

Paddling at the Ala Wai Canal

By George Wessberg, Club Captain

The closing of the Ala Wai Canal last year proved to be exciting and stressful for our Club. Launching canoes from Kaimana Beach for practice was a new experience for many of our kids and it brought back fond memories for several of our masters paddlers. Then the summer swells returned to the South shore and conditions in the channel changed from tricky to treacherous for even our experienced crews.

Last season the damage to equipment was unexpectedly high, costs for additional staff and whaler use skyrocketed, a few swimmers in the channel were bumped by canoes and we were fortunate that no one suffered serious injuries when canoes ran onto the reef or collided.

By the end of the season we remembered why every crew except the upper division men and women launched their practices from the Ala Wai Canal site—safety. It became obvious to us that the potential liability for injury to our members and others was too great to manage a paddling program of our size from the Club in the future.

We accept that some members resist practicing on the Ala Wai Canal and no explanation will satisfy their concerns. For these few members we made every effort to find an alternative site that would provide adequate parking and access to the ocean.

We attempted to secure a permit for Kaimana Beach or Magic Island. We attempted to rent boat slips at the Ala Wai Yacht Harbor and the Waikiki Yacht Club. We looked at vacant land along the Ala Wai that was closer to the ocean. We even pursued locations between Waikiki and Hawaii Kai. None of these were viable options.

We believe the vast majority of Outrigger Canoe Club paddlers and their parents are reasonable people who will make informed decisions for themselves and their children based upon reliable information. We also accept that some members will elect to join another canoe club rather than practice on the Ala Wai Canal.

We consulted with numerous experts during the past several months to objectively determine the health risks associated with canoe paddling on the Ala Wai Canal. Everyone agreed the Ala Wai Canal is, and always was, classified as a drainage ditch that was not suitable for swimming or fishing.

However, the consensus of these experts was that the Ala Wai Canal does not pose an increased risk for infectious disease in healthy individuals if they follow proper hygiene after every practice and avoid direct exposure of cuts and scratches to the water.

It was also concluded by many of these individuals that the water in the Ala Wai Canal is cleaner now than it was before the dredging and the addition of the bacteria-filtering plants near our practice site. It was pointed out by one expert that bacteria levels and contaminants are higher in the sediment than in the water.

This expert also emphasized that contamination of the Ala

Wai Canal was greatest following heavy rains due to run-off from smaller streams.

According to our records of medically treated staphylococcus infections, three women reported infections during the 2005 season when practices were primarily held on the Ala Wai Canal. Last year, when all practices were conducted from the Club, there were also three infections reported. All of these infections were managed with oral antibiotics and none of these members were hospitalized.

It is encouraging to know that more than a dozen of our Masters Women have been practicing from the Ala Wai Canal site twice a week since September and no one has reported an incident of a medically treated infection. Furthermore, all of the other canoe clubs, Hawaii Canoe & Kayak Team and the ILH paddling programs have returned to the Ala Wai Canal.

Since there are no reasonable alternatives to scheduling the majority of our canoe racing practices on the Ala Wai Canal the Canoe Racing Subcommittee has adopted the following guidelines for coaches and athletes:

Ala Wai Canal Health & Safety Advisory

- Paddlers should wear appropriate clothing to prevent scrapes and cuts.
- Paddlers should use appropriate eyewear to protect against splashes.
- All coaches should be trained to administer Basic First Aid.
- First Aid Kits should be available at the practice site.
- Abrasions or cuts should be treated immediately with disinfectant soap.
- Paddlers with an inflamed sore or cut should seek immediate medical attention.
- All incidents of bacterial infection should be reported to the Canoe Racing Chair.
- Paddlers should rinse exposed skin with water following every practice session.
- Paddlers should wash clothing following every practice.
- Paddlers should protect feet during practice (reef walkers, Crocs, etc).
- Paddlers with open sores or cuts should not practice until wounds have healed.
- Canoe seats should have smooth padding to prevent abrasions.
- Canoe interior should be disinfected on a regular basis.

A pre-season First Aid Course will be provided for all coaches. We have applied for a permit to place a storage cabinet at the Ala Wai Canal Practice Site. It will contain First Aid Kits, disinfectant soap, and several two-gallon sprayers with clean water for rinsing. Our application for a permit from the C&C to construct a permanent shower at the site was denied.