

Safety and health alert

06/99 Recreational diving accident - night dive

Incident

There have been a number of recreational diving accidents recently in Western Australia. The accidents resulted in the death of two recreational divers and another incident that could have resulted in death. This report deals with one of these accidents that occurred at Exmouth to a diver of non-English speaking background.

On 1 December 1998, at Bundegi Reef Sanctuary in Exmouth Gulf, a female diver died during a night drift dive. The diver entered the water from a commercial dive vessel anchored approximately 500 metres offshore. Due to a strong current and wave action, the diver drifted away from the vessel instead of holding onto the mermaid line.

A second diver, who had also drifted away, swam back to the vessel and reported the missing diver to a dive instructor. A surface search by the vessel was unsuccessful, and the diver's body was recovered from the ocean bottom, close to the location of the original dive site, on 2 December 1998.

Factors

There were a number of factors that contributed to this accident:

1. The deceased diver held an advanced open water diving qualification, but had only eleven recorded dives before 1 December 1998. Nine of the dives were carried out in training, and included one previous night dive. The deceased was the least experienced diver on the vessel.
2. The deceased diver had never dived in Exmouth, but was allowed to carry out a night drift dive without any orientation to local conditions other than a basic dive briefing. Although the crew considered the dive conditions satisfactory, the deceased diver had never experienced the conditions, and could not handle the current and wave action at night.
3. The skipper/lookout and dive instructor on the vessel did not notice the two divers drifting away from the vessel, although the divers were provided with torches and light sticks.
4. The dive vessel crew did not receive training in the company's emergency procedures, or practice emergency drills, leading to confusion and increased response time to a life-threatening situation.
5. The dive vessel did not have a powered tender for an immediate response to the emergency. Lifting the anchor took about five minutes before the search could start. The search was then interrupted to pick up another group of divers already in the water.



Recommendations

1. Commercial dive operations should be aware that they have a legal responsibility to ensure the safety and health of their customers is not adversely affected by their work activities.
2. Dive vessels must include a powered tender that can respond at short notice to diving emergencies. All crewmembers should be trained to operate the tender.
3. Emergency procedures must be documented and regularly practiced to minimise confusion and to reduce response time in the event of an emergency.
4. A diving qualification does not demonstrate competency to dive. Procedures for the selection of dive sites should include reference to diving experience as well as qualifications. Diving activities for a mixed group should be selected on the basis of the most inexperienced diver's competency.
5. Inexperienced divers who are unfamiliar with local conditions should be buddied with an experienced diver or provided with in-water supervision.
6. Dive vessels require at least a skipper and one other crewmember (usually a divemaster) to ensure that there is adequate surface supervision of diving activities. A lookout should have no other duties whilst observing divers at all times they are in the water.
7. At least one crewmember must understand English and also speak a language understood by the divers, to ensure that there are no communication barriers between crew and customers regarding dive procedures. If no interpreter is available, instruction sheets should be given to non-English speaking divers. The information should be written in a language understood by the divers.

Further Information

Further information can be obtained from the WorkSafe internet site www.worksafe.wa.gov.au, or by contacting customer service on 1300 307 877 or email: safety@docep.wa.gov.au.

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