

**REPORT TO REGIONAL PARKS COMMITTEE
MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, JUNE 26, 2024**

SUBJECT Water Safety in CRD Regional Parks

ISSUE SUMMARY

The Capital Regional District (CRD) Board has asked that staff work with partners, including Island Health, to review and update data and reports and provide a report back on opportunities for water safety at the CRD's regional parks.

BACKGROUND

Within the CRD, there are 18 regional parks with known fresh and saltwater swimming locations; within these parks, there are often multiple water access points. The most frequented freshwater swimming areas are: Thetis Lake, Elk/Beaver Lake, Sooke Potholes, Durrance Lake and Matheson Lake. Island View Beach, Witty's Lagoon and Jordan River contain popular oceanfront beaches. Historically, two regional parks were staffed with seasonal lifeguards. Lifeguard services were provided at Thetis Lake from 1970 to 1990, when the park was operated by the City of Victoria. The city cancelled the services in 1991. Services resumed in 1994, when the park was transferred to the CRD, and were provided until 2002. At Elk/Beaver Lake, the District of Saanich provided lifeguards from 1966 to 1976, and those services continued when the park was transferred to the CRD in 1976 until 2003.

In November 2003, the Regional Parks Committee approved a motion to discontinue lifeguard services at the CRD's regional parks. The reasons for this decision were competing budgetary pressures, challenges in recruiting qualified lifeguards, and the overall trend among municipalities and other park agencies to remove lifeguard services from waterfronts.

Injuries and a non-fatal drowning at Thetis Lake Regional Park in the summer of 2017 raised the question of reinstating lifeguards. At that time, the Committee recommended to the CRD Board that current service levels be maintained, focusing on the use of signage and public information to address public safety concerns near swimming areas in regional parks. At the November 22, 2023 Regional Parks Committee meeting, Island Health presented on water safety in lakes in the region, and the following motion arising was carried: "That staff work with partners including Island Health to review and update data and reports and provide a report back on opportunities on water safety at CRD parks."

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

Staff completed a jurisdictional scan of 20 regional districts in the province to ascertain their current approach to water safety in official and unofficial swimming areas in regional parks. Of the 18 who responded, no regional parks had lifeguards. The most common measure in place was signage, indicating no lifeguard on duty. Four regional districts provided life ring(s) and three had personal flotation device (PFD) loaner stations in place. One regional district has seasonal lifeguards in place in a community park but not in any of their regional parks (Arbutus Park, Cowichan Valley).

Lifeguards are not provided at any municipal parks in the region. BC provincial parks do not provide lifeguards, nor do national parks in the region. Pacific Rim National Park Reserve discontinued its surfguard services in 2012.

Data Analysis

Working with Island Health staff to better understand related data, they noted that the data sets that are available to them were mostly established to monitor the performance of the health system rather than to conduct injury surveillance; therefore, much of the data is incomplete and difficult to interpret. However, Island Health reported that over an eight-year period, there were 34 emergency department (ED) visits related to injuries or non-fatal drownings, originating at CRD lakes. These numbers may be underestimated if visits to the emergency department were not captured due to insufficient detail in hospital records.

BC Emergency Health Services (BCEHS) data is also limited, as calls to the area may also capture responses to residences or locations nearby the park, and calls may not be properly identified as water related. Between 2014 and 2023, BCEHS data shows 10 calls related to near drowning/diving/scuba diving at Elk/Beaver Lake and seven at Thetis Lake. For all call types, the data includes various call responses, therefore aggregate numbers are not particularly useful for understanding water-specific injuries.

Eight lakes were included in the data analysis – Thetis Lake, Elk/Beaver Lake, Durrance Lake, Wigglesworth Lake, Matheson Lake, Humpback Reservoir, Magic Lake (not a regional park) and Prior Lake. The majority of incidents in regional parks occurred at Elk/Beaver and Thetis Lake regional parks and a summary of 2016 to 2023 data is as follows:

2016-2023	Visitation Estimate	*ED Visits near drowning	ED Visits related injury	Fatal Drowning	*BCEHS Calls all types	BCEHS Calls 2014-2023 near drowning/diving/scuba
Elk/Beaver Lake	13,741,693	4	4	0	653	10
Thetis Lake	3,977,599	3	22	3	205	7

*ED (Emergency Department); *BCEHS (BC Emergency Health Service)

According to Island Health, over the eight-year period, all four injuries presenting in the emergency department from occurrences at Elk/Beaver Lake were due to water activities, such as tubing, standup paddleboarding, water skiing or rowing. The vast majority of the 22 injuries occurring at Thetis Lake involved cliff jumping/diving.

Current Water Safety in Regional Parks

As a result of a commitment to visitor safety, the CRD has implemented recommendations made through coroner reports and best practices regarding the improvement of signs to better convey safety messages to a broader range of park users in more locations. The CRD continues to promote safety in regional parks through the following approaches:

- in park pictorial signage with consistent sign standards
- increased signage at key locations
- seasonal social media posts promoting safe water use
- updated swim safely messaging on the “be prepared” webpage for CRD Parks

- patrols by park rangers and enforcement partners to address risky behaviours, such as alcohol consumption, cliff jumping and boating safety
- reviewing ranger reports to develop compliance action plans for emerging key management issues

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1

The Regional Parks Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board:
That current service levels be maintained, focusing on continued public education to address water safety in regional parks, and that staff work with partners to increase education and awareness for key demographic groups.

Alternative 2

That this report be referred back to staff for additional information.

IMPLICATIONS

Intergovernmental Implications

In 2023, CRD park rangers conducted joint patrols with the boating safety officer from Transport Canada, which proved to be an effective way of educating those recreating on the water about the requirements for PFDs and ensuring PFDs were not out of date and were in satisfactory condition. This aligns with the Canadian Drowning Prevention Coalition's targets for drowning reduction by focusing on recreational boating and PFD/lifejacket use (Canadian Drowning Prevention Plan, 2022). Continuing this partnership is a priority for 2024.

CRD park rangers and bylaw officers work in conjunction with enforcement partners, such as Westshore RCMP, to have a strong presence at Thetis Lake Regional Park. These patrols address regulatory issues and dangerous behaviors, such as alcohol/drug consumption and cliff jumping. This aligns with the Canadian Drowning Prevention Coalition's targets for drowning reduction by focusing on alcohol and substance use (Canadian Drowning Prevention Plan, 2022). A combined total of 1,883 hours were allocated on patrols at Thetis Lake Regional Park in 2023, and a similar focus will continue in 2024.

Social Implications

As with other outdoor recreational activities in parks, there are inherent risks. Visitors are encouraged to assess their surroundings, understand their skill level, and take responsibility for their personal safety. Physical hazards associated with swimming in lakes, rivers and oceans can include uneven and slippery surfaces, submerged objects, poor visibility, strong currents and deep water. It is important that swimmers using these natural areas understand the potential hazards and have the swimming abilities required for the area they are swimming in.

In addition to in-park signage, staff share water safety messaging on social media and on the CRD website to inform park visitors of the risks associated with outdoor swimming and to provide safety tips.

This summer, the Lifesaving Society's Water Wise Team, through funding from Island Health and with on-the-ground support of CRD staff, will be visiting key locations in the CRD's regional parks to promote water safety. CRD staff will also work with the Lifesaving Society to amplify their existing messaging through corporate social media channels for a larger reach.

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

Language barriers and unfamiliarity with common hazards in BC lakes are factors to consider. People new to Canada are four times more likely to be unable to swim than those who were born in Canada (Lifesaving Society, 2016). Four of the seven people who drowned at Thetis Lake since 1999 were international visitors. The coroner's report following the drowning in 2006 noted that visitors to BC might not realize that the lakes can be colder than those they are used to and that they may be unfamiliar with underwater hazards. In response to and in compliance with coroner recommendations, staff added symbols to warning signs in 2006 and then changed sign standards in 2013 to include images, shapes and colours that are internationally recognizable (see Appendix A).

CRD staff will work with the Lifesaving Society to see if further work could be undertaken to increase education and awareness for international students and non-English-speaking visitors by leveraging existing campaigns and programs such as the Swim to Survive Program. This work will support the Canadian Drowning Prevention Coalition's focus targets for drowning reduction (Canadian Drowning Prevention Plan, 2022).

Service Delivery Implications

At most swimming locations in regional parks, visitors swim at multiple locations and are not confined to one serviceable area. Given the sheer number of potential swimming locations, preventative education is the best way to reach visitors engaged in water-based recreation across the large regional park system.

Financial Implications

Public education is the most cost-effective way to reach the largest number of park visitors. The current budget for all communication campaigns and outreach for regional parks and trails is \$35k per year. However, staff also work with partner agencies to share safety messaging and amplify existing community campaigns.

Education is also provided by park rangers and bylaw officers who patrol the regional parks as part of the regional parks core budget. In 2023, park rangers spent a combined 969 hours at Thetis Lake and Elk/Beaver Lake, in addition to the 1,230 hours of bylaw officer patrols conducted at Thetis Lake.

The Lifesaving Society estimates that it could cost upwards of \$270k per beach to implement a lifeguard service from May through September. The aggregate cost to implement this program across the five busiest freshwater swimming beaches based on the Lifesaving Societies estimates will be approximately \$1,350,000 per season. Currently, there are no funds in the 2024 or 2025 budget that would cover this service.

CONCLUSION

As with other outdoor recreational activities in the regional parks, visitors are encouraged to assess their surroundings, know their skill levels, and take responsibility for their personal safety. Staff collaborate with partners to enhance public education and address safety concerns near swimming areas in regional parks. CRD park rangers and bylaw officers work in conjunction with enforcement partners like Westshore RCMP and View Royal Fire Department to maintain a strong presence at Thetis Lake and Elk/Beaver Lake regional parks, addressing regulatory issues and dangerous behaviors, such as alcohol/drug consumption and cliff jumping. This summer, the Lifesaving Society's Water Wise Team, with the support of CRD staff, will be visiting key locations in CRD regional parks to promote water safety.

RECOMMENDATION

The Regional Parks Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board:
That current service levels be maintained, focusing on continued public education to address water safety in regional parks, and that staff work with partners to increase education and awareness for key demographic groups.

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ATTACHMENT

Appendix A: Water Safety Signage in CRD Regional Parks