

2013 Potomac River Gorge Safety Press Conference

NPS remarks

Brent O'Neill, Site Manager at Great Falls Park

Welcome to the Potomac River Safety Press conference

I am Brent O'Neill, the park manager here at Great Falls Park, a unit of George Washington Memorial Parkway.

Today we gather to emphasize the widespread efforts to increase awareness within our greater community about river safety in the Potomac River Gorge. We have multiple agencies and groups represented in a united effort to bring attention to the dangers of the river and educational efforts to ensure the public's park experiences is one that is enjoyable and safe. Principal agencies present today among the National Park Service are the George Washington Memorial Parkway, The Chesapeake and Ohio National Historical Park, the United States Park Police, Fairfax County Swift Water Rescue units, Montgomery County Cabin John Swift Water Rescue, and the Potomac Paddlers Volunteer Corps. On behalf of the NPS and Park Police, we thank both Fairfax and Montgomery county Fire and Rescue units for their outstanding expertise and dedication to swift water

rescue operations that save lives. We also specially thank our river volunteers, the Potomac Paddlers Volunteer Corps, who dedicate time patrolling the river, keeping an eye on river safety, making contact with park visitors and assisting persons in distress.

After remarks during the press conference, press representatives will have the opportunity to ask questions of agency officials and group members; and take a ride on one of Fairfax or Montgomery County's swift water rescue boats to experience the river up close and take unique photo shoots on the river, an experience you will never forget! The NPS will provide a shuttle to and from the emergency river access point a short distance downstream from the falls.

It is this very time of year that historically poses the greatest concerns as river levels remain moderately high, temperatures soar, and visitors seek park experiences near the river. In particular, with Memorial Day weekend, as people swarm to the parks and trails along the Potomac River we need to remind the public of the ever so real dangers of the Potomac River and how to be safe.

Above all, the most important reminder is that **YOUR SAFETY IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY**. Be ever mindful of that.

There are three words that come to mind that I would like to see all visitors think about when they visit natural parks in the area. Three words. Beauty -- Danger -- Respect.

As you look around here, at the Great Falls of the Potomac and the Gorge below, one is filled with a sense of beauty. The scenery and river environment is breathtaking and inspiring. But often, where there is rugged natural beauty, danger is present as well. The Potomac River is deep, fast moving, with jagged rocky bottoms, making powerful currents that even strong swimmers cannot swim against. Drownings from people going for a swim or tragically falling in to the river are real and are the greatest danger in these natural places. More than half (51%) of all river related injuries in the Potomac River Gorge are fatal. This is worth repeating. More than half (51%) of all river related injuries in this 14 mile section from above Great Falls to Washington D.C. end in death. In addition 72% of river related incidents are shoreline based activities (not kayaking/canoeing). These statistics gathered in a 2011 review of river incidents shows that if you are doing something from the shore of the Potomac River, without proper gear, fall into a situation where injury is likely, you have high chance of drowning.

Respect the river, respect its power!

If you have respect for the river you will want to learn more about it. You will see that there are many kinds of river currents and turbulence, depth factors, velocity, river level characteristics.

Why are these river currents so deadly? There are a couple aspects of the river in particular that are important to know. Where the river is deep (such as in the Potomac Gorge) there are strong downward currents – currents that push and pull you to the bottom of the river. These are the major reason for drownings. Also there are large rocks in the river that create movement of water in different directions creating high turbulence, powerful forces that can be sufficient to drown swimmers and waders. Also, the river level changes quickly in the Potomac River Gorge, sometimes within hours. A small increase in river level, increases substantially the river velocity and many of the forces of river currents I mentioned. River levels on the Little Falls gauge (available on the Internet) between 3.4 and 5.2 is referred to as the death trap. At these levels the Potomac River is four times more likely to have a drowning occur than when it is running higher or lower. Today the river is running at 3.9.

FOR ALL THESE REASONS, SWIMMING AND WADING ARE STRICTLY PROHIBITED!

I have been working at Great Falls since 1997. I have seen, like many of the different agencies representing today, tragic and fatal incidents on the river. I have seen people, unknowing of these river dangers, enter the river for a swim or simply fall directly into the rivers deep waters and never return. Don't let this happen to you or someone you love.

Boaters also need to know these inherent river dangers. If you plan to boat in the Potomac Gorge you had better be knowledgeable.

From my experience, though, most boaters are the ones who respect the river the most, and know most about the river's currents and dangers. Truthfully, there is a long history of kayakers and canoeists who have saved lives by assisting a victim in the river. For instance there have been incidents where swimmers or waders who become distressed in the river and the only help around at that moment in time is a paddler on the river who provides assistance to land that person safely back on shore. Some stories are hair raising accounts. It is for this reason that the NPS and the local boating community have joined together (in partnership) to work towards improving river safety on the Potomac. The volunteer group is called the Potomac Paddlers Volunteer Corps. Through their efforts we have increased visibility on the river, making contacts with park visitors engaged in

risky activities by the river, and saving lives. We have several corps members here today, participating in this press event.

One last thought. The river is truly a beautiful river. The river has dangers that are ever present and may be unseen - deceptive. If you respect the river and its power you can be safe while enjoying the river environment. If you are engaged in a river activity, always wear a lifejacket, and that also goes for fishermen too. Life jackets are smart and save lives! We at the National Park Service want you to enjoy these natural areas, but above all, we want you to leave from parks safe and sound. Please be smart, and always remember – YOUR SAFETY IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY.