Beautiful Keowee can be treacherous, too

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
THE JOURNAL

SALEM — The drowning of a Greer teenager last week while having fun with his buddies at a popular Lake Keowee swimming area is the fourth reported drowning at that location in the past five years.

Lake Keowee is a majestic and beautiful attraction that draws visitors in droves from near and far. Built more than 40 years ago by Duke Energy, wave after wave of retirees have come from many parts of the country to build their dream homes cloistered throughout the approximately 300 miles of shoreline.

But as beautiful as Lake Keowee is, it can be treacherous, too.

Tragedy struck again late Friday afternoon when 17-year-old Treven J. Tolliver of Greer jumped into the water from the shores of Fall Creek Landing and began swimming toward the island called "The Rock," located roughly 200 feet offshore.

Tolliver tired and never

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The drowning of a Greer teen near "The Rock" in Lake Keowee last week was the fourth reported near the popular swimming area in the last five years.

KEOWEE: 'If you can't swim, it's dangerous'

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made it to land. Oconee rescue personnel located his body approximately 26 feet below the surface. Although he was resuscitated at Oconee Memorial Hospital, he died later that night after he was transferred to Greenville Memorial Hospital.

Oconee emergency management director Scott Krein is all too familiar with drownings at Lake Keowee. He said in 2012 alone, seven people drowned in the lake. He's also aware of the loss of life around the area of "The Rock."

The risk, Krein insists, is great anywhere around Lake Keowee and not just in the area of Fall Creek Landing. He said it would be impractical to have warning signs posted all over the lake, because there are multiple dangerous areas.

"You know, it's water, and if you can't swim, it's dangerous," Krein said. "There are dropoffs all over the lake. Depending on water level, you can walk out a distance and then get into water that's too deep. You can be standing in one spot and step into water that's 20 feet deep. All over the lake, you can go from 10 feet to 50 feet in places."

If it appears that tragedy hits more often around "The Rock" — drownings were reported there in 2010 and twice in 2013 in addition to last week's incident — it is because many are attracted to the particularly beautiful spot, which includes a waterfall not far away.

"That's a very popular area," Krein said. "During the summer months, it's not unusual to have hundreds of people there."

One of its attractions, according to Krein, is that people can park their vehicles and walk through the woods to get to the area. He said it's also a spot where boats can be launched.

Krein said he's participated in discussions on different levels with stakeholders related to safety issues around the lake, but can't recall anything ever coming out of those talks.

Calls by The Journal to the local area office of South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, which patrols the lake, and to Friends of Lake Keowee Society, an organization dedicated to preserving the lake as a vital resource to Oconee County, went unreturned Wednesday.

The Journal also reached out to Duke Energy, which is the federally appointed lakeshore manager of Lake Keowee, to address water safety concerns. Duke Energy representatives asked for more time to formulate a comprehensive response.

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