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Risks prompt call for cooperation, advocacy

Isle safety and tourism officials join forces as data show drowning is the top cause of death for visitors

By Allison Schaefer

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People enjoyed the water and sunshine at Waikiki Beach on Wednesday. "Our visitors are at a much higher risk for ocean-related harms than residents because they don't have knowledge and understanding of our ocean conditions," said Jim Howe, city Ocean Safety operations chief.



In the last four years, drowning was the leading cause of death among visitors to Hawaii.

Over the last decade, visitors to the islands were eight times more likely than residents on a per capita basis to drown in the ocean.

These statistics were revealed this week during a two-day Ocean Safety and Drowning Prevention Conference in which Hawaii visitor industry officials and ocean safety experts joined forces for the first time to try to combat the disturbing trend.

"Visitors have low risks of injury, with the exception of drowning, near-drowning and spinal cord injury," said Dan Galanis, who works for the state Department of Health's EMS and Injury Prevention Systems Branch.

While Hawaii is generally safe for visitors, tourism officials and ocean safety experts statewide say, high surf, strong currents and winds, coastal cliffs and dangerous marine life are just some of the hazards beachgoers face. The risks mount when a visitor is seeking thrills and is unfamiliar with the ocean, weather conditions and safety procedures, they say.

"Our visitors are at a much higher risk for ocean-related harms than residents because they don't have knowledge and understanding of our ocean conditions," said Jim Howe, city Ocean Safety operations chief.

From 2009 to 2012, visitors to Hawaii made up 77 percent of the 151 spinal cord injuries attributed to ocean activities, Galanis said. During the last decade, they represented about 52 percent, or 282, of the total 538 drownings statewide.

Drownings also accounted for 48 percent, or 162, of all visitor deaths from 2008 to 2012, according to the state Department of Health's Injury Prevention and Control department.

The conference, which ended Friday, prefaced the start of

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the first Hawaii Ocean Awareness Week, which Gov. Neil Abercrombie proclaimed for next week.

Abercrombie's proclamation urged the formation of partnerships between county, state and federal agencies to promote ocean safety through awareness programs, prevention strategies, hazard forecasts and collaborative training throughout the year.

Ralph Goto, administrator of the city Ocean Safety and Lifeguard Services Division, said he hopes conference will help ocean safety operations increase their resources.

"The visitor industry is bringing the people here, but we are the ones who are looking after them," Goto said. "We have an islandwide service, and we are mandated by the city to be the primary responder in ocean cases. To do that, we need twice as many resources as we have now."

Goto said he has about 165 full-time and 70 part-time employees in his department, but that more are needed as more residents and visitors take to the ocean.

"There are so many people in the water every day doing a myriad of things," he said. "We work 365 days from dawn to dusk, but our budget is only \$9 million in comparison to over \$100 million for the Fire Department and about \$200 million for the Police Department."

Goto and other safety officials also said they were concerned about next year's sunset of laws that offer legal immunity for lifeguards and employers who are performing their duties. "In the past, when we didn't have this protection, Maui and Kauai counties removed some of their lifeguard protections," he said.

While Goto said ocean safety is unlikely to get direct funding from the Hawaii Tourism Authority, he said the conference offered an opportunity to pool resources and increase advocacy for important safety programs.

Hawaii Tourism Authority President and CEO Mike McCartney said he hopes the conference and other initiatives provide an opportunity to share ideas to reduce the number of drownings and ocean injuries.

Several years ago, McCartney said HTA gave the Hawaiian Lifeguard Association money to develop the Hawaii Beach Safety website, oceansafety.soest.hawaii.edu.

HTA recently added an electronic brochure on water safety — in English, Japanese, Chinese and Korean — to its travel-smarthawaii.com website, which offers visitor safety tips. By the end of the year, the agency also hopes to complete a short safety video that could be shown on airplanes and shuttles or hotel rooms.

Enlisting greater community support also could make a difference, said Hawaii island lifeguard Joy Mills-Ferren, who was honored by the county's Ocean Safety Division on Friday along with other lifesaving colleagues Waika Koanui, Sean Gallagher and Charlie Oliveri.

"The Daniel R. Sayre Memorial Foundation helped provide the equipment that helped us rescue and revive a visitor who nearly drowned at Magic Sands Park on the Big Island," Williams said. "The community also helped with the rescue, which took place on a busy Saturday. I still remember the whole beach calling out this man's name as he fought for his life. People really cared. It was a chicken-skin moment."

TOURISTS, BE CAREFUL

Fatal injuries among visitors in Hawaii from 2008 to 2012:

CAUSE OF DEATH	TOTAL	PCT. VISITOR DEATHS
Drownings	162	48%
Suicides	36	11%
Falls	28	8%
Other injuries	20	6%
Undetermined intent	21	6%
Motor vehicle crash/occupant	17	5%
Poisoning	15	4%
Motor vehicle crash/motorcycle	13	4%
Motor vehicle crash/pedestrian	8	2%
Aircraft crash	8	2%
Homicide	5	1%
Suffocation	5	1%
Motor vehicle crash involving bicycle	4	1%

Source: *Hawaii Department of Health, Injury Prevention and Control*

CORRECTIONS: >> A table on Page A6 Saturday showing the causes of fatal injuries to visitors in Hawaii from 2008 through 2012 also listed the percentages of those causes to the total number of visitor deaths. The table mislabeled the column of percentages.

>> Joy Mills-Ferren was the Hawaii island lifeguard who was honored for helping to rescue a visitor to Magic Sands Beach. Her last name was misspelled in a Page A6 story Saturday.

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