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## ARCHIVES

### Kaua'i's chief lifeguard discusses ocean safety

By Jon Letman - Special to The Garden Island

Posted: Sunday, May 16, 2004 - 11:08:38 pm HST

Sometimes the difference between a fun day at the beach and tragedy can be as simple as taking five minutes before jumping into the water to observe the ocean, reading the posted warning signs and asking a lifeguard and other beachgoers about current sea conditions.

"Most incidents occur on days with small to moderate waves, which can be quite deceptive," said Kaua'i County lifeguard supervisor Kalani Vierra. A lifeguard since 1997, Vierra is responsible for overseeing lifeguard personnel from Ha'ena to Kapa'a, with his counterpart Kaleo Ho'okano in charge of Kapa'a to Kekaha. Currently there are 29 lifeguards employed by Kaua'i County, manning ten lifeguard towers around the island.



Jon Letman

**County Lifeguard Supervisor Kalani Vierra** stands next to one of the many water safety signs posted by Kaua'i County across Kaua'i.



foot long custom made rescue boards designed to cut through rough surf, Kaua'i's lifeguards respond to distress calls from swimmers, divers, boaters or anyone else in need of help. Vierra said Kaua'i's lifeguards have also recently been responding to kite surfers whose equipment fails them far from shore.

Vierra noted that while he feels ocean safety awareness is improving, every year



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sees preventable drowning deaths on Kaua'i. Vierra spoke of the positive impact of increased signage on Kaua'i's beaches, along with the jet ski program which has placed six jet skis at the disposal of county lifeguards, but added that more lifeguards in towers would be welcome at beaches like Kee, Lumaha'i and Polihale. New towers and staffing, of course, require money and as Vierra put it, "Good advice is free, but paying a lifeguard to watch a beach costs money."

Speaking of Kaua'i's unique ocean hazards, Vierra said that it was Kaua'i's strong currents that often prove deadly. "Typically drowning victims in Hawai'i are men between 30 and 50 years old," Vierra said. "Often they are full of confidence and don't know their own limitations or Kaua'i's seas. Eighty percent of our rescues are boogie boarders with no fins caught in a current they cannot swim out of." Vierra said that in Kaua'i, visitors account for roughly 80% of all rescues.

Vierra added that he felt it was the responsibility of activity desks and resorts which rent equipment to visitors to make sure they are given adequate gear (i.e. board and fins as a set) and to impart, at the minimum, basic ocean safety information as well as the various seasonal risks involved with particular beach areas. Vierra also said he would like to see an ocean safety education program developed especially for those working in the visitor industry.

Vierra's ocean safety mantra is, "more education, more education."

One major component of ocean safety education is the Junior Lifeguard Program, sponsored by the County of Kaua'i and offered in partnership with the Hawai'i and Kaua'i Lifeguard Associations. The program focuses on direct interaction between lifeguards, the Kaua'i Fire Department, paramedics and Kaua'i's youth (offered for 13—17 year olds). This year accomplished north shore surfer, 13-year old Bethany Hamilton, will also participate in the program which teaches kids about prevention, rescue and basic ocean safety.

The 20-hour training (4 hours a day for one week) will be held at five locations (Salt Pond, Po'ipu, Kalapaki, Kealia and Hanalei) in June, July and August. There is no charge for the program (although donations are welcome) and participation is on a first come, first serve basis. All participants must have a signed waiver by a parent or guardian.

Additionally, Mayor Brian Baptiste will be declaring the last week in May (May 23—May 31) Ocean Awareness Week. During this time, expect to see and hear a lot of Kalani Vierra and the Kaua'i lifeguards as they take to the airwaves, schools, streets and beaches, promoting safer beach going practices.

For more information or to sign up for the 2004 Junior Lifeguard program, call the Kaua'i County lifeguard office at 241-6506.

This report is the first part of a three-part series on Kaua'i watersafety.

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