Oregon beach-goers warned to stay alert

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Ocean beach explorers lured by shipwrecks and other fascinating sights during the upcoming spring break are reminded to keep an eye on the tides and waves that exposed or created them. Beach safety education coordinator Robert Smith of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD) warns sightseers and beachcombers that recent storms and the extremities of tides have greatly changed Oregon's beaches. "The ocean floor has been changed in many places," said Smith. "If you're looking at shipwrecks or other exposed objects, you need to stay aware of the tides. If you go into the water, you have to be especially wary of rip currents and sneaker waves." Staying out of the water, said Smith, is the safest way to enjoy the ocean at this time of year. "We still have a winter ocean out there," he said. "The water is cold (around 45 degrees) and the waves are very unpredictable." Children who cannot resist the urge of wading into the water should be under close adult supervision at all times and be wearing life jackets, Smith said. "Life jackets do more than make you float. They add a layer of warmth and, if yellow or orange, can be spotted easier and lead to a rescue." So far in 2008, two people have drowned on the coast and three others have had to be rescued. The 2007 toll included six deaths and 26 rescues. Dangers also lurk off the beach. Smith added that the winter storms have weakened some cliffsides. "Climbing over fences at viewpoints is very risky right now. Climbing on cliffs anywhere is extremely dangerous." Tide tables can help people avoid becoming stranded on rocks or at shipwreck sites, said Smith. The tables are free at state parks and many coastal businesses. Before driving a vehicle to a shipwreck site, people also should check beach driving regulations. "It can be both illegal and unsafe," said Smith.