

Water Safety Project Spotlight
Water Safety Partnerships Lead to Smooth Sailing at the Bay Model
By: Carla Robinson, SPD Representative on National Water Safety Committee

Water safety, boating, and amazing water recreation adventures might not immediately spring to mind when you think of a brick-and-mortar Visitor Center like the Bay Model. This unique hydraulic Model built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the 1950s to test the impact of proposed projects on the San Francisco Bay-Delta sits inside a 3-acre building on the edge of Richardson Bay, drawing visitors and engineers from around the world.

With more than 280,000 gallons of water in a holding tank flowing from the Pacific Ocean through the Golden Gate into a collection of connected bays, straits, sloughs, and tidal marshlands up to the far reaches of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, the 64-year-old concrete structure is a water project all its own. If you've only seen it in pictures, you might not imagine that your visitor experience will involve stepping back in time into a cavernous space to trek thousands of steps around the 1.5-acre model of the Bay-Delta watershed, which in reality covers more than 75,000 square miles and includes the largest estuary on the west coasts of North and South America.

Once a research facility, the Model was used to simulate currents, tidal action, sediment movement, and the mixing of fresh and salt water. Engineers studied the potential effects of chemical and oil spills, the altering of shipping channels, levee failures, and bay in-filling. Today it is a public education center for learning about the Bay-Delta watershed, water as a vital resource, and the importance of water safety.

While the Bay Model promotes water safety year-round, our high-season water safety initiatives kicked off this year with Wear Your Life Jacket to Work Day and National Safe Boating week in May. We fitted life jackets and set up activity and information tables in the Visitor Center gallery. Employees and volunteers at the Bay Model and San Francisco District Navigation Base Yard donned life jackets to promote the importance of wearing a life jacket when around water. South Pacific Division leadership and Park Manager Chris Gallagher posed for pictures wearing their life jackets on the Bay Model waterfront, emphasizing the importance of water safety to the coastal community.

To celebrate the event, Bay Model staff and volunteers set up banners and water safety activity and information tables to reach a variety of visitors, including children, youth, adult boaters, and those interested in kayaking, paddle boarding, sailing, fishing, and clean boating on San Francisco Bay.

On busy summer days, the tables were sometimes restocked as many as 5 or 6 times for popular items, such as frisbees, life jacket whistles, floating key rings, and "Life Jackets Worn...Nobody Mourns" fishing towels, which proved popular with sailors, kayakers, and paddle boarders. The life jacket whistles and frisbees disappeared every time a group of Sea Scouts or youth from the many summer sailing academies and adventure camps around Richardson Bay paddled over to tour the Bay Model in their life vests.

An activity table with crayons, stickers, and Bobber the Water Safety Dog coloring books welcomed some of our youngest visitors. A COVID-safe Bobber the Water Safety Dog theater with life jacket-draped chairs drew children (and sometimes parents and grandparents) to watch the Bobber the Water Safety Dog cartoons, which proved especially irresistible to anyone under the age of 12. A Bobber face-painting water safety table at the San Francisco District's annual picnic appeared to be a big hit with both kids and adults.

By the time you've finished learning about water safety and exploring the tidal shifts and curving waterways of the concrete structure of the Model, you'll emerge from the Visitor Center onto the Bay Model waterfront with an urge to explore this picturesque waterway on your own in real life. But, where do the Visitor Center's "real life" water recreation experiences come from, and how do we keep our visitors water safe?

Our partners Sea Trek and Call of the Sea take visitors from the Bay Model waterfront and pier out to explore the San Francisco Bay through safe kayak adventures, stand-up paddle boarding, and educational sails around Angel Island to the Golden Gate and beyond. These safe water recreation and educational opportunities are supported and enhanced by the commitment to safety of the larger maritime community of Richardson Bay.

Sea Trek, the first commercial sea kayaking business in California, has a commitment to safety in its adventure experiences, which include kayak treks, stand up paddle boarding, full moon paddles, trips to Angel Island, and even a Golden Gate paddle. Visitors receive a comprehensive water safety training and life jacket fitting for each outing. Because they provide every visitor with a fitted life jacket, the Bay Model does not need to provide life jacket loaner stations. The water recreation outfitter also offers a sea kayak rescue class, as well as monthly CPR and Wilderness First Responder trainings to the public.

Call of the Sea is an educational nonprofit that connects people to the sea using its teaching platforms—the 82' schooner *Seaward* and the 132' *Matthew Turner* brigantine tall ship. Some of the most enthusiastic students are children and youth who sign up for the popular summer adventure camps and educational sails focusing on marine sciences, nautical heritage, the ocean environment, ship building, and how to be safe at sea. Each child receives a life jacket fitting and boat safety training before embarking on the sailboat or tall ship. Call of the Sea also performs regular Coast Guard safety drills to keep the vessels seaworthy and the passengers safe.

In the same way our partners provide experiential water recreation and educational opportunities for our visitors, they also amplify the water safety message like the ripples of an outgoing tide.

During the past year, the Bay Model's water safety contacts reached more than 4,552 visitors and 1,919 social media contacts, which felt like quite a victory given the COVID-19 limitations on indoor gatherings and events. For the sailing season, Call of the Sea made 4,959 water safety contacts for seagoing visitors, and the Sea Trek team provided 28,950 water safety trainings and talks for water recreators throughout the entire year.

The unified commitment to safety and the relationships among USACE staff, Bay Model partners, volunteers, visitors, maritime community organizations, and first responder agencies, such as the Sausalito Police Department and Marin County Fire Department, are a key reason our site has no water-related fatalities. Our team hopes to build on these outreach experiences in years to come as part of our mission to keep the public safe on the water.