

Cliffside Park man drowns in former mining quarry

Erik Larsen

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MANCHESTER – A 22-year-old Bergen County man drowned at Crystal Lake in the Pine Barrens on Sunday evening, police said Monday.

Jimmy Sadan Gomez-Estrada of Cliffside Park was illegally swimming in the former mining quarry at the Heritage Minerals site with another person about 6:30 p.m., when both ended up in distress in the water, said police Capt. Vincent Manco, a spokesman for the Manchester Police Department.

Gomez-Estrada's companion was pulled from the water by a passerby, but they were not able to reach Gomez-Estrada before he drowned, Manco said.

The victim was later pulled from the submerged quarry by another passerby and lifesaving measures were attempted to resuscitate Gomez-Estrada, Manco said.

Gomez-Estrada was taken to Community Medical Center in Toms River where he was pronounced dead, the officer said.

"The preliminary investigation indicates the drowning to be accidental," Manco said.

Originally operated by the American Smelting and Refining Company Inc., the 7,000-acre site between Route 37 and 70 in Manchester, was operated by Heritage Minerals until the end of mining operations there in the early 1980s, Manco said.

During its years of operation, the land was mined so deeply that bodies of water would form in the mining pits often, which were then referred to as "lakes" by the locals. However, the bodies of water are actually groundwater aquifers. Because these lakes were formed as a result of a mining operation, they do not have stable bottoms or shorelines, the way that naturally occurring lakes do, Manco explained.

"The banks are very unpredictable and dangerously unstable," he said. "Those entering the water will quickly realize that after taking a few steps in the soft, unstable sand that the shoreline 'shelf' quickly drops off to depths that exceed 60 feet."

"Some estimates have the largest 'lake' on the property as being up to 300 feet deep."

Because the lakes are not fed by any streams, but rather by a deep underground source, the water is clear but "very cold."

"These 'lakes' are filled with mineral-laden spring

water from the underground aquifer and, as such, buoyancy is reduced," Manco said.

"Additionally, the water is also much colder, which can result in a swimmer, even an accomplished one, tiring much faster."

As a consequence, there have been several drownings on the property over the years.

The Manchester Police Department wants to remind the public that the Heritage Minerals or "ASARCO" site is private property and closed to all recreational use. To trespass on the property is a criminal offense, Manco emphasized.

"In the interest of public safety, the Manchester Township Police urges everyone to obey the 'No Trespassing' signs posted at the site," he said.

"Trespassers are subject to substantial fines and penalties up to and including incarceration for being on the property."

Anyone who may have been at Crystal Lake and witnessed this incident is asked to contact Detective Richard Conklin of the Manchester Police Department's Investigations Bureau at 732-657-2009 ext. 4211.

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