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# NEWS

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### News

### Less water, more beach

05/25/01

By **MOLLY KAVANAUGH**

Lake Erie boaters, nervously watching their depth-sounders, may start gazing enviously at people back on the beach.

Low water levels, the bane of boating, will be a boon this summer for beach bumming. More exposed sand means volleyball, sandcastle contests, sunbathing privacy and space to walk without tripping over people doing all of those things.

"Our yardstick is the dune. The first year I got here, 1998, the waves were hitting it," said Tom Hill, conservation coordinator at Headlands Beach State Park in Mentor.

Now 50 to 70 feet of sand lies between the dune and the lake's edge.

Lifeguard chairs at Headlands have been moved farther from the parking lot and closer to the water. Although the water is still chilly, 57 to 62 degrees, lifeguards will be on duty starting tomorrow at Headlands and state parks Edgewater, Geneva, East Harbor, Maumee Bay and Crane Creek.

Many state parks have 20 feet more of sand and are making the most of it.

Kelleys Island State Park is going to put in beach volleyball courts. East Harbor State Park in Ottawa County typically has a shallow swimming area but couldn't do anything about it. This summer, the park has a new sandy area with deeper water.

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Huntington Beach in Bay Village expects to see more sand castle builders. "In fact, sand villages seem to sprout up, and sand cities," said Joan Pfungsten, park manager of Huntington Reservation, operated by Cleveland MetroParks.

Over the past two years, the beach has gained about 50 feet, Pfungsten said.

Several factors cause the low water levels in Lake Erie and the other Great Lakes. Recent years have brought less snowfall and rainfall in the Lake Superior basin, which means less water flowing into the other lakes, and temperatures have been warmer than usual, causing more lake evaporation.

The water drop in Lake Erie, to the lowest point since the mid-1960s, began in earnest last summer and is expected to continue through this summer.

With swimming areas running shallower and farther out in the lake, swimmers should be alert to sharp drop-offs and rocks, park officials say.

"We may have a shallow, wading beach, but you still must watch your children," said East Harbor Park Manager Ina Brolis. She recalled a near-drowning two years ago, when a young boy fell in knee-deep water.

At Crane Creek and other parks in Northwest Ohio, receding waters have brought piles of zebra mussels closer to the swimming area. Water shoes are recommended.

The sand at Headlands, though, seems to be finer, Hill said. He should know - he grooms the beach, which now takes an extra three hours.

Whether the shallow water will have any effect on E.coli and other bacteria in the lake is not known, said Steve Binns, administrator of the state's bureau of environmental health. "We won't know until we get into the season," he said.

Heavy rainfall last summer was the main culprit in high bacteria levels. The state coordinated water quality testing at 18 beaches, resulting in 269 days of advisory postings. County health departments monitor other beaches.

State testing is tentatively scheduled to begin next week.

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