

Intelligencer Journal Editorial

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A deadly river *In our view*

The Susquehanna River forms a 40-mile-long shoreline along Lancaster County's western border. It can be a great place to fish, boat and swim. It is a recreational resource that has been enjoyed by generations of county residents.

But it can turn deadly for those who ignore its potential dangers.

Tuesday, rescue crews boarded boats for the third straight day to look for Nicholas Herr, a 24-year-old from New Providence, whose kayak flipped when he and Archie McConnell, 24, of Quarryville decided to paddle to an island in the river around 10:30 p.m. Saturday. McConnell's kayak hit a patch of rough water and flipped. Herr tried to help but his kayak capsized. McConnell made it back to shore and called 911.

As of this writing, Herr has not been found.

If Herr is dead, he would be the first area resident to die in the river in 2012. If past is prologue, he will not be the last.

Since January 2010, at least five people have died in the Susquehanna River. Some were older, some were teenagers. Some died while taking an evening swim. Others fell from their boats.

Over that same period, emergency crews have responded to more than a dozen river rescues. Last August, rescue crews helped four swimmers from a rock south of the Norman Wood bridge. Two months earlier, rescue crews picked up two fishermen who were stranded when they failed to move quickly enough after Holtwood Dam opened its spillway.

Those rescues are preferable to the ones in which bodies are fished from the river.

But accidents do occur. And it goes without saying that no one -- not even experienced outdoorsmen like Herr and McConnell -- should be on the river after dark in the middle of winter. While this has been a relatively mild winter, the water is but a few degrees above the freezing point. It is frigid enough sitting in a boat on the river. Should someone fall into the water, hypothermia can set in within minutes.

River accidents not only endanger the victims, but also rescue crews who must traverse rough water and unseen currents as they search for victims.

Last summer, the U.S. Coast Guard's Search & Rescue Detail stationed at Long Level met with boaters to warn them of the need to be safe and to have proper equipment -- especially a personal flotation device.

Those who spend time on the river experience a sense of freedom and adventure that is hard to replicate in the modern world.

But they also have to recognize that safety must be paramount. Ferrying to an island in the dark increases the odds against even the most experienced boaters. A river that appeared serene Saturday night now appears to have claimed yet another victim.