

Sea Kayaking

Channel Islands National Park

National Park Service
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Kayaker Dies during Holiday Visit to Channel Islands

A fatal incident involving a 26-year-old female kayaker occurred over the Memorial Day holiday offshore of Santa Cruz Island, within Channel Islands National Park.

On Sunday afternoon May 29, 2005, national park rangers, assisted by a Ventura-based private vessel, responded to a report of two missing kayakers last seen off the eastern end of the island. The local boating community played a large role in the rescue operations.

Battling rough seas and in 30-35-knot winds, they located two distressed female kayakers about 20 yards from the shoreline, a quarter mile west of San Pedro Point. The two paddlers were in the water with no sight of their kayak; one had head trauma and was semi-conscious. Each paddler suffered from exposure, exhibiting telltale symptoms of hypothermia after being submerged in the 58-degree waters for nearly two hours.

Shortly after discovering the kayakers, a 47-foot Coast Guard rescue vessel from Channel Islands Harbor responded to a mayday call, retrieved the victims from the water, and assisted in providing medical treatment. The 26-year-old victim was hoisted off the vessel by Coast Guard helicopter and flown to St. John's Hospital. She was pronounced dead later that evening.

The surviving kayaker was transported by Coast Guard rescue vessel to Prisoners Harbor where she was transported, along with another patient from a separate incident, by Mercy Air Medivac to Ventura County Medical Center. She was treated for mild hypothermia and released later that night.

According to the surviving kayaker, their sit-upon style kayak capsized after being hit by a large wave. She watched as her friend was swept onto the rocky island shoreline, thrashed by repeated waves, and then washed back out to sea. Clinging to each other, she held her friend above water until they were rescued.

The two kayakers were part of a group of seven Taiwanese nationals who were camping on the island. They had rented kayaks on the mainland and planned to experience kayaking for the first time.

The two female kayakers departed Scorpion Bay at about 3:30 p.m., accompanied by a second tandem kayak paddled by friends, a male and a female. A short distance past Little Scorpion Anchorage the wind and sea conditions picked up and the two kayakers were separated. The second kayak capsized, and after being righted, the male and female paddlers drifted out to sea later to be rescued by another Good Samaritan boater. They reported their friends missing when they returned to the island after 5:30 p.m.

The waters of the Santa Barbara Channel are known to be treacherous. Wind and sea conditions can change rapidly and with little warning. The volatile conditions can be a challenge for even the most experienced of kayakers. National park rangers urge kayakers to be wary of these conditions, to file a float plan, and to use caution and only paddle in conditions that match their skill level. The positive identification of the 26-year-old victim is pending notification of next of kin. The State Department is assisting in the notification process.

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