Waikīkī Beach Improvements Benefit Everyone

By Dr. Richard Kelley & Dr. Chuck Kelley

What makes a great beach? Well, that depends on what you are looking for! Around the world there are many outstanding beaches. Some appeal more to niche travel markets, from beach glass combers to nude sunbathers. But when it comes to universal appeal to mainstream travelers, it is hard to beat Waikīkī, which is consistently rated at the top by those who evaluate such things.

On TripAdvisor for example, most rate Waikīkī Beach as Very Good or Excellent. Visitors love the great surf, swimming, people watching, outrigger canoeing, convenient location and the wealth of nearby dining opportunities.

"Dr. Beach," "America's foremost beach expert," rates Kahanamoku Beach, the Ewa end of Waikīkī Beach near the Hilton Hawaiian Village, as the nation's third-best beach. Others, however, note that our beach space is at times quite limited. If you walk down to Waikīkī Beach today, you will immediately see that it looks quite different from its usual appearance. That's because it is in the middle of a huge replenishment project, and tons of sand are being moved around to widen the beach. When the work is done (it is scheduled for completion by the end of April), the widening of Waikīkī Beach will benefit everyone, local residents and tourists alike, and we applaud the state government and its several private partners for undertaking this massive and vital project.

Years ago, before Waikīkī was developed as a tourist destination, there was really not much of a beach in Waikīkī. The streams that flowed out of Mānoa Valley emptied into duck ponds and rice paddies, then drained into the Waikīkī Beach area. The beach itself was small, in places rocky or swampy, and normally covered with seaweed. In some places, there was no beach at all. Over time, as Waikīkī was developed, streams were diverted by the Ala Wai Canal and clean sand was brought into create the type of beach that swimmers, surfers and sunbathers would enjoy.

But these changes took place nearly a century ago. Today most people think of Waikīkī Beach only as a long white stretch of sand covered with sunbathers. Mother Nature is always changing the landscape, whether one is talking about the Rocky Mountains or the Nile River, to name only two of thousands of ever-evolving landmarks. Waikīkī Beach is no exception. In Hawai‘i, the prevailing currents sweep through the Molokai Channel and around Diamond Head and then along Waikīkī Beach. As they pass the beach, they pick up grains of sand and carry them out to sea. Most of the sand is deposited on the ocean floor not far off Waikīkī Beach; it can easily be seen from the air as white patches between fields of darker coral.

As a result of this natural erosion, the beach becomes narrow, and periodically sand has to be taken from these plentiful off-shore deposits and returned to dry land. The last major replenishment of Waikīkī Beach took place in 1985, 27 years ago.

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Since then, tourists, local residents and beach operators have competed for ever-diminishing space. In recent years, at high tide the beach almost completely disappears in some places. At the annual 4th of July Macfarlane Canoe Regatta, which coincides with the high summer tides, there isn’t even room to sit down, and many spectators end up standing in the shorebreak all day.

For years, everyone has recognized the need for maintenance, but actually doing something has been delayed by budget issues and great debates about the best way to restore the beach. Now finally, we are taking action, and improvements are well under way. Under the Department of Land and Natural Resources’ watch, contractors are reclaiming sand from offshore and spreading it along the beach, making it wider and more usable.

Approximately 24,000 cubic yards of sand is being pumped to the shore and spread out to widen by 40 feet the 1,700-foot-long segment between the Kūhiō Beach crib wall and the Royal Hawaiian groin, bringing the beach back to its approximate 1985 width.

That’s enough for another 5 or 6 rows of sunbathers lying head to toe!

Getting to the point where this $2.4 million public-private project could begin took not only years of debate, but massive coordination between multiple parties including the state Department of Land and Natural Resources, state Department of Health, the city’s Division of Ocean Safety, Parks & Recreation Department, Fire Department, Police Department, the Hawai‘i Tourism Authority, Hawai‘i Lodging & Tourism Association, Waikiki Improvement Association, Kyo-Ya Hotels and Resorts LP, and many other concerned and affected groups.

If you visit Waikīkī today, you are likely to see trucks driving along the beach hauling the “new” sand into place each morning. In the afternoon, when the construction work stops, you will see families already spread out on the new sand, enjoying the beach.

The competition for beach destinations has grown global, involving not only traditional destinations like California, Florida, Mexico and the Bahamas, but far more exotic places in South America and Southeast Asia. If Waikīkī is to remain competitive in this global market, we must continue to invest and reinvest in our destination.

The economic value of Waikīkī Beach is enormous. According to estimates of the Department of Land and Natural Resources, if the beach were allowed to erode away, Hawai‘i could lose $2 billion in visitor expenditures, $125 million in tax revenue and 6,350 jobs!

We are extremely pleased to see this project almost complete. Congratulations to everyone who has had a part in planning, funding and executing the restoration of Waikīkī Beach!

1 Dr. Stephen P. Leatherman, “Dr. Beach,” is Professor and Director of the Laboratory for Coastal Research at Florida International University. He is an expert on shorelines and beaches and, in addition to writing scholarly books and articles, he annually rates beaches for their human values. For details see: http://www.drbeach.org/aboutdrbeach.htm

Aerial view shows accumulation of sand between fields of coral offshore Waikīkī

Photo credit: Department of Land and Natural Resources

Before the sand replenishment, Waikīkī Beach was getting pretty crowded. Current improvements will reduce congestion by widening the sand by 40 feet.