

July 2004

## Beware the Grip of the Rip!

Margaret (Peg) A. Van\_Patten Ms.  
*University of Connecticut, peg.vanpatten@uconn.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/wracklines>

---

### Recommended Citation

Van\_Patten, Margaret (Peg) A. Ms., "Beware the Grip of the Rip!" (2004). *Wrack Lines*. 27.  
<http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/wracklines/27>

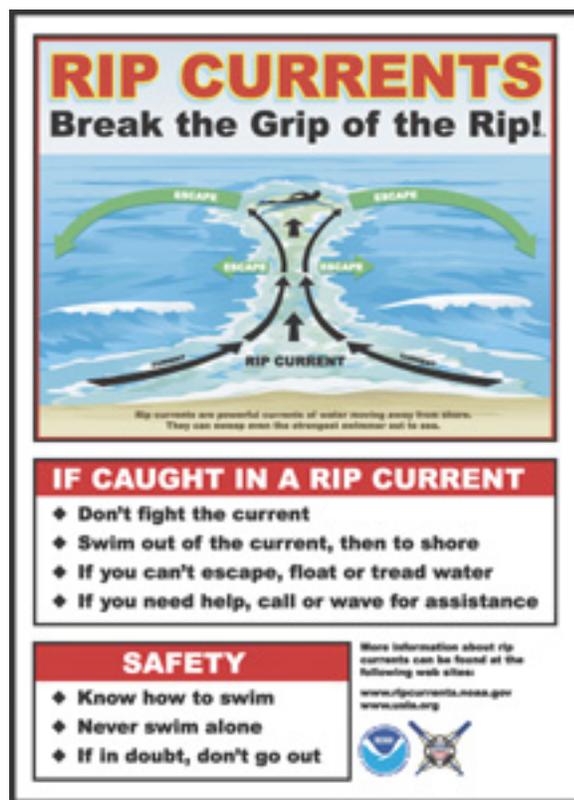
## Beware the Grip of the Rip!

by Peg Van Patten

Be careful of the undertow," my mother warned in somber tones when I went off with friends for a summer swim at Misquamicut Beach, Rhode Island, in my youth. "It's very powerful and can pull you away from shore—right out to sea!" An inexperienced swimmer, I nodded gravely and went happily on my way to the day's pleasure of surf and sun. Mom, who had extensive Red Cross training, was probably actually warning me of rip currents, although she had never heard that term and neither had I. Nor have a great many people who flock to the shore for holidays. Yet a rip current can sweep away even a strong, skilled swimmer. Don't let that scare you away; just read on and be armed with knowledge about what they are, how to spot them, and what to do.

Rip currents, channelized currents of water flowing away from shore, can appear on any surf beach (those with breaking waves), at any time or day. They claim an estimated 100 drowning victims per year in the United States, and that doesn't include U.S. citizens vacationing abroad. Despite the fact that they occur commonly, they are not well-known to most people. Why not? A variety of reasons; for one, obituaries may report the deaths but give the cause as drowning without mentioning rip currents. Same thing for news article reports of rescues and drownings—only about half of these are reported in news media anyway. Confusion in terminology has not helped; sometimes rip current, rip tide, and undertow are used interchangeably. The causes and conditions that generate rip currents have not been well understood until recently, so the phenomenon has remained shadowy, on the fringes of our awareness of danger. Imagine that, considering that rip currents account for 80 per cent of rescues performed by surf beach lifeguards, and cause more American deaths annually than tornadoes or hurricanes.

One who has been through one, though, will never forget it, whether he knows the name or not. Here's a recollection from Mark Parker, an environmental analyst at the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection:



Information for this article came from the NOAA rip current information campaign, in partnership with the U.S. Lifesaving Association.

For more information, see:  
<http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov>

For moving survivors' stories, see:  
<http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov/survivors.shtml>

"In 1977 when I was a student at Southampton College on Long Island, a friend and I went body surfing on the south shore of Long Island, east of the Shinnecock Bay inlet, in early November. After catching a number of waves and being in the water about a half hour, I found myself quite far from shore, and far down the beach from where we started. My six-foot-ten friend now looked like a very small stick man and I began to try to get to shore. I became very tired and began to panic, but managed to calm myself down. I reasoned I should try to ride some waves in and let them help me get closer. Then I began swimming parallel to shore to try to find areas where waves were breaking and moving toward shore. I did, and managed to do a combination of wave surfing and swimming to finally get to shore. I don't know how long it took me but my life passed before my eyes a few times and when I finally got up on the beach, I was exhausted and collapsed on the beach to rest. I eventually got back up and my friend reached me and we got back. I didn't realize what I had been through until a number of years later. But I've always been thankful that I regained calm and survived the ordeal."

My mom's warning didn't keep me from enjoying the beach, and this article shouldn't keep *Wrack Lines* readers away either. However, you can arm yourself with knowledge and pass it on to co-workers, friends, and family, including children old enough to swim. If a family lives inland, they may be less familiar with ocean conditions that may be experienced on a vacation far away from home.

### **Clues That A Rip Current May be Present**

A channel of churning, choppy water may be a clue—so move to a calmer section of beach. Another clue is a section of water that appears to be quite a different color from the waters on either side. A line of seaweed, debris, or foam moving steadily away toward the sea? Another sign. A break in the incoming wave pattern could be yet another. One or more, or all, of these clues may occur (or not). They often form near coastal structures, such as jetties, groins, piers, or sandbars. Sometimes the current generates a plume of sediment that can be seen moving away from shore. The body surfer may not be likely to spot that as he waits for the perfect wave, but it can be seen in aerial reconnaissance, in which case a warning may be posted. Look for them.

### **What to Do if You're Caught**

Experts say, if you're unlucky enough to be caught in rip current, try your best to fight off panic and stay calm. Don't fight it by swimming against it. Instead, try to recall what you've learned here and swim parallel to the shore. Rip currents can be very narrow, or more than 50 yards wide, so the length to swim in order to escape will vary widely. If you can manage to get far enough to one side, you can break free and then head towards shore at an angle away from it. (see diagram on page 12). If you are unable to escape the grip of the rip, float or tread water. When the current weakens, swim at an angle slanted away from the current, towards shore. Do draw attention to yourself, and fast. Facing shore, yell, and wave. This is not the time for unclear statements, especially if it might be your last words! Avoid the mistake of calling out the name of a spouse or friend. If you yell "Sue!" or "Tom!" others may hear you but not realize you're in danger. Instead yell "Help!", pure and simple. Many tragedies have occurred when would-be rescuers are themselves trapped, so maybe calling them in isn't the best plan anyway.

Of course, it would be a big help if everyone with you had discussed rip currents and what to do before the trip to the shore. Children are often least prepared, even though they have learned emergency procedures for other situations. (Hopefully parents and other care-givers are well aware that an eagle eye must be trained on all of the offspring at all times, regardless of swimming ability.)

## **How to Help Somebody Else**

If you hear a call for help or spot someone in distress, call the lifeguard. Seems like common sense—however, many states, including Connecticut, are experiencing serious lifeguard shortages, and people often take their chances. An alternative is to cup your hands to your mouth and shout instructions to the swimmer. If you can, throw an object that floats to the person in trouble—a lightweight cooler or swim ring, for example. The trick is to get it close enough for the victim to reach, without beaming him in the head. Have someone phone 9-1-1 immediately and wait for rescuers to arrive. For now, when you're done with this article, share it with someone—maybe even your mom!

###

Peg Van Patten is [Wrack Lines](#) magazine editor and Communications for [Connecticut Sea Grant](#), at the [University of](#)

[Connecticut's Avery Point campus.](#)