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Stones, shells, sharp drop-off are hazards of a new beach

By Jim Cresson

Cape Gazette staff

Yes, there is a sharp and hazardous drop-off in the surf-break area of the newly replenished beaches at Rehoboth and Dewey. Yes, there are lots of sharp-edged stones and shells in the drop-off that have caused a higher-than-usual number of abrasions and cuts among swimmers this season, some of them serious. And, yes, a higher-than-usual number of body surfers have been pounded into those stones and the drop-off shelf so hard that they have injured their spines, dislocated their shoulders and broken their bones.

For those who have not yet entered the waters, the best advice is to talk about the hazards with lifeguards before swimming. The information those guards provide could spare swimmers an aching body or a trip to the hospital.

Savvy beachgoers know from experience that replenished beaches always pose challenges during their first summers of existence, said longtime Rehoboth Beach Patrol lifeguard Tom Coveleski.

“In 1998, we had a small replenishment project here that put very fine sand onto the beach,” said Coveleski. “There were no rocks or shells in that sand; it was beautiful looking. But it was so fine that it caused very hazardous sinkholes, sand bars and rip currents. It was so bad, we had to close sections of the beach.”

Coveleski said this beach replenishment project brought a far different kind of sand onto the beaches. He said the sand is coarse and heavy, littered with pebbles and broken shells.

“I think part of the problem is that we haven’t had any nor’easter storms or heavy surf this summer, so the beach hasn’t had a chance to flatten into a gradual slope at the surf line,” said Coveleski. “After a winter of storms, this beach should be fine next summer, and we shouldn’t see these problems next year.”

State shoreline manager Tony Pratt said he told the public throughout the replenishment process that the new beach would not be a finished product until May 2006, when nature’s forces should correct its current problems.

Pratt said that the bothersome stones and shells at the surf line should be buried by a few inches of sand next summer. The sharp drop-off should be a sandy slope, and the high incidence of

medical responses seen on the beaches of Rehoboth and Dewey this summer should return to normal lower levels.

“There are always a lot of risks people face when they come to swim in the ocean,” Pratt said. “First, there are the risks of being bitten by marine life, whether it’s a crab, bluefish or shark. Second, there are the risks of being caught in rip currents or being slammed into the sand by a big wave. And third, there is the single biggest risk of all - driving to the beach.”

Rehoboth Beach Patrol medical officer Rich Szvitich said he blames the lack of any big summer storms this year for the problems causing swimmer’s injuries.

“The beach just hasn’t flattened out yet,” said Szvitich. “The rocks and shells haven’t yet been covered by sand. It should be fine next summer.”

Szvitich said the Rehoboth Beach Patrol has responded to more than 250 wound cases, usually abrasions and cuts, 21 spinal injuries and more than 30 sprained, broken or dislocated shoulders, bones and joints.

“As of Aug. 11, we’ve surpassed our total number of spinal injuries from last year,” said Szvitich.

In fact, medical responses have been the normal daily routine for lifeguards at the replenished beaches.

“One day in July, we had so many people injured and transported to the hospital that we got a call from the staff of Beebe Medical Center,” said Coveleski. “They said they were running out of ambulances and emergency room space. They told us to put signs on the beach warning people. We kicked that idea around but decided against it, because from our experience, people rarely pay attention to signs. We decided to just keep swimmers informed that they should avoid standing in the surf-break zone and they should not body surf.”

“It’s bad this year, no doubt about it,” said Dewey Beach Patrol Capt. Todd Fritchman. “We’ve had some real ugly wounds from people hitting rocks while body surfing. And we’ve had more spinal injuries than usual.”

Fritchman said he would wait and see if next year the beach is flatter and less littered with sharp-edged rocks and shells.

Despite the high number and severity of some of the injuries, Rehoboth Beach Patrol lifeguards said not one injured swimmer has expressed anger about the injury. None have said they’d never return to Rehoboth or Dewey beaches because of the injury they sustained this year, said lifeguard Coveleski.

“They always ask what has changed this year,” Coveleski said. “When we explain that we had a replenishment project this year and it changed everything, they look around and then understand. Nobody has gotten mad about it.”