

*By: Shonda Borden, Environmental Extension Assistant
Alabama Sea Grant/Auburn Marine Center*

Today I read a web page with real life stories of people caught in rip currents. Some are stories written by a family member of someone that drowned from getting caught in a rip current, and some are first-hand stories of survivors. Gulf Shores is mentioned, along with Florida, and North Carolina in these stories. As I read, I thought to myself that printed on this web page are just a handful of hundreds of frightening accounts of rip current incidents, and some of them on our own Gulf beaches.

Before you or your visiting friends stride through the breaking waves into the water, you should be aware of the potential dangers of rip currents. Rip currents are powerful channels of water that flow away from shore, and can drag unsuspecting or unprepared swimmers with them. These currents do not pull you under but are surface currents, and it is conservatively estimated that they kill 100 people per year, and account for 80% of lifeguard rescues. That's more than are killed by sharks, tornadoes, lightning or floods.

The good news is that if you are aware of the danger, you can be aware of the solution. On many public beaches there are flags denoting surf hazards; if the flag flying is red don't swim. Even if the flag is green and seas are flat as a pancake, don't swim alone, and whenever possible swim at lifeguard protected beaches. If you become caught in a rip current, the first step to survival is not to panic. Think of the current as a treadmill, and you want to step to the side of it – so swim across the current in a direction following the shoreline. When out of the current, swim at an angle away from the current back to the beach. If you can't escape this way, float calmly until the current subsides. It will typically end a short distance offshore, and then you can swim back.

A three-hour rip current seminar is scheduled for June 28 at the Island House Hotel. Experts will discuss why and how rip currents form, as well as rip current legal issues that effect tourism based industries. The goal of the seminar is to get information to those that come into contact with our beach-going tourists (hotel and condominium staff, safety personnel and realtors, among others.), so that they in turn can pass that information along. Everyone is welcome to attend, but space is limited, so register early by contacting Shonda Borden at the Auburn Marine Extension and Research Center at (251) 438-5690, or by email at bordesm@auburn.edu.

Always check surf and weather conditions before heading to the beach by calling 968-TIDE in Gulf Shores and 980-INFO in Orange Beach. The National Weather Service has an excellent website with rip current information, including rip current forecasting and those real life stories I mentioned at <http://www.ripcurrents.noaa.gov>. Learn what the dangers are before you, your friends or your family enters the water.