

Aquarium takes a ride on surf culture, science

L.B.: 'Catch a Wave' to take 10-month look at origins, risks, role in beachside life.

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By A.K. Whitney, Staff writer

LONG BEACH - The creation and anatomy of a wave, the critters who like to surf it, those who live in the surf zone and the joys of surf culture - from hula dancing to music to surfboards - are all part of "Catch a Wave," which opened Friday at the Aquarium of the Pacific and will continue through March 2008.

But "Catch a Wave" also has a strong and serious environmental message, said Aquarium president and CEO Jerry Schubel.

Apart from celebrating "the awesome power of waves and our union with them through surfing," Schubel said he hoped Aquarium visitors would become more informed about water pollution and habitat destruction, particularly the destruction of coral reefs and mangroves. Both not only provide homes to many species of animal and plant life but also form natural barriers that can lessen the impact of a tsunami.

The Aquarium has partnered with the Surfrider Foundation for this exhibit. Matt McClain, the environmental group's marketing director and also a surfer, said it has gotten "harder and harder to catch a perfect wave."

Water pollution from industrial runoff and sewage has led to

20,000 beaches being closed or declared unhealthy, McClain said. Southern California beaches often get low marks for being polluted, forcing surfers and swimmers out of the water. Long Beach got a particularly bad grade in a report released this week when Heal the Bay monitored 25 different locations around the city.

"It helps remind all of us why the beach is such a precious resource for all of us," McClain said of the exhibit.

Though "Catch a Wave" has elements throughout the Aquarium, the exhibit is focused on the first floor in the Waves Gallery. There, large displays explain how waves are formed and their origins. The waves that hit California in winter start in Alaska; summer waves originate in New Zealand.

The exhibit talks about tsunamis - what they look like (a big sheet of water, not a big wave), how they form (earthquakes or big shifts in the ocean floor) - and warning systems in place in the Pacific Ocean. The Indian Ocean, where tsunamis killed hundreds of thousands of people in 2004, had no comprehensive warning system.

The gallery also has some animals that live in the surf zone, including the kind of sting ray that inhabits (and stings) people on a regular basis in Seal Beach every year.

Elements of the exhibit outside the gallery include daily hula demonstrations by the Blue Cavern, surf zone animals and a surf board exhibit in the Northern Pacific Gallery, animals who like to surf in the sea lion and seal exhibit and a history of Hawaiian surfing in the Tropical Pacific Gallery.

Through the summer and into fall, there will be lectures on waves and surfing and surfing movies (yes, that includes "Gidget") will be screened in the Honda Theater. On Friday evenings in

September and October, Shark Lagoon will feature bands playing surf music.