The Big Kahuna in the Big Apple

No one is likely to confuse the water from the seas around the Hawaiian Islands with that from the Hudson River in New York City. The Hawaiian Islands' water has almost perfect clarity – it is totally unpolluted - a sort of ephemeral quicksilver. In contrast, the water of the Hudson River is a brackish pea soup. It has a density or weight to it that water is not supposed to have, perhaps due to dissolved heavy metals from the old power plants upstream.

But, after all, this is New York City - a city of loud, rude, impatient inhabitants; speeding yellow cabs; trash bags piled high on the sidewalks; and lights and noise 24 hours per day. The water surrounding Manhattan in a way mirrors Manhattan - it is unsettled and dirty. If you venture on to it your senses are overwhelmed just as they are on any street. Confronting you are unexplainable odors; flotsam and jetsam of similarly unknown origins; nerve shaking booms from barges' warning horns, ferries at one, four and seven o'clock, all moving towards you at 20 knots; and 1000' cruise liners performing docking maneuvers with barely enough space. It is on this water New York Outrigger Canoe Club paddles.

We have no sandy beaches from which to launch our canoes, rather, two docks – one of which sank recently sank and no new clubhouse or beachside bars in which to relax after training, that honor is reserved for an old, rusting coal barge. There are no tanned bodies parading along the wet sand to check out - we have Captain Bob - a permanent fixture on the dock in his skipper's cap, aloha shirt and cutoff shorts. There are no perfectly formed waves on which to surf, instead, we battle a current of up to 7 knots, which tugs unsuspecting paddlers into the piers. In preparation for last year's Molokai Hoe, we had to drive one hour every Sunday to Rockaway Beach just to have somewhere safe enough to practice our sea changes. These are the accepted conditions we overcome each day simply to be on the water, but once winter begins the dedication required to paddle doubles.

The racing season on the east coast of the mainland USA is from the beginning of June until the end of September. The weather allows paddling of our oc-6s for a month either side of the season, after which the big canoes are stored. Outside of this time - from December until March - you need to be certifiably fanatical to train. The water temperature drops to freezing point; ice flows down from the upper Hudson River; and snow and sleet cover the launching docks. With these conditions, on a clear day with no wind, hypothermia will result after about 5 minutes in the water. It is difficult to paddle an oc-1 wearing a bulky dry suit and the surf-ski-style of our oc-1s doesn't accommodate the use a spray skirt. So for warmth we wear several layers of neoprene and fleece as well as gloves, booties and wool caps. We don't stray too far from the piers in case a problem does occur. Regularly a wind howls between the skyscrapers and this stops all paddling as its chill drops the temperature to a deadly level - no warm aloha spirit here.

The water quality, however, is improving. Marine life, such as algae on piers, crabs and fish have returned. A porpoise and a seal have been sighted this year. We even swim in it during summer training runs.

Is it any wonder that we salivate over every photograph of perfect paddling conditions shown in each new edition of "Pacific Paddler", or jealously listen to the expatriate Hawaiians' recollections of their Bacchanalian exploits on the islands? Enjoy yourself next time you sit for drinks on the deck of the

Outrigger Canoe Club in the evening and watch an oc-4 crew catch a glassy 8-footer, or you surf an oc-1 across from Koko Head to Waikiki – we wish we could be there with you.

But living in the Big Apple does have benefits. After our cold paddle, we dry off and then have to decide at which of the hundreds of top restaurants to eat, at which super-model packed bar to party or which band to go and see.

Aloha.