

# **The Ocean, Crowds, and Alcohol- A Qualitative Analysis of The Aquatic Risk During Dominican Semana Santa in Cabarete, Dominican Republic**



International Surf Lifesaving Association  
Project Dominican Republic  
Semana Sanata Cabarete 2012



Prepared By:  
William Koon  
Manager of International Relations



## **Background of the ISLA Project in the Dominican Republic**

The International Surf Lifesaving Association began operations in the Dominican Republic in November of 2011 by conducting a three-day basic open water lifeguard course that covered basic aquatic rescue techniques, first aid, CPR, and Lifeguard/Rescue systems theory. The second phase of the project was to continue lifeguard education by sending a team of volunteer lifeguards from Southern California to work along side Dominicans during the Semana Santa holiday in Cabarete, Puerto Plata, on the North Coast of the country. ISLA is planning another training in November 2012 in Cabarete with the goal of educating Dominican lifeguard trainers and people that will be able to expand aquatic safety efforts in the country.

The time with the highest rate of drowning in the Dominican Republic is Thursday thru Sunday of the Semana Santa holiday. Semana Santa literally translates to “Holy Week,” and is celebrated the week before Easter Sunday. In Cabarete specifically, the holiday is known all for its big crowds, sponsored beach parties, and drowning incidents. Alcohol, a large non-swimming population, and treacherous ocean conditions in the town combine to form a deadly holiday weekend, and the opportune time for ISLA to make a real impact. More information about ISLA can be found at: [ISLASurf.org](http://ISLASurf.org).

## **Objective of the Semana Santa Qualitative Analysis**

The main goals of the ISLA Semana Santa Cabarete 2012 Project were to: significantly reduce death by drowning in the Cabarte, continue training local rescue personnel, and gather information to better understand the nature of the aquatic risk of this specific holiday weekend. The last goal was a research-oriented element of the project undertaken almost exclusively by of the ISLA volunteer lifeguards, and it aimed at accomplishing two primary tasks. The first was to give an accurate account of the aquatic safety aspect of the holiday in order to realize trends and patterns in public safety pertaining to aquatic risk during the four days. The second is the ongoing process of continuing and developing the analysis of



Semana Santa in the DR to implement preventative and precautionary measures to help manage the aquatic risk during the weekend.

### **Method of Observation**

During the Semana Santa Holiday, ISLA volunteer lifeguards were strategically placed along the beach in elevated platforms to effectively watch the water. The guards had three main methods of documenting events during the day: communication via radio with a main radio operator documenting events, Cameras with video capabilities, and personal notepads. The guards radioed in any type of safety actions taken, and a pre-designated radio operator filled out a radio log each day. All the lifeguards were encouraged to take as many pictures as they could, of all types of situations ranging from alcohol use on the beach to dangerous surf conditions. The last method of observation was largely based upon the volunteer lifeguard writing down quick stories and notes throughout the day and revisiting the notebook later at night in a journal type exercise. At the end of the project we had several hundred pictures, five pages of radio logs, and countless stories recorded by the lifeguards.

### **Method of Analysis**

In order to take all this data and systematically analyze it, the team decided to break down the data into three sections that by consensus were deemed principal elements effecting aquatic safety in Cabarete during Semana Santa. The sections were crowds, alcohol, and oceanic conditions and hazards. These three categories are common aspects in aquatic risk management on any beach in the world, however it was interesting to see how they manifested themselves differently in a different culture and environment.

### **Findings**



As mentioned in the previous section, the data gathered was divided into three categories and will be presented in the same manner. Over all, the ISLA lifeguard team concluded that while each element in itself is dangerous, the combination of two or more of the elements causes a dramatic increase in the aquatic risk of a given beach. This will be discussed in further detail at the end of the section.

### Oceanic Conditions and Hazards

The Dominican Republic has a very unique set of oceanic conditions and hazards due to its geographic location and local weather patterns. Most beaches in the country have very calm conditions common with other Caribbean countries, however certain places on the North Coast are commonly hit with Atlantic swells that catch the public off guard. In Cabarete, the angle of the beach with swells from a particular direction cause extremely large waves, dangerous shore pound, and very strong rip currents. The public has little to no knowledge of ocean systems or hazards, and often become victim to these conditions.

On Thursday and Friday of Semana Santa, a large North swell hit the North Coast of the Dominican Republic causing hazardous conditions at many beaches including Cabarete. Very large shore break became a huge danger for children playing in shallow water who did not recognize the danger of the area that they were playing in. Strong rip currents were also a huge problem that kept the lifeguard team very busy on Thursday and Friday. In general, most people that were rescued or contacted had zero prior information or knowledge regarding any type of oceanic conditions. Many people that were contacted had looks of shock or disbelief when we explained that the ocean was very different from a pool or lake and that extreme caution was necessary.

### Crowds



On Saturday April 7<sup>th</sup> 2012, more than 10,000 people were packed into a 1.5-kilometer stretch of shoreline in Cabarete. In general, having so many people so close together is ripe with potential for dangerous situations involving altercations and accidents. The ISLA team noticed that the two predominant risk factors pertaining to the beach going population at Cabarete during Semana Santa were the sheer size of the crowd, and the large volume of non-swimmers in the water.

As it pertains to lifeguarding in this specific project, having so many people on the sand and in the water made it extremely difficult (and at times impossible) for our small team to keep an attentive eye on every bather. The mass of people and limited resources caused a unique change in the way the team lifeguarded the weekend. Traditional lifeguarding is based on preventative action and predicting rescues before they happen. In ideal conditions, when a lifeguard sees a potential danger on the beach s/he leaves their post and address the issue before it develops into a rescue situation. In the same manner, the lifeguard should enter the water to warn bathers of potential dangers before those dangers become a reality for that specific person or group. With such a large number of people present in the water and limited resources, leaving the lifeguard platform for anything short of saving someone from dying immediately placed an entire area at risk because the lifeguard was no longer watching that water. ISLA volunteers expressed their concern for making preventive contacts because they feared they would miss a more serious situation if they left their vantage point. This made traditional lifeguarding very hard, but also put extreme amounts of stress on the volunteer lifeguards as they are trained to leave the tower often to prevent rescues. The number of people in the water was nerve racking and very difficult to manage throughout the weekend.

The other aspect involving the crowd was that of the non-swimming population. Even though the Dominican Republic is part of an island, very few Dominicans know how to swim. During Semana Santa,



several people arrived in large groups where machismo and groupthink caused several rescue situations throughout the weekend. A common scenario was a group of bathers (almost exclusively male under the age of 30) that would start to swim to an area where they could no longer touch. Being in a group of peers aided a false sense of security in many bathers as they continued to deeper and deeper water, and caused a fear of rejection in others as they continued despite their inability to swim well. Often when the group was 75-100 meters away from the beach, they would turn around and start to swim in, quickly become exhausted, and often require assistance from lifeguards. Other risk factors of the non-swimming population included people entering the water in clothes, people relying on inadequate floatation devices, and inexperience with waves and currents. For pictures relating to population risks see appendix B.

### Alcohol

Alcohol is an intrinsic part of beach culture in the Dominican Republic, however for the Semana Santa Holiday weekend it is used in extreme excess and completely abused. Often, the drowning situations over the Semana Santa holiday weekend are a direct result of alcohol consumption in two general scenarios. The first involved a person under the influence that would enter the water with a false sense of judgment regarding their own swimming ability and the present conditions. The person would swim out to a point where they could not return to shore on his or her own and have to be rescued by a lifeguard. The second involved people literally passing out in the water due to ETOH intoxication. Countless stories were told to the ISLA team of past events where people drown in less than four feet of water because they would enter the water intoxicated and not have the ability to return to shore due to inebriation, even from a very short distance in shallow water.

Drunkenness in the water is also an intensifier of any type of oceanic hazard because alcohol impairs judgment. As stated before, the Dominican Republic has a unique situation regarding oceanic



conditions, however alcohol further blinds the bather to the dangers and risks in the water. It may take longer for a drunken swimmer to notice that he or she is in trouble and they are not capable of managing the situation. In the ocean, those precious seconds could mean life or death for a swimmer.

### The Danger of Combined Elements

A common pattern noticed during analysis of the project had to do with the combination of these three elements of aquatic safety, and the level to which the ISLA volunteer team could manage the situation accordingly. On Thursday, a very large swell made for dangerous conditions but the busses from neither inland cities nor the alcohol companies had arrived at the beach. On Thursday the risk was difficult, but very manageable. On Friday the managing the oceanic risks that presented hazards to bathers in Cabarete was made much more difficult by the increased number of people in the water. By Saturday the swell had died and conditions were much more calm, however throngs of people and alcohol use in excess made for a very difficult situation. On Sunday the alcohol use diminished drastically, but a pretty large crowd remained. In conclusion, when two or more of these main aquatic risks combined, the public safety situation in Cabarete became much more difficult to manage. The danger increased to the public with more people arriving at the beach and more people at the beach utilizing high amounts of alcohol.

### **Implications**

The findings and observations taken from the careful analysis of the ISLA Semana Santa Cabarete 2012 Project will help formulate future aquatic safety plans and devise new ways to prevent death by drowning during Semana Santa. The following will be critical in creating a sustainable operation that continues efforts to reduce drowning:



- Ocean Education- A large part of the rescue activity during the project was due to lack of knowledge regarding ocean conditions (waves, rip currents, shore pound, etc.) It is vital to start educating the public on these matters via internet campaigns, partnerships with local education non profits and schools, and offering proper training to existing rescue personnel in the country.
- Increased Number of Lifeguards- May they be ISLA volunteers or trained Dominican Lifeguards, having more lifeguards on the beach in Cabarete will be essential to keeping the beach safe and increasing the effectiveness of the operation.
- Encourage Responsible Consumption- Reducing the alcohol consumption during Semana Santa will remain a top priority. Partnering with safety groups, the Dominican Civil Defense, and Dominican Alcohol Companies to encourage responsible consumption on the beach will be very important to future safety efforts on the beach.
- Continue Training Professional Lifeguards- The more trained Dominican Lifeguards are working during the Semana Santa holiday, the safer the beaches will become. It is important that ISLA continues training missions with efforts at training Dominican Instructors so that professional lifeguard techniques can be replicated and re-taught throughout the country.

## **Conclusion**

The ISLA Project in the Dominican Republic is committed to efforts that train and establish permanent lifeguard in the country and projects such as Semana Santa Cabarete 2012 are crucial steps in reaching that goal. Funding remains the biggest obstacle in continuing training missions in the Dominican Republic, and is a constant struggle often placed on the back of the ISLA volunteers who already devote their time and energy into these projects. With further support, increased aquatic safety and professional trained lifeguards could easily be a reality in the Dominican Republic.





## Ocean Conditions



**Above:** Two inexperienced bathers enter the water in the middle of a rip current. Both swimmers were rescued when a set came in and made the rip more powerful.

**Below:** Strong shore pound causes a group of bathers, mostly children, to be in unexpected deep water. Shore pound is often a precursor to very short and strong rip currents; lifeguards entered the water to warn swimmers of the danger.





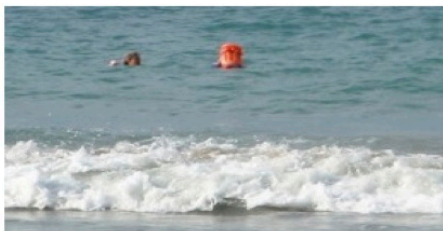
## Crowds/People

**Right/ Below:** Crowds of more than 10,000 pack into a very short stretch of sand in Cabarete.



**Below:** A group of (intoxicated) male bathers swims out farther than their swimming ability. Most deny that they needed help even though they were showing signs of active drowning.

**Below:** Swimmers use blow up lifejackets as a method of protection against their inability to swim.







## Alcohol

**Right:** one of about 50 piles of alcohol bottles collected on Sunday morning on Cabrete Beach. About half of the bottles in these piles were hard liquor other than beer.



**Left:** Passed out man on dry sand. Several people were intoxicated to the point of unconsciousness near or in the water.

**Right:** This was an intoxicated man rescued from about chest deep water based on signs of poor swimming ability and drunkenness. When he exited the water we saw that he was wearing shoes, jeans, two shirts, a hat, and a backpack. The man stumbled up the beach and began to vomit under one of the stages. Law enforcement partners informed the lifeguards later that the man "in wet clothes with a backpack" got on a motorcycle and crashed into a wall causing serious injury to himself.

