

Water special



Tombstoning - a giant



A jumper at Bude canal sea lock

By David Walker

"If it wasn't dangerous, we wouldn't be doing it" ... the answer given in response to the Times when they asked a young man why he jumped from cliffs, in the face of such an obvious danger.

Tombstoning June - A

A 26 year old male was injured in an inflatable dinghy after jumping from a stone wall in Dorset in August. The man was unconscious and having a seizure. He ran from the scene.

A 17 year old male jumped from a stone bridge into the River Leven in August. This was one of his jumps. His body was found in the river.

A 16 year old was killed after jumping from a stone wall in August. He disappeared following a jump, and the body was found 12 hours later.

A 46 year old father of six was injured after attempting a 30 foot jump from a stone wall at Berry Head, Devon, in June. He was found to be drinking with friends and had a "stunt" before.

A 29 year old male was injured after jumping from a stone wall into the sea at Trevaunance Cove, Cornwall, in June. He was also drinking in June, he was also injured.

A 14 year old girl suffered spinal injuries after landing on rocks at Armchair Cliff, Devon, in June.

A 39 year old, broke his neck after jumping from a stone wall into 2 feet of seawater in June.

A 44 year old died in hospital after suffering injuries sustained by jumping from a stone wall in Devon with a group of friends in June. In the same incident a 48 year old was also injured.

leap into the unknown

This summer has seen a spate of cliff and structure jumping incidents, resulting in death and a serious injury. Coverage and comment in the mainstream press has been widespread, with some quarters calling for a ban on the activity.

Between June and August there were nine drowning or near

misses as a result of people jumping from height into the water. Five were fatal, and impact injuries such as neck and spinal injuries were common in those who survived.

The associated risks seem obvious; being at height, the depth, density and temperature of the water along with the less easily identified factors such as underwater rocks, tide and the ability of the person to control their fall and subsequent impact with the water all add up to make it high risk.

Cliff jumping became tagged with the term 'tombstoning' around 2003, the title is a reference to the way the person falls and plunges deep into a pool of water, in much the same way a stone would. Quite often it is done as part of organised activity, such as coastering and deep water soloing (climbing). Participants jump from man-made structures such as piers or bridges, or natural features such as cliffs. The nature of tombstoning is that it is a high risk, high impact activity.

Although this activity has been around for generations, its profile is only just beginning to

rise. Traditionally associated with the southern areas of England, in Cornwall and Devon, it has become perceived as increasingly common throughout the rest of the UK. This increased awareness can in part be attributed to the use of new media outlets such as You-Tube, enabling participants to post video clips of their jumps to a worldwide audience, and maybe in part, due to greater coverage given to the activity in the mainstream television and press.

Perhaps one of the more surprising elements of the recent incidents is that the average age of those who have been killed or seriously injured is above 30 years old. Hospital episode data also points towards the same

DEEP WATER SOLING is a form of climbing, over water without any use of rope or harness safety systems. The climber primarily relies upon their judgement, and skill to climb, in addition to learning how to fall and land correctly. The presence of deep water is the climbers primary protection against serious injury.

rush, while incidents involving adults seem to be alcohol-related.

Irrespective of whether the risks are obvious or not, the judgement of those taking part in this activity needs consideration. In many other outdoor and extreme activities there are often natural barriers to participation; climbing often requires a good knowledge of

rope work and navigation, many watersports requires a technical grasp of the craft and an understanding of the water or sea conditions. In gaining these often-technical skills, the participants are equally gaining the soft skills of experience and judgement. This apprenticeship required by the nature of many

Tombstoning will always be a high risk, high impact activity and we will see more serious injuries and fatalities

age/gender profile with 31 years old being the mean age, and two thirds of all the cases involving males. The youngest victim we are aware of is a 13 year old who suffered head, neck and spinal injuries. While not entirely exclusive, a noticeable trend shows that teenagers seem to be participating purely for the

ing accidents August 2007

rescued by holidaymakers in an
jumping 65-100 foot from Durdle Door
The rescuer reportedly noticed him
fit in the seabed, his three friends

ed with friends from the Balloch
in August and disappeared during
y was found by police hours later.

er jumping from Minehead Harbour
eared after getting into difficulties
Coastguard recovered his body six

died after landing on rocks after
from a building roof into the sea at
. He had earlier been reported to
and had apparently performed this

as in hospital after becoming
impacting the water when jumping
e Cove, Cornwall after reportedly
o treated for severe hypothermia.

al injuries after jumping 30 foot and
Rock in Paignton, Devon in June.

and back when jumping from a 15
ter in Lyme Regis, Dorset in June.

spital after treatment for critical
ng from Clacton Pier at Torbay,
nds after drinking on the Beach.
ar old father of four died.



Elizabeth Walker, RoSPA's leisure information officer, points out the warning sign at a popular tombstoning site

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outdoor and extreme sports is not necessarily required for tombstoning, or to put it another way; any fool can leap in.

Outside of those whom deep water solo, or go coasteering the recognition of the risks involved in tombstoning is arguably not at the level it should be. There may be several reasons for this; there is little by way of direct advice for would be participants, of that is available it is often hard to access, so those seeking to try tombstoning (especially teenagers) will come across informal information on the web. Many of the sites do not acknowledge the risks, using videos and material, which glamorises or markets a product.

Access to training is often difficult; there are several credible outdoor centres around the

country which offer plunge pooling and coasteering "taster sessions". The potential development of new courses, or a new national governing body may help to promote a good alternative.

However, both of these assume the participant is actively seeking to understand and manage the risks. The cases we have seen this summer, and over the longer term involving adults, quite often begs questions about our relationship with alcohol, and in the wider context, our understanding and acknowledgement of risk.

Calls have been made for this activity to be banned, but on a practical level how would we do this? What would be the impact on other legitimate activity in that area? More importantly should anyone be making this call at all?

It may prove prudent to better understand and start to address the underlying causes of these incidents, rather than immediately call for a regulatory approach.

It is not logical to expect this activity to stop, even if the calls to ban are acted upon. It is reasonable to expect that participants are given the opportunity to inform themselves about the risks.

In the wider context it is questionable if we equip enough young people with the skills, knowledge and experience to manage the risks in their lives. Issues of risk perception can be seen in many other leisure activities, RoSPA for a long time has supported those seeking to inform teenagers and young people about the risk in their lives, the RU A Dummy 2? education

COASTEERING takes place along the intertidal zone, it is a mixed water and rock activity. Essentially the participants traverse along a stretch of coastline using a mixture of climbing and swimming techniques, tombstoning and jumping into water is required to complete many routes. Wetsuits, buoyancy aids and rope work systems - in addition to rescue boat backups - are commonplace. The Adventure Activities Licensing Authority has a list of activity centres offering coasteering www.aala.org/.

packs is one resource aimed to help inform debate among teenagers about risk taking in the context of water safety.

The question of alcohol misuse has caused considerable debate throughout the media over the summer. Rospa has run and supported several 'Don't drink and drown' campaigns, and no doubt will do so again in the near future, but are we at the point where our approach to education and response to those who misuse alcohol in the leisure sector needs reconsidering? All the alcohol related incidents we have listed placed considerable strain on the emergency response and hospital services, in addition to directly placing the public and professional rescuers in harm's way. Several of the victims were fathers and husbands.

Tombstoning will always be a high risk, high impact activity and we will see more serious injuries and fatalities associated with this activity. However, the examples of coasteering, and deep water soling show that activities with very similar levels of risk are managed every day, without resulting in the same level of harm.

All too often this is not reported, nor are the benefits to the individual. Throughout the summer, we have been asked the same question several times "should tombstoning be banned?" our answer has always been no. This is because not least a ban would be costly and impossible in reality to regulate, but the underlying issues of risk perception and the misuse of alcohol are the real problems which deserve attention.



Spectators filming a jumper on their mobile phones