Death In Paradise Is All Too Frequent For Visitors To Hawaii

Yet state, county and even tourist officials are doing little to try to reduce what's become one of the highest rates of visitor deaths in the nation.

ABOUT 13 HOURS AGO - BY NATHAN EAGLE, WASHINGTON BLOOM

Married 32 years, Jane and Bob Jones did a lot in life together. They raised a family, served those in need and traveled when they could.

They died together, too.

The Joneses drowned in Hawaii on a vacation aimed at escaping wintry Washington state weather for sun and sand.

On a Friday last March, the couple decided to explore the warm waters of Hanauma Bay, a popular tourist destination half-hour east of Honolulu. They were a few hundred yards from the beach in an area called Witches Brew. Witnesses said one of them got in trouble and the other tried to help. Lifeguards responded but it was too late.

A longtime social worker, Jane, 56, coordinated free medical clinics and advocated for the homeless. Bob, 60, a retired Navy captain, was a volunteer firefighter and worked for the Troops to Teachers program that helps military personnel start new careers.

"They were real 'sparplugs' for the community, always looking for ways to serve the marginalized among us and working for justice," David Ammons, a fellow parishioner at Westminster Presbyterian, told The Olympian newspaper. "Together, they made a real difference."

The Joneses were not unlike others who have come to Hawaii for vacation, lured by the majesty and mystique conveyed by countless visitor publications, movies and magazines, songs and social media.

A longtime social worker, Jane, 56, coordinated free medical clinics and advocated for the homeless. Bob, 60, a retired Navy captain, was a volunteer firefighter and worked for the Troops to Teachers program that helps military personnel start new careers.

"They were real 'sparplugs' for the community, always looking for ways to serve the marginalized among us and working for justice," David Ammons, a fellow parishioner at Westminster Presbyterian, told The Olympian newspaper. "Together, they made a real difference."

The Joneses were not unlike others who have come to Hawaii for vacation, lured by the majesty and mystique conveyed by countless visitor publications, movies and magazines, songs and social media.

But like dozens of other visitors, the Joneses died in a manner that's becoming all too familiar in the islands.

Drowning is by far the leading cause of death for tourists in Hawaii and snorkeling is the most common activity that leads to visitor drownings.

State health department records over the past decade show that Hawaii's visitor-drowning rate is 13 times the national average and 10 times the rate of Hawaii residents.

Since July 2012, at least 147 visitors -- nearly one a week on average -- have died in Hawaii from injuries suffered while doing common tourist activities like swimming, snorkeling, hiking and going on scenic drives.
Accidental Visitor Deaths, July 2012 - December 2015

Data for Honolulu County was provided by the Honolulu Medical Examiner. Data for all other counties was self-reported by Civil Beat. All data is estimated. All locations are self-reported.

The state, counties and the tourism industry spend millions of dollars on lifeguards, warning signs, informational websites, safety videos and other strategies to keep people safe.

But a Civil Beat review of tourist deaths over the last three and a half years suggests safety is far from the top concern when it comes to the 8 million visitors who travel to the islands every year.

Hawaii sends clear and consistent safety messages to target visitors before they arrive. Even the Hawaii Tourism Authority’s main safety website contains broken links to online resources.

A sign warns visitors of the dangers at Queen’s Bath on Kaua‘i. Ocean safety experts worry that the state isn’t doing enough to prevent visitor drownings.

Although many visitors now use social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and other online sites to plan vacations and find activities, government officials and tourism industry leaders have done little to develop a social media presence that promotes safety.

Experts say the key to injury prevention is getting that message in front of visitors as many times as possible — whether it’s through websites like Yelp or in-flight videos and brochures in hotel rooms.

Former lifeguards, emergency room physicians and other safety experts have for years lobbied state legislators and policymakers to prevent injuries and deaths by getting timely and useful information — current ocean conditions, the latest trail closures, general safety tips — disseminated as widely as possible.

But local and state officials have paid little attention to efforts to strengthen safety programs or test whether those that are in place are effective.

For instance, tourism officials have started playing videos of drownings at airports and car rental companies, putting more brochures in hotel rooms, passing out pamphlets and adding more warning signs. But it’s unclear whether tourists are paying attention.

Dr. Henry Dowsn, an emergency room physician and longtime ocean-safety advocate on Kaua‘i, estimates that only a small number of people see the videos at baggage carousels — although there is evidence that at least one man’s life was saved as a result of information his son obtained from the airport video.

Dowsn has been focused instead on expanding statewide a rescue tube program that’s been successful on Kaua‘i. The tubes have been in place at unguarded beaches around the Garden Isle for more than six years, and rescues using them are regularly reported.

The Hawaii Tourism Authority recently created a new in-flight safety video under a 2013 legislative mandate, but it’s not shown on any flights yet from the mainland or overseas and some consider it too soft on safety.
Mary in the industry now question whether the video was a waste of time and money given the historic lack of cooperation from airlines—and logistical challenges—to show safety messages. Plus, many passengers are simply not paying attention to the in-flight videos and entertainment because they are focused on their smart phones, tablet, book or magazine.

Commercial tour companies tout their own safety programs in an effort to convince tourists to try parasailing, scuba diving or rent various thrill craft with them. In general, experts say many of these companies give visitors a safe way to participate in an activity—often safer than on their own when there’s direct supervision.

But there’s no good way of knowing what companies are operating abovetopboard and which ones are just trying to make a quick buck. The state only started requiring an operator to obtain a commercial permit in late 2016. And to avoid liability, the program leaves it up to the businesses to hire qualified, competent staff.

Meanwhile, nonprofits have been created whose focus is to help visitors cope with tragedies experienced while on vacation in Hawaii, whether it’s how to send a body to the mainland or arranging counseling to deal with an untimely death.

These are the kinds of things that guidebooks don’t provide, online sites underplay and the tourism industry shy away from.

Yet, the Aloha State’s drowning rate for visitors is so much higher than the national average. Hawaii’s visitor drowning rate was 5.7 per 1 million visitor arrivals—down from those in states like North Carolina and Florida, where drowning rates are 3 and 3 drownings per 1 million visitors, respectively.

Drowning has been the leading cause of fatal injuries for visitors for decades. From 2005 to 2016, 49 percent of visitors who died of injuries did so by drowning, compared to just 9 percent for locals, according to state Department of Health data.

It’s particularly significant on Maui and Moloka’i, where visitors comprise almost three-fourths of all fatal injuries. Experts say that is partly due to the stronger water presence on the neighbor islands compared to Oahu. On Maui, for instance, roughly one in five people on any given day is a tourist.

Clearly, experts say, Hawaii residents know something about staying safe in the ocean that tourists don’t, and that vital information is not reaching those who need it.
“There’s a Hawaii vacation mentality that ‘I can do anything’ went here because I’m in paradise,” said Jessica Rich, president of the Visitor Aloha Society of Hawaii. “They take risks here that they would never take at home.”

Some visitors increase their chance of a fatal accident by combining alcohol with a dip in unfamiliar waters or simply exercising poor judgment.

But many fail to understand the risk they are taking. In the first place — inadequate trip preparation, bad decisions by tour guides or a lack of sufficient warning of inherent dangers.

In the last few years, the number of visitor deaths has increased, mirroring the state’s successful push to increase tourism especially from areas on the mainland and abroad that don’t have beaches or the kind of exotic ocean attractions found in Hawaii.

Visitor arrivals hit a new record in November with $94,092 people arriving in that month alone. Just over 40 percent came from the western United States, according to the Hawaii Department of Business, Economic, Development and Tourism.

Japanese arrivals numbered 122,840 and there were 16,000 visitors from the eastern U.S.

With 2016 expected to be another record year for tourism, a new task force is exploring ways to improve ocean safety. In September, a committee of 12 key players from Hawaii’s various tourist and ocean safety agencies met for the first time.

“We’ve done a really, really good job of branding Hawaii. We’ve done a really good job of marketing and getting people here,” said Jim Howe, a longtime ocean safety advocate who chairs the new Drowning and Aquatic Injury Prevention Advisory Committee.

“What I think is missing is that we oftentimes don’t tell people about some of the issues that they may face when they get here, and how to either avoid these. No. 5, if they find themselves in these circumstances, what to do.”

So far, the committee has been working to come up with options to help raise public awareness, both before tourists arrive and once they get here. Some of those ideas include more meaningful and engaging in-flight videos and partnering with online review sites. The committee also is looking at identifying beaches that might need more lifeguards or better warning signs.

“Social media and the Internet are the key players in this game right now,” said Howe, who recently retired from his job as Honolulu’s chief of ocean safety.

“They’re not going out guided tours, but they need that information.”

As more visitors opt for alternative accommodations through Airbnb and vacation rentals, they’re even less likely to book guided activities through hotels that might recommend tour guides who offer safe excursions.
Instead, there are signs of individuals using social media. But these signs don’t provide the same safety advice that a tour guide might when visiting dangerous locations like Kekaha Kai State Park or hiking in the Great Smoky Mountains.

“Many visitors are basically like our toddlers in terms of their understanding of what’s going on at the beach and in the ocean,” Howe said. “This may be a 37-year-old adult, but if you look at their beach IQ, they’re about a 2-year-old.”

That’s part of why every week on average, somewhere in Hawaii, a tourist dies while involved in what should be common — and safe — activities.

Most tourists who die at least a short write up in the local paper or in a news website.

It was the frequency of these stories that caught our attention a few years ago. It’s not the kind of story you see with such regularity anywhere else in the country, even in big tourist markets like California or Florida, or rugged adventure travel areas like Alaska.

The stories, along with autopsy reports and other official records, formed the basis for a database that allowed us to analyze visitor deaths in a comprehensive and compelling manner. Our staff visited some of the sites, too. The old shows, pose the greatest risk for out-of-state visitors. They interviewed numerous ocean safety experts, state and local officials who track visitor deaths, and people who work for the nonprofit organizations that help when tragedy strikes. They tracked down family members who lost loved ones here in the islands.

We created a database of 477 tourist deaths over the past four years, compiled from media reports we’ve been reading since July 2012 along with autopsies from the Honolulu medical examiner. Neighbor Island medical examiners said they couldn’t provide similar reports.

We also relied on a Hawaii Department of Health report for this series, showing non-resident deaths over the past decade.

The data, including the state’s records, are consistent. When visitors die from injuries, the vast majority die by drowning. And of the ocean activities they were doing at the time, snorkeling was No. 1.

In the past four years, people were swept out to sea while climbing on rocks near the shoreline, some perished in car or motor accidents, and several died while hiking.

A significant number of tourists who died were in their 70s or 80s, same, as it turned out, with underlying heart conditions.

“We’re really like to say, ‘Hey, exercise a few months before,’” said Jeff Murray, chief of the Maui County Fire Department. “People should understand their limits, number one, and ask questions.”

Hawaii’s unique ocean conditions can look deceptively mild to visitors. Experts say the physical characteristics found only in the Hawaiian Islands — the way the surf pounds and currents rip — often surprise visitors who were expecting the gentle
The state and counties put up signs warning of unsafe conditions — for instance, high surf or strong shore breaks — but mostly just at public beach parks. These signs are often ignored, and ocean safety experts say they don’t go far enough to deter visitors from going into the water on dangerous days.

Todd Duberman was paralyzed from the neck down while on a family vacation to Maui in July 2014. He saw the sign warning of the shore break — before diving head first into the sand.

“There’s a certain mentality where it doesn’t matter how many signs you put up, I’m still going to frolic in the ocean,” he told Civil Beat.

Guided tours also don’t guarantee safety.

Tyler Mistoff, a 15-year-old star athlete and honor student from New York, drowned during a kayaking trip on the Big Island in July 2012.

He was on a guided tour with a dozen other teens from across the country at lunch, the guides led them down a trail to sea-tide pools and “the real Hawaii.” A rogue wave washed over the rocky coastline and pulled Tyler out to sea. His body was never recovered.

Other visitors get into trouble on their own.

Cheryl Black, 55, was a financial manager at an auto dealership in Texas. She was hiking at Oheo Gulch on Maui in June 2004 when she left her 15-foot-old off a ledge. Firefighters found bystanders giving the woman CPR while she lay unconscious, halfway in the water.

Oheo Gulch, commonly called Seven Sacred Pools, is promoted as a must-see spot on a trip to the Valley Isle.

Cheryl left behind a husband and two sons. Friends and family penned heartfelt memorials, calling her a “warm and wonderful woman” who was “loved by all that knew her.”

Dan Galenik, the state wardenologist who has spent the past two decades analyzing injury data and prevention techniques, said the advisory committee’s formation marks the first time people from around the state have been convened on this issue in a sustained manner.

“I don’t think it’s going to magically solve the problem overnight, but it’s definitely the first needed step for bringing a coordinated approach to this problem statewide,” he said.

Safety advocates say the balance between promoting Hawaii to visitors and protecting them hasn’t shifted far in favor of the tourism industry over the past few decades, but there’s optimism that it can be leveraged.

“There really is a sea change of attitude and kind of perspective that we feel is really timely right now,” said Bridget Valacos, the state drowning and spinal cord injury prevention coordinator.

Hawaii has one of the highest visitor drowning rates in the country. Officials are hoping a new advisory group comprised of known experts and tourism industry leaders will be able to improve safety for visitors.

Her position was created in the past year, and she’s responsible for pulling together the advisory committee over the past six months. Valacos said solid evidence — and the data — will steer the committee.

“Hawaii Tourism Authority has said we realize we are bringing people here and we need to keep them safe, and that’s part of their mission now,” she said. “Being able to partner with them is huge.”

Jodie Otsu’s main responsibilities for the Hawaii Tourism Authority are safety programs, the China and Taiwan markets, and workforce development. She
said keeping visitors safe is a collaborative and collective effort.

Just from a budget point of view, HTPA is mandated to allocate a certain percentage to safety programs. For fiscal 2018, the agency budgeted $488,000, which is $270,000 more than required.

“The key word is balance,” Goo said. “We want to develop consistent, strong messages to inform visitors. But we don’t want to scare them away.”

About the Authors

CIVIL BEAT STAFF

Nathan Eagle

Nathan Eagle is a reporter for Civil Beat. You can reach him by email at nathan@hawaiipulse.com or follow him on Twitter at @nhaleagle.

Use the RSS feed to subscribe to Nathan Eagle's posts today

Marina Riller

Marina Riller is an intern for Civil Beat.

Use the RSS feed to subscribe to Marina Riller's posts today

More Stories In This Special Report

PART 1

Death In Paradise Is All Too Frequent For Visitors To Hawaii

Enter your email to receive Civil Beat's free daily newsletter.