

Lingering effects of shark attacks?



Oak Island (above) and other Brunswick County beaches do not have lifeguards. Officials say lifeguards would not have made a difference in shark bites that occurred over the past week. PHOTO BY MIKE SPENCER/STARNEWS

Shark bites likely won't prompt hiring of lifeguards

By Adam Wagner
StarNews Staff

BRUNSWICK COUNTY — Three shark attacks in the past week likely won't compel Brunswick County's beach towns to add lifeguards, local officials said Wednesday.

Emergency personnel commended other beachgoers for helping save the lives of Kiersten Yow, 12, and Hunter Treschl, 16, after Sunday's attacks happened about 90 minutes apart. Three days before that in Ocean Isle Beach, another girl, who officials did not name, was bitten on the foot by a shark that also chewed up her boogie board.

Town officials Wednesday questioned whether lifeguards could have prevented the attacks or could feasibly patrol entire beach strands. Instead of adding employees, the towns are taking the steps

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Though local schools are dismissed for summer and vacationers have arrived, the main business district in Wrightsville Beach is quiet. Officials say it's too soon to tell if the shark attacks will scare summer vacationers away from the region. PHOTO BY CAMMIE BELLAMY

Officials hope visitors aren't deterred

By Cammie Bellamy
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SOUTHEASTERN N.C. — Just days before the official start of summer, a pair of shark attacks has brought international attention to Southeastern North Carolina.

As two children recover in the hospital after suffering severe injuries, images of boat and helicopter patrols scouring the waters near Oak Island proliferated on social

media. On beaches miles from where the attacks occurred, some visitors were staying a little closer to the shore or sticking to the pool.

Officials say it's too soon to tell if the shark attacks will scare summer vacationers away from the region. But as rental property and hotel managers field inquiries from concerned visitors, questions about how the incidents could impact

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to tell visitors how to avoid sharks.

Ron Watts, Sunset Beach's mayor, said Sunday's incidents were tragic for those involved, but the infrequency of shark attacks at the county's beaches means lifeguards likely aren't worth the added costs. From 1935 to 2014, Brunswick County had nine confirmed unprovoked shark attacks, according to the International Shark Attack File.

"If the situation called for it on a regular basis, that would be one thing," Watts said, "but this seems to have been a bit of a freak incident."

In New Hanover County, Wrightsville Beach spends about \$420,000 a year for its lifeguard service, according to town manager Tim Owens. Carolina Beach Mayor Dan Wilcox said the costs and potential liability are both factors town officials have to consider about staffing their beaches. But, like the other town officials, he said Carolina Beach believes their nearly \$377,000 budget outlay is worth the cost.

"Sure, it's an economic decision as much as life-and-safety decision you make when you decide to have lifeguards," Wilcox

said recently. "But we see it as one that's worth it, that we are telling people that we feel we have safer beaches because we have lifeguards."

In 2013, after four swimmers died at Brunswick County beaches over the Fourth of July holiday weekend, the county's beach towns took a serious look at what it would take to start lifeguard programs. In April, the Brunswick County Beach Consortium prepared a resolution for the county's state legislators to see if the General Assembly can "enact legislation to provide immunity or otherwise limit the liability of beach towns who provide lifeguard services to protect visitors to the North Carolina beaches." The Brunswick County Commissioners endorsed the plan.

Oak Island officials insisted lifeguards wouldn't have made a difference in Sunday's incident.

"Lifeguards will not do anything, in my personal opinion, to prevent shark bites," said Betty Wallace, the town's mayor.

Oak Island's beach is 9 miles long and covering it all with lifeguards would be difficult, Wallace said. Even more difficult could be warning people up and down the coast to get out of the water, which Wallace said would be significantly



An unidentified fisherman snags a shark Tuesday evening in the surf at Wrightsville Beach. PHOTO COURTESY OF BO DEAN

different than the panicked lifeguard in "Jaws."

"If you look at the movie 'Jaws,' it's a cove," Wallace said. "It's not on the Atlantic coast."

Beachgoers, Wallace added, should not go more than knee-deep into the water.

Ocean Isle hasn't discussed adding lifeguards, but the town's board also hasn't met since Sunday's incidents.

"If lifeguards could prevent this, then it would be something our town would try to provide, but there's no guarantee lifeguards could have prevented these shark attacks," said Debbie Smith, Ocean Isle Beach's mayor.

Chad Hicks, Caswell Beach's town administrator, wondered whether a lifeguard on the shore Sunday would have known there was a shark nearby.

"When the water gets

turbid like the other day, I don't know if you could even see a shark," Hicks said.

For now, Brunswick towns are educating the public on the water's dangers. Ocean Isle Beach is sending mass emails to the town's homeowners, telling them to share information about sharks and how to stay safe in the ocean with their families and renters. Caswell Beach, which is near Oak Island, has an electronic sign warning visitors of sharks in the area and has increased police patrols on the beach.

"A lot of people come up to them and talk," Hicks said. "We're telling people there has been this incident, so use your best judgment when going in the water."

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