

Confronting danger of rip currents

Weather service, beaches team up to curb drownings



Grand Mere State Park offers more than a mile of undeveloped beach. The National Weather Service teamed up with beach operators to enhance warnings of deadly rip currents. (*South Bend Tribune / May 25, 2012*)

By LAURI HARVEY KEAGLE The Times

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SYRACUSE -- Forecasters say they've gotten pretty good at predicting when rip currents will cause dangerous swimming conditions in Lake Michigan and getting that message out to the public.

"The hard part is the human side of the equation, answering why people go in when the red flags are flying and the alerts are out," said Mike Sabones, meteorologist-in-charge of the northern Indiana office of the National Weather Service in Syracuse.

"We've actually had people in the water when rescue crews are out searching for victims."

Last summer, the National Weather Service gathered beach operators, the U.S. Coast Guard and other stakeholders for a series of meetings around the lake aimed at answering those questions and trying to determine how best to address the problem.

As a result, the National Weather Service's Chicago office in **Romeoville**, Ill., and the northern Indiana office teamed up with beach operators to enhance predicting and warning of rip currents along Lake Michigan's beaches in an effort to reduce drowning deaths.

In addition to modeling to predict rip currents, forecasters now have the help of lifeguards at beaches at Indiana Dunes State Park in Chesterton, Ind., Washington Park in Michigan City, Warren Dunes State Park in Sawyer, and Silver Beach County Park in St. Joseph. The lifeguards report water conditions twice daily and can see the rip currents in the water from their guard stands.

"We do issue rip current warnings based on models, but to have live observations on it really helps," said Richard Caspro, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Romeoville.

Buoys in the lake also help provide real-time data in the waters off of beaches in Chicago and Bridgman.

"That real-time wave data provides valuable information," Sabones said.

The National Weather Service also is working to improve its websites to give beach-goers plenty of data before they leave home.

"We want to make the surf zone forecast more of a visible thing on our website," he said.

The Grand Rapids forecast office has a Lake Michigan recreational beach forecast that includes a color-coded map showing rip current risks. Caspro said the hope is to re-create that for the Chicago and northern Indiana office websites.

"It really is about awareness and education," Caspro said. "The fact is people say, 'Oh, I can't go here because it's a guarded beach and they shut down,' so they just go around and walk down to an unguarded beach. That's what happened to that **Valpo** student in August."

Rayan Sami A. Bokhari, 22, a Valparaiso University senior, drowned while swimming with siblings and friends at Porter Beach in August during a rip current advisory. Officials said the group initially went to Indiana Dunes State Park but discovered the beach closed because of rip currents and large waves, so it walked down to a portion of the beach that is not guarded and swam there.

The group told rescue crews it saw Bokhari disappear in waves about 200 feet from shore. His body was found by a recreational boater about 24 hours later after air and water searches by the **U.S. Coast Guard, Lake County Sheriff's Department**, Indiana Department of Natural Resources and Porter County dive team.

Sabones said the rip current fatalities in Lake Michigan largely have been young men from out of town.

"The people who are locals understand and respect the power of the lake," he said.

Caspro said he is "just hoping for a safe summer."

"Last year, we had five or six drownings in our waters and not all were rip currents," Caspro said. "If we can knock down those numbers and the number of rescues, that would be great."