

Cape May warning of undersea sand peril

The Philadelphia Inquirer

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August 23, 2008

Chad deSatnick, a Cape May native and a longtime surfer, learned years ago that there are hazards in the ocean other than riptides and jellyfish.

In September 2001, deSatnick rode a wave too close to the shore on the city's Poverty Beach and hit a wall of sand hidden under the waves.

The impact threw him headfirst into four inches of water, breaking his back in several places. DeSatnick was told he might never walk again.

DeSatnick, now 31, is fully recovered. But officials fear that injuries like his may become more commonplace in Cape May, where erosion of sand deposited in beach-replenishment projects has created steep cliffs and suddenly shallow water near the shoreline.

When the Army Corps of Engineers began replenishments in Cape May in 1990, the ocean bottom gently sloped. The city had few emergency calls for suspected spinal injuries each year.

This summer, Cape May's beach patrol has had 17 emergency calls from swimmers and boogie-boarders with symptoms of spinal injuries, such as difficulty walking, after a wave sent them crashing into the shore, said Mayor Edward Mahaney. Last year, there were 11 calls, he said.

City officials embarked on a public-awareness campaign this week to warn people about the hazard.

Bright orange-and-black signs with the warning "If in Doubt, Don't Go Out" are now posted at entrances to each of the city's 21 beaches, informing swimmers of the drop where the waves break. Lifeguards have been trained to spot high-tide conditions that can heighten the risk of being hurt. And public-service announcements will be shown on local cable TV.

The corps pumps sand back along the shoreline every several years to address beach erosion, a project aimed at protecting the city from flooding and making the beach enjoyable for swimmers and sunbathers.

In the years after the sand is pumped, the profile of the shore shifts dramatically, Mahaney said.

"As the waves pound against that surface, they eat away at that embankment," Mahaney said. Heavy storms speed the process.

As part of Cape May's awareness campaign, deSatnick, a longtime advocate for the signs, will speak at area schools next spring.

The city will also meet with the corps before this fall's planned replenishment, Mahaney said, to discuss how the problem can be addressed.

Though other Shore towns have had beach-replenishment projects, only Cape May has reported a rise in spinal-cord injuries. In Ocean City, which started replenishing its sand last year, authorities say they have noticed no change.

Cape May's year-round population of 3,800 increases to 45,000 in the summer. Most of the people who are hurt are tourists, Mahaney said.

"We think, if we educate people and address this, people will appreciate that," the mayor said.

"There's a misconception that you can't get hurt if the waves are small, but you have to be careful not to just go out there without thinking," said deSatnick, who is again surfing. "The beaches are safe as long as you're aware of the situation."