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Posted: Monday, May 17, 2004 - 10:16:48 pm HST

ARCHIVES

Geologist Blay: 'ignorance' may be main drowning cause

By Jon Letman - Special to The Garden Island

Posted: Monday, May 17, 2004 - 10:16:48 pm HST

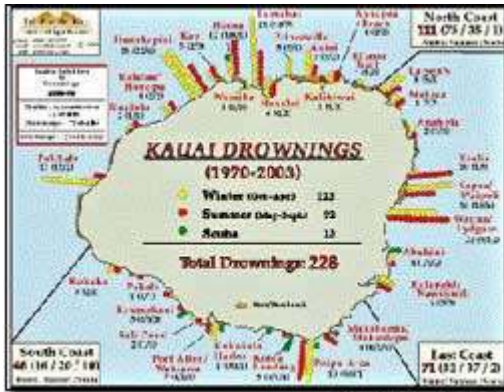
Editor's note: This is the second in a series of articles on ocean safety.

Local geologist, educator and ocean-safety advocate Dr. Chuck Blay first developed a keen interest in ocean-safety issues while completing his walk around the edge of Kaua'i in 1986, when he closely examined the forces that have created some of Hawaii's most beautiful and potentially deadly beaches.

With data compiled from 1970—2003, Blay's research shows that incidents of shoreline drowning (swimming, snorkeling, surfing, etc.) have increased by an overall average of one incident per year each decade (1970-1979, 5.3 per year; 1980-1989, 6.7 per year; 1990-2001, 7.7 per year).

This increase, although slight, comes despite a concerted effort to help improve ocean safety on Kaua'i.

It appears that Hurricane 'Iwa and Hurricane 'Iniki both helped indirectly in bringing a temporary respite from drowning incidents, as fewer visitors came to Kaua'i and, as a result, there were fewer drowning deaths in 1983 (three



Chuck Blay / TOEK
This chart shows the seasons and places of drownings on Kaua'i dating back to 1970.



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incidents), 1992 (two incidents) and 1993 (four incidents).

In an effort to share his findings, Blay has posted detailed graphs pertaining to ocean safety on his Web site, <http://www.teok.com/Drownings/drownings.html>.

One graph illustrating the demographics of drowning victims on Kaua'i between 1970 and 1996 shows 75 percent of the victims are visitors with a median age between 30 and 50, and 90 percent of them are men.

Why are victims overwhelmingly middle-aged male visitors? Blay suggests a combination of factors. Middle-aged men may be more likely to have reached the level of affluence necessary to visit Kaua'i. On vacation, perhaps unaccustomed to swimming in the ocean and most significantly, they may possess the dangerous combination of being physically unfit, over-confident and under educated about potential ocean hazards in Kaua'i.

Blay notes, "Ignorance of hazardous ocean conditions may be the most common reason for drowning."

He adds that ocean-safety education needs to begin long before beach-goers even pack their trunks and fins. If it were up to Blay, detailed ocean-safety information would be found on island promotional Internet sites, inter-island flights, in all guidebooks, hotel literature, and at all major beaches.

"As it is now," Blay says, "most beaches have the same stock signs. If a tourist sees signs like 'Dangerous Current' and 'Shorebreak' at every beach, they are less likely to recognize the profound differences in the risks at, say Salt Pond versus those of Hanakapi'ai," Blay says.

Blay would rather see small, billboard-like beach signs that offer beach-specific explanations about potential hazards that clearly illustrate the physical forces at work which can turn against a swimmer.

Citing the impact of an unofficial sign that listed the names of drowning victims near Hanakapi'ai Beach, Blay says, "detailed signs would never fly, though," insisting that legal arguments about liability prevent more informative signs from being posted.

Meanwhile, the same places see similar accidents again and again.

Romantic and remote beaches like Lumaha'i, Hanakapi'ai and Polihale attract tourists and locals alike, but the average visitor to Kaua'i does not have the benefit of having grown up learning the hazards of these beaches, and is more likely to swim out or even "just wade in" to the seemingly inviting waters.

And while more lifeguard towers have been erected in recent years, Blay points out that some of these are located in places where they are least needed.

"Look at Po'ipu and Lydgate Park," Blay says. "Both have lifeguard towers beside the well-protected baby beaches." Blay also feels that major resort beaches like those in front of the Sheraton Kauai Resort in Po'ipu and the Hyatt Regency Kauai Resort & Spa, also in Po'ipu, should be required to provide water-safety personnel.

More lifeguards, towers and equipment would be helpful, Blay notes, adding, "You cannot have lifeguards everywhere, but you can post signs that paint a realistic picture of common risks on most beaches."

In the past, Blay regularly attended the Ocean Safety Task Force meetings, and insists he is still driven to advance ocean-safety education, but sometimes feels the issue is mired in bureaucratic red tape and concerns about liability and litigation.

"Usually, it all comes down to politics and money," Blay laments. "Meanwhile, the number of drowning victims is not going down."

Legislative wrangling aside, Blay commends the Ocean Safety Task Force and Kaua'i's water-safety personnel, saying, "They are well-trained, extremely dedicated, and very effective in the specific areas to which they are assigned."

Blay adds, "Good lifeguards are not just men and women with binoculars looking cool up in a tower all day. They are down on the beach, communicating and interacting with the public about ocean-safety issues, informing people they observe more likely to be potential victims."

Blay himself says that when he sees someone in a potentially dangerous situation on the beach, he approaches and in a friendly manner informs them of the natural forces at work on that particular beach, sharing his own knowledge

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with someone who might have otherwise played obliviously in dangerous surf or a strong current.

"Usually they say, 'thanks, I had no idea.'"

Jon Letman is a freelance writer based in Lihu'e.

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