

Kipu Falls, Queen's Bath pose serious dangers

Visitors Bureau advises against popular tourist sites

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Nathan Eagle/The Garden Island Kipu Falls: beware.

KIPU — While Kipu Falls in the southeast and Queen's Bath in Princeville may be some of Kaua'i's more popular visitor attractions, they're also some of island's more hazardous places to take a dip.

"It can be very dangerous, if you don't know what you're doing," Kaua'i Visitors Bureau director Sue Kanoho says. "Whether it's the rocks or the rope swing or the falls, it's tourists that are getting hurt out there, not locals."

In little more than a year, two visitors have drowned at the falls and numerous people have been injured. Last week, a 26-year-old man from Kane'ohe, O'ahu, drowned at Kipu Falls while attempting to swim back to the edge of the pond after diving off its 20-foot rock face when he encountered difficulty. He then went underwater and did not surface.

A friend of the victim dove into the water and tried to locate the man, but was unsuccessful. Two firefighters later found the victim on the bottom of the pool.

December of last year, there was a similar incident.

A 48-year-old visitor from Apple Valley, Calif., drowned after he and his son jumped off the top of the falls and into the pool. The two surfaced and the man escorted his son to a nearby rock. The man then began swimming toward the right of the falls, and about halfway there he went underwater and didn't come back up. Rescue specialists later found the man at the bottom of the pool.

Kanoho said she has asked guidebook publishers not to mention Kipu Falls in their lists of attractions because it's unsafe for tourists and because the falls are on private land.

"So number one, it's illegal," said Dr. Monty Downs, an emergency room doctor at Wilcox Memorial Hospital and a longtime advocate of drowning prevention, "and number two, it's really bad. What's worth one death; a thousand people having a good time?"

He said, "The problem with these places is they are exotic and beautiful, but people go there thinking that they're in Disneyland or some paper mache place."

"The Ultimate Kaua'i Guidebook" by Andrew Doughty calls Kipu Falls and Queen's Bath "a real gem," and says tourists should decide for themselves whether the ladder up to the falls and the rope swing are safe. Downs believes the publishers "have blood on their hands" for encouraging visitors to go to such dangerous places without much warning of the risks involved.

"The Underground Guidebook" mentions the falls, but suggests tourists stay away. "Lonely Planet" doesn't mention the falls at all.

"But people Google it," Downs said, "and then what do you do?"

In at least three drowning incidents at Kipu Falls, people were swimming across the pond and suddenly became distressed, went under the water and didn't resurface until rescue crews dragged them up from the bottom of the deep pond.

Local officials say they don't what is causing this to happen.

“I was at Kipu Falls today to put up one of our rescue tubes, and I felt like a doctor showing up at a gun fight with a box of Band-Aids,” Downs said. “The water was so brown. There was a family of 15 there from LA, including the grandfather and teenagers. My stomach was in a knot the whole time.” He estimates about 20 people a year end up in his ER because of injuries sustained at the falls.

“A lot of people end up in the operating room because of the place,” he said. For example, one man hopped onto the rope swing and went crashing into a rock wall and crushed his chest. More typical injuries are serious scrapes and bruises, especially among women, he said.

At Queen’s Bath there are warning signs for visitors alerting them to the dangers, but none exists at Kipu Falls, said Downs. Queen’s Bath is a lava bench, in geological terms, and resembles a massive tide pool.

“It’s exotic and pretty,” Downs said, “but the conditions are completely ridiculous this time of year,” especially when the surf is up. “The only time people should go is in June, July and August because of the north swells.”

In October of 2009, two Mainland visitors walking along a ledge at Queen’s Bath were swept out to sea by a large wave and drowned.

The following November, County Council unanimously passed a resolution urging government agencies and guidebook authors to participate in a concerted effort to address the hazardous conditions.

Rescue tubes are part of a community program, and they are placed at hazardous locations where there are no county lifeguards. So far, the program has paid off.

In August, two teenage boys, both Princeville residents, were clinging to one before being rescued in the ocean off Queen’s Bath. Kaua’i Fire Department plucked the two boys from rough waters after one of them got swept off rocks and the second went in after him with a rescue tube. There are two rescue tubes at the location.

But the bottom line both Kanohe and Downs urge is “just don’t go there.”

“If a visitor comes to you and asks where to go or what to see on the island,” she said, “don’t send them to Kipu Falls or Queen’s Bath.”

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California man drowns at Kipu Falls

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Kipu Falls, which is public, is accessed through private property.

KIPU — A 35-year-old male visitor from Irvine, Calif., drowned Sunday afternoon at Kipu Falls, county officials said.

According to witnesses, the man had jumped off the top off the falls into the pool below at about 2:05 p.m. He was swimming toward the shore when he went underwater and did not resurface, a county news release states. Firefighters and rescue specialists responded to the scene and recovered the body from the bottom of the pool at about 3:05 p.m.

His name is being withheld pending notification of next of kin, the release states. This is at least the fifth visitor to drown like this since December 2006.

In December 2010, a 26-year-old O’ahu man jumped off Kipu Falls and was attempting to swim back to the edge of the pond when he went underwater and did not resurface. He was found at the bottom of the pond hours later after emergency personnel were called to help in the search.

In December 2009, a 48-year-old male visitor from Apple Valley, Calif., drowned after jumping off the falls with his son. The two surfaced and the man escorted his son to a nearby rock. The man then began swimming toward the side of the falls when about halfway there he went underwater and didn’t come back up. Scuba divers eventually found his body at the bottom of the pool.

In February 2008, a 30-year-old visitor from Philadelphia drowned. He had jumped off the falls and surfaced, seemingly OK, when shortly thereafter he went under water. Rescue specialists later found his body at the bottom of the pond.

In December 2006, a 25-year-old Chicago man died after jumping off the falls. His lifeless body was pulled out of the water just before emergency crews arrived at the scene.

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