

# Deadly dive spot should be safe

Coast guard auxiliary on hand for Aug. 18 emergency

Jennifer Luther

[jluther@nsnews.com](mailto:jluther@nsnews.com)

WHYTECLIFF Park has been a popular scuba diving spot for beginners and experts, though it has claimed the lives of both in the last three years.

In November 2008, a 61 year-old diving instructor died at Whytecliff Park after being found unconscious by his students. A 20 year-old California man diving at the park got the bends (an illness resulting from rapid decompression) and was hospitalized in the same month. In February of 2008, police issued a warning to divers at the popular scuba spot, after a group of divers were nearly swept out to sea. This year has had its own share of misfortunes, with one diver airlifted off the Sea to Sky Highway, one diver dead, and one in intensive care at Vancouver General Hospital.

In spite of the accidents, Whytecliff Park isn't an especially dangerous spot, said Mike Delaney of the Edge Diving Centre on Marine Drive, a diving instructor and assistant dive safety officer for the Pavilion Lake Research Project (led by UBC, the Canadian Space Agency and NASA).

"Different spots of the bay can be challenging, but overall in the area where the general dive public goes, it's relatively controlled. There aren't a lot of currents that act upon the Bay. . . . Once you pass the two islets, there is a lot more potential current there, so you have to be aware of that."

Delaney warned divers that the bay is a gradual slope, so watching ascent and descent is especially novice-friendly. The nearby "cut," however, is more demanding, the instructor said.

Divers should have prepared ahead of time, prior to entering the water, with a pre-descent safety check, and Delaney suggested heavy wet suits or dry suits, additional weight, and predetermined hand signals.

Whytecliff Park might be particularly beautiful, but in warm weather the blue waters have in the past disguised visibility-impeding plankton.

But carefully laid plans aren't always enough for



**VOLUNTEER** members of the West Vancouver Auxiliary Coast Guard Unit practise a rescue operation. The unit is based at West Vancouver Yacht Club and is seeking new members.

NEWS photo Cindy Goodman

divers. West Vancouver's Auxiliary Coast Guard Unit has experienced this reality first hand, fishing divers out of the drink.

"We try to get rid of those guys as quick as we can, because we want them to live," said Mike Cupit, the operations officer of the volunteer organization, who also enjoys diving.

Cupit was on hand Aug. 18, when a Port Moody woman was pulled from the water while unconscious. Cupit said this incident could have been operator error, since the woman ran out of air deep below the surface.

He described the woman's face as being "pale," and was glad that the unit was able to work together with other emergency crews.

"The firefighters were actually doing CPR on the back of our boat while they were still standing in the ocean."

The West Van unit was the first Canadian Coast Guard auxiliary on the West Coast and has delivered much-needed assistance in West Vancouver for more than 20 years — yet it receives no direct government funding.

"We're even puzzling over whether we should

be renaming the group because people think we're federal government and it's quite unfortunate when all the financing is raised by donations," said unit leader Dugal Purdie.

When rescuing is needed, the West Vancouver men and women, on call 24/7, will ensure that a crew is onboard a rescue boat within 15 minutes. According to Purdie, the crew have had about 40 calls per year. The crew's members have shouldered an important task, putting others ahead of themselves.

"We have to be able to go out in any kind of weather anytime, and there may not be anyone coming to rescue us," said Cupit.

The West Vancouver Yacht Club-based unit has provided an important lifeline especially to divers, because of their proximity. Cupit also described the difficulty North Shore residents might face if the auxiliary unit wasn't in place: "There's only one (Canadian) Coast Guard boat for all of Vancouver at Kitsilano Coast Guard Base, and they only have the one crew. So sometimes if they're on a call, there's no other boat from the coast guard. . . ."

The unit has conducted numerous missions in the dark, and under other conditions that would restrict assistance from other vessels. "Most of the time we get called out, is when the weather's so bad nobody else wants to be out there," explained Purdie.

Divers have had company on the list of people in need of the unit. The West Van auxiliary has also rescued victims of Sea to Sky Highway crashes and sinking boats, as well as cliff jumpers who have missed the water.

Cupit described the ability to participate in the unit as an amazing learning experience.

Purdie, in his fourth year for the auxiliary, said the Unit has raised \$500,000 for a bigger boat — though it will need to swell its ranks as a result. "At the moment we've got about 25 active and trained members, what we need is probably to double that number."

He said the opportunity to take part in the unit is special. "There is nothing as rewarding as having a successful incident where you've gone out and saved somebody who was really scared of losing their life and you've managed to get them out of that predicament and get them back to shore."

Those interested in joining the auxiliary are encouraged to email [imcb@shaw.ca](mailto:imcb@shaw.ca) for more information.

The North Shore Lifeboat Society fundraises for both the West Van and Deep Cove unit. Visit their website at [www.northshorelifeboat.ca](http://www.northshorelifeboat.ca) for more information. An electronic volunteer form is on the site.

## Rescue groups offer other options

From page 1

Gillis said the kittens were very young, and were covered in fleas and ear mites.

On Friday, she took the pair off to the vet's at Norgate Animal Hospital where they were cared for for most of the day.

Almost a week later, the brother and sister grey tabbies are starting to get some bounce back, she said — on Monday one of the kittens even risked giving one of her golden retrievers a playful pat on the tail.

Gillis said it seems that someone was hoping the kittens would be found and looked after. But she can't really understand why they would choose to dump the kittens on the trail.

"There's tons of rescue groups and there's the district (of North Vancouver) shelter," she said. "There are many options."

Long said he's stopped by to see the kittens since he found them and is happy to see them doing well. "I can understand people not having the ability to take care of them," he said. "But the fact (they were dumped) just blocks from the shelter is kind of ridiculous."

Gillis said she plans to keep the two kittens until they are old enough to be spayed and neutered and will then make sure they are adopted by responsible owners. "We already have people who are interested in adopting them," she said. "We'll make sure they get forever homes."

## Slow down for the long weekend

Jane Seyd

[jseyd@nsnews.com](mailto:jseyd@nsnews.com)

**ICBC is warning travellers to plan ahead and drive safely during the last long weekend of summer.**

On average, there are 1,725 crashes resulting in 515 injuries and five deaths across the province over the Labour Day long weekend, according to the insurance corporation.

Police report that driver inattention, alcohol and speed are the top contributing factors.

People planning trips should build in time for rest breaks and delays, according to the insurance corporation — because there are usually more cars on the road this weekend. Drivers are also warned to check road and weather

See Expect page 4



photo Axel Melville

**B.C. Ambulance Service** paramedics rush a diver, believed to be suffering from the bends, to a waiting helicopter for quicker transportation to hospital on March 31.