

For Rio's Olympic sailors, it's not safe to go in the water

August 2 2015, by Sebastian Smith



The heavily polluted Guanabara Bay, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil is seen on June 10, 2015

Here's a piece of advice for sailors at next year's Rio Olympics: think twice before leaping into the water to celebrate the end of a race.

It is utterly filthy.

"You won't be throwing the winner in," Andrew Lechte, a member of Team Australia's advance party, told AFP.

Pollution and floating garbage have turned Rio de Janeiro's Guanabara Bay, where the sailing and windsurfing contests will take place, into perhaps the world's prettiest garbage dump.

Brown clouds of human excrement, speckled with chunks of feces, gush from two large drains directly into Marina da Gloria, the Olympic sailing headquarters. And that's just a drop in the overall flood of untreated sewage—and general junk—pouring from a metropolitan area of some 12 million people, into Guanabara Bay as a whole.

A boat ride with Lechte onto the bay revealed water fouled with household waste such as bottles and plastic bags—and, apparently, pretty much anything else.

"I've seen a fridge door, mannequins, whole beds, doors and windows," said Airton, who leads one of the so-called "eco-boats," or floating garbage trucks, that officials have deployed in a last-ditch effort to clean the bay in time for the Summer Games. Airton would only give his first name.

"I've seen dead dogs, cats—all animals," he continued. "Even a horse."

Rio's promise

When Rio de Janeiro—a chaotic, violent, but vibrant city—beat Madrid, Chicago and Tokyo in 2009 to host the 2016 Olympics, one of the headline promises in the winning bid was to cut pollution in Guanabara Bay by 80 percent.

Surrounded by forest-clad mountains and overlooked by Rio's Sugar

Loaf peak and the Christ the Redeemer statue, Guanabara is picture perfect. But long-term neglect of municipal garbage collection, antiquated sewage systems and a generally cavalier attitude towards the environment have left the bay filthy.

"The main problem is the sewage which drains from practically all the rivers reaching the bay," Mario Moscatelli, a prominent environmental activist and professor of biology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, told AFP.

"Basically, large areas of the 21st century metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro continue to live with basic sanitation from the 18th century. In other words, all the sewage produced in large areas is reaching the bay without any treatment."

Even officials have generally shown little confidence in their 80 percent goal, with Rio state Governor Luiz Fernando Pezao saying in February: "I don't know what percent we'll achieve."



Garbage is seen on the Guanabara Bay, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on June 10, 2015

Raising a stink

The controversy has turned the relatively minor sport of sailing into the most talked about aspect of Brazil's Olympics preparation, embarrassing a country that wants the Games to demonstrate its rise as a global economic power and regional giant.

Top flight international sailors have condemned the pollution, citing not just potential health hazards but the more immediate risk of floating debris impeding boats and spoiling races that are decided by tiny margins.

Local authorities and the Rio2016 organizing committee reject

suggestions that the competition should move out of the bay into the cleaner open sea.

And in an interview with AFP, the deputy CEO of Rio2016, Leonardo Gryner, struck a highly optimistic note, saying that already half of the city's sewage is being treated and that the project would indeed be completed.

"We will get to 2016 with 80 percent of sewage treated," he said.

The water and sanitation authority CEDAE also told AFP that regatta areas "are already free and ready for competition."

But the true picture remains murky, with allegations that the situation remains out of control.

"Only 60 percent of the region has formal collection of sewage," said Paulo Canedo, an expert on water management at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Of that, he said, about one third is treated.

In other words, around three quarters of human waste in the Rio area is untreated, much of it ending up in the Guanabara, he calculates.



Sailboats are seen from above during a training session on Guanabara Bay ahead of the 2016 Olympic Games, in Rio de Janeiro on July 28, 2015

Rough waters

Australian team technician Lechte, who was testing the engine on a support boat at Marina da Gloria, said competitors can prepare against catching waterborne illnesses, such as Hepatitis A.

But how can they protect their fragile, high-speed sailing machines?

A semi-submerged television—one of the objects Lechte reports coming across—would probably break or capsize a racing dinghy. But even colliding with something more innocuous could rob precious speed, possibly making the difference between gold and zero.

"You don't even want to hit a plastic bag," Lechte said, navigating his motorboat out on the bay past soft drink bottles and what resembled an old mustard container.

Incredibly, this means that races usually won by skill at working with the boat and wind, may instead be decided by which sailor is best at spotting the hazards.

"That will make or break the results. Everyone will have to deal with it," Lechte said.

Last chance

Rio2016 organizers say a special fleet of eco-boats will deploy in a circle around the race course during Olympic events.

In the meantime, eco-boats are doing what they can to collect what's already there, even if it only takes a rainfall for new garbage to arrive.

"The tendency is towards improvement," said Airton, the eco-boat leader, who was resting with his crew at the dock and wondering what to do with a half-dead cormorant they'd just found in the bay. "But there's a lot of rubbish and not much time."

Asked if he'd seen an improvement over the last year, Lechte, the Australian technical adviser, deadpanned: "It's 100 percent better."

In what way?

"I haven't seen any dead, floating bloated pigs."

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