Our Ocean Backyard

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Hazards at the Shoreline

It’s probably safe to say that most beachgoers fear a shark attack more than any other single hazard at the beach. And perhaps surprisingly, on average, there is less than one death each year from a shark bite in all coastal waters of the United States… less than one fatality every year! The probability of being attacked or chomped into by a shark once you enter the water is about 1 in 11.5 million, considerably less than virtually any other hazard you can imagine. The odds of actually dying from a shark are less than one in 264 million. While I’m not a gambler, I would say these are pretty good odds and they wouldn’t keep me out of the ocean. Meanwhile, while many are obsessed with a shark having us for brunch or dinner, 3,700 people are drowning somewhere in the U.S. every year; that’s ten deaths every day on average!

Sadly, the past two weeks along the Central Coast have been illustrative of much more dangerous hazards than shark encounters. Two weeks ago, on September 12th at 5:30 pm, a 26-year-old man from San Jose went out into the ocean near Davenport Beach. The man was about 30-40 yards offshore when he began calling for help from others on the beach. He disappeared before anyone could help him and his body hasn’t been located.

Two days later on September 14th, a 30-year-old visitor from Chicago was pulled off the rocks at Panther Beach, two miles south of the first victim and about 6.5 miles north of Santa Cruz. While the incident occurred at 4:00 pm, it wasn’t until 5:50 that tide conditions were such that emergency responders could reach and recover the body. The third tragedy was just a week later on the 20th of September when a 17-year-old boy body surfing at Laguna Creek Beach, a mile south of Panther Beach, went missing. A little over a year earlier, also at Panther Beach, in July of 2020, a 19-year-old woman from San Jose was also swept off the rocks and drowned.

In just the last two weeks, three deaths along the shoreline of the North Coast. Why so many fatalities along this stretch of coast? I believe there are several reasons for these tragic losses. All of the victims that I am aware of have been from out of town, or somewhere other than Santa Cruz, so are unfamiliar with the North Coast and its beaches. The rock ledges and outcrops are attractive to young people but are also frequently reached by large waves. The rocks can be slippery and out of town visitors are unfamiliar with the area and what can happen quickly.

The waves are also typically larger along the North Coast than those breaking on Cowells, Main or Seabright beaches. North Coast beaches are also often steeper so there is a more powerful backwash, which can surprise visitors unfamiliar with the area and pull them offshore. Rip currents can also be dangerous and along with cold water and no lifeguards, these beaches can all be more hazardous places to swim than the city beaches. In contrast to the average of one death per year from a random shark attack in U.S. waters, somewhere between 100 and 150 people die by drowning each year when caught in rip currents.

There were two other incidents along the Central Coast during the same two-week period, but these involved motor vehicles. On September 15th, a 73-year-old man lost his life when his car went over a cliff on Highway 1 at Devil’s Slide and plunged 200 feet to the beach below. The cause of the accident wasn’t clear. Two days later on Friday, September 17th, a car with a parent and two young children drove through a barrier at the end of 18th Avenue adjacent to Sunny Cove and landed in the water. Fortunately, they were all rescued by surfers, and while the children suffered only minor injuries the adult was air-lifted to a trauma center. This unfortunate event has been reported as suspicious and may have been done intentionally. There were 3 similar incidents a month earlier in August, where motor vehicles went off the local bluffs, two on West Cliff Drive and one at Schwann Lake, where the drops were fortunately much less than the 200-foot cliff at Devil’s Slide.

The message here is that while the North Coast beaches are less developed, less crowded and provide a different experience than the city beaches, they can also be dangerous for those who may not be familiar with the power of the waves and what can happen to the unexpecting visitor.