

Listening to the Lake Radio Program
Rip Currents
6/1/05, KUMD Radio, Duluth, MN

(Opening music)

Welcome to Listening to the Lake. This is Marie Zhuikov with Minnesota Sea Grant, which is part of UMD. Sea Grant is bringing you this show through the generous support of KUMD twice a month to help keep you in touch with what's happening with the big pond in our front yards – Lake Superior.

The focus of today's show is rip currents. The week of June 5 is National Rip Current Awareness Week. If you recall, these currents, which can take lives, have been a hot topic the last few summers. But first, I'd like to let you know what's happening on the lake. Here's what the lake had to say yesterday morning at Gitchee Gummee Park.

(Enter lake sounds)

It was calm and clear by the lake then. The nearshore marine forecast calls for an east wind 5 to 10 knots today, increasing to 10 to 15 knots by afternoon. Mostly sunny. Waves 1 to 3 feet. Tonight it will be partly cloudy with waves 2 feet or less. The east wind will continue at 5 to 10 knots.

(Fade out lake sound)

Marcia Rheame (RHEEM) has to steel herself when she walks on the Lakewalk, especially when the waves are crashing. Rheame, who lost her 21-year old son in a rip current off Duluth's Minnesota Point two summers ago, can't enjoy the lake like before. She has to turn away and compose herself before she can continue walking.

"You only live your life once. And it's such a shocker when you lose a child, even though he was 21. That was my youngest one. He also was leaving the nest, so before he even drowned, I was already grieving because I had to let go of my only little baby who was left in the house."

Rheame is grateful for the support shown by the community after the death of her son, Matthew. She has been active in efforts to inform people about the hazards of rip currents and thinks even more can be done.

Local organizations involved in rip current information include UMD and the parks department. Jesse Schomberg, an educator with Minnesota Sea Grant, describes what a rip current looks like:

"There's a couple of things that you'll notice.... Where there's a rip current, you'll see a different wave pattern than the rest of the beach. Another sign to look for is foam or

debris, wood, or anything, trash in the water that's floating away from shore... One of the other things that's noticeable right away after a rip current forms that sometimes fades, is a plume of dirty or muddy water.... After that dirty water clears, you might see sort of a deeper spot because there will be a trench in the bottom where the rip current formed."

Schomberg explains that even though rip currents are narrow and fast, it is possible to escape one if you're caught.

"Your first urge is to fight and try to go straight towards shore.... But the currents can go very fast. 5 miles per hour, faster than an Olympic swimmer can swim. Even if you're an absolutely excellent swimmer it's very likely that you're not going to be able to out swim this current. You need to turn sideways and swim along the shore."

"The other option is to just to float, to keep yourself floating in the water and let the rip current carry you out. They dissipate fairly quickly out from shore, so they're not going to push you miles and miles out from shore... Once you get out of that current, then you can just angle again back to shore."

Sea Grant has produced a brochure and web site about rip currents, including specific information about the rip currents on Minnesota Point. The group has also distributed radio public service announcements and hosted a Great Lakes rip current conference in Michigan last year.

The Duluth weather service office is also getting involved. Beginning July 1, in time for swimming season, they plan to include information in their daily morning hazardous weather outlook if conditions favor rip currents. According to Michael Stewart, meteorologist-in-charge, this involves winds 25 miles per hour from the east.

"It's not really an advisory. We're not to that point yet. We're probably one to two years from that. This is just a preliminary type of action here that we're just informing the public that there is a possibility of rip currents forming."

Stewart says the hazardous weather outlook distribution will help get the word out about the danger:

"That gets distributed out to the world. You can get it off our web site. Also the emergency managers receive that. So in the case here of the St. Louis County Emergency Manager can let the park and recreational department know and then they can put up however they want to handle it."

Last year, weather service staff trained city lifeguards on how to identify and rescue people from rip currents.

"We're still learning ourselves. Like I said, we have people here, 'Oh, this is Lake Superior, we don't have that stuff,' and we're trying to change the attitude towards that. But we also have to do it slowly because we have to learn ourselves."

Duluth's Park Department director, Carl Seehus, describes the city's efforts to keep beach-goers safe.

"We've been working with our lifeguard staff and working with the Coast Guard and many others to come up with policies and procedures that we'll use for opening and closing our beaches to make them more safe and to make sure people are aware of what rip currents are."

The parks department has put up signs directing people to swim at the one location where they provide lifeguards.

"There are several locations where we don't advise swimming because there is not a lifeguard present. There's a big difference between enjoying our beaches and actually swimming in our waters. And we're telling people, if you are going to swim, do that where we have our lifeguards and that's at our official designated beach, which is at the beach house."

Lifeguards watch the wave height to determine rip current danger and will close beaches when the waves get to be 3 feet or higher. To close the beaches the lifeguards tell people to exit the water. Then the lifeguards go to several nondesignated swimming beaches and uncover 'beach closed' signs.

The department got criticized last year for the small beach closure signs they used at non-designated swimming areas. This year the signs will be much larger, Seehus said.

Another thing people wonder about is why the lifeguards leave, just when the beach gets hazardous.

"It's a very interesting Catch-22 situation...Debated with lifeguard staff the last couple of years and checked with other organizations to see what they do and when the beaches are closed, it's better not to have anybody present and for them to leave so they don't have this false security that oh, there's still a lifeguard sitting there or around, so let's just run in and real quick catch a wave and run back out. We want people to know that when the beaches are closed, they're closed."

Then the parks department issues a news release about the beach closure. The head lifeguard monitors the beach conditions and can reopen them if the weather conditions improve.

In the future, Seehus says the parks department may use a system similar to that employed on the oceans -- towers and flags that represent different beach conditions.

Seehus says the city hopes people will obey the signage and will swim only in designated areas.

"We think that most rational people will understand we're doing it for a purpose and that purpose is public safety, public safety, public safety. We want them to live to come back to our beaches again. It's that simple."

David Israel, a science instructor at Lake Superior College knows rips currents well. An avid kayaker, he regularly uses rip currents as an easy way to get out into the lake. Israel rescued 6 people the day Matthew Rheame died, including UMD hockey stand-out Junior Lessard. He describes rip currents as deceptively subtle.

"You really don't feel it...It's not like stepping into a fast river, like in a rapids, and feeling the current pull on your body very much...Usually when you're in one it's, at least when people are getting in trouble, it's when you're up to your neck or you're swimming and you just slowly start to move out. I'd say I most people don't realize it until you realize you're a long way from shore. You don't feel a real strong pull, at least not in ours. In the ocean, they're stronger and they're faster."

But the gentle tug turns nasty when people start to fight it and swim back to shore. Remember, don't fight the current, swim out of it to the side, and then head back to the beach once you're free of the pull. Rip currents needn't spoil what little beach time we get in the Northland, but you need to be aware.

If you'd like to learn more about rip currents, visit Minnesota Sea Grant's web site at seagrant.umn.edu/rip. If you have questions about rip currents not answered on the site, feel free to e-mail me, Marie Zhuikov, at mzhuikov@umn.edu or call 726-7677. This has been Listening to the Lake from the Minnesota Sea Grant Program at UMD.