles to preserve the natural splendour of the South African coastline.

But this idea of the beach is not what defines ebuthlanthi. It is a celebration of culture rather than nature. It is not a beach experience predicated on swimming, diving or surfing. In fact, the precinct has its back to the ocean and faces the city. There are no rusty bakkies or 4x4s with surfboards on their roofs.

When life's a beach



EL's evolving beach cultures could be a catalyst for development and inclusivity, says Leslie Bank

PROMENADING: In the early 1900s East Londoners fully clad in Victorian styles would congregate at the main tearoom at Orient Beach

Pictures: SUPPLIED

There are no rusty bakkies or 4x4s with surfboards on their roofs. Ebuthlanthi seems to represent a new kind of frontier of freedom for black East Londoners and especially the new middle class, who used to socialise at Eastern Beach before they were sent to Fuller's Bay by the apartheid state.

So, at one level, the move back into Marina Glen is about reclamation, taking back a beach that was lost to apartheid. But it is also about saying this is "our beach" which does not belong to the city council, or to any other body or developer. It belongs to "us".

Ebuthlanthi is not essentially about family fun – it is about occupying a prominent public space, embracing

urban styles and announcing the arrival of a new social class in the city. Starting as early as phuzu Thursday and running through until Sunday the precinct hums as black city residents and middle class wannabes mix and socialise around cars, braais and music. Smart city cars fill the parking lot, while new cell-phones and flashy clothes are part of this beach scene too.

But it is also a very mixed social space which attracts different groups at different times and can be extremely dangerous as the attack on lawyer Dali Mpfu and the recent rape of two Swedish tourists attests. Moreover, every Monday morning the precinct is awash with litter, wrappers and beer bottles. The orange-jacketed municipal workers clean it all up before the cycle starts again.

These dynamics are all part of the ebuthlanthi scene, just as they were

integral to Blackpool and South-end on Sea in England at the turn of the 20th century, when the English working classes started visiting middle class seaside resorts in their droves for weekends of revelry and fun.

In fact, in its olden days the East London seaside was all about entertainment culture, display and consumption, about asserting and demonstrating modernity and class position and less about swimming, tanning and nature. Even the tidal pools were sheltered from the rough seas.

Indeed for much of the 20th century East London was actually marketed and developed as a British-style seaside resort with hotels, pageants and fun to be had by all on the esplanade. That is presumably why we still get the old rickety roundabouts and a funfair at the end of the year.

Now if ebuthlanthi is indeed a major attraction in the city that is defining a new kind of beach consumer culture, it begs the question: how can this experience be enhanced and developed in positive ways, ways that will attract visitors and develop a new set of products and experiences that will add longer term value and dynamism to the area.

Can the positive aspects of the ebuthlanthi scene be the catalyst for the redevelopment of the esplanade.

If we can accept that there is space for a diversity of beach cultures, something more dynamic and inclusive could emerge from the ebuthlanthi phenomenon.

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RECLAIMING: African beachgoers like these from the early '60s who were later barred from white East London beaches are taking back territory



PLACES OF NURTURE AND NATURE: These Nahoon lifeguards of 1953 symbolised the emphasis on the environment and a healthy outdoor lifestyle