

No health concerns at this beach

By MIKE BILLINGTON ENGLEWOOD SUN EDITOR

ENGLEWOOD — Carla Brooks bent to help her son Jakob adjust his SpongeBob SquarePants arm floats, then straightened as her husband David waded through the water to show her a handful of shells.

The Florida and **Charlotte County health departments** issued an advisory Friday just before the start of the Memorial Day weekend noting that higher-than-normal levels of bacteria were present in the waters at Stump Pass and other areas waterfronts. That didn't keep the Brooks family out of the water Monday, however.

Nor almost anyone else.

The small lot at Stump Pass was filled to overflowing as people waited patiently in their cars for someone to leave so they could find a place to park. There were several hundred people on the beach, which was littered with brightly colored umbrellas. The water was full of men, women and children throughout the afternoon.

"I checked the water when we got here," said Carla Brooks, a Punta Gorda resident. "I didn't see anything floating and there was no bad smell so I thought it was okay. It was an advisory. They didn't close the beach."

The health departments noted in their advisory that enteric bacteria, which normally inhabit the intestinal tract of humans and animals, could have entered the water when waste was washed into it by a series of heavy rain storms during the week.

The bacteria, according to health experts, can cause rashes, diarrhea, nausea and vomiting.

None of the people at Stump Pass seemed concerned about that, however. They pointed to the clear waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the lack of an odor as proof that they could swim safely.

"We came all the way from Fort Myers so, yeah, we're gonna swim," said Cory DeWalt just before he sprinted into the water and did a back flip to the cheers of a dozen people, all family and friends.

"We're at the beach so we've gotta swim," said Jordan Santiago as he and his friend Miguel Sullivan took turns diving for shells.

Back in Fort Myers, DeWalt said, he and his friends swim in ponds and rivers that are not nearly as clean as the Gulf.

Farther up the beach Michelle Noto helped Farrah Bellingham, 6, hunt for sharks' teeth. They were soon joined by her husband Mario and son Anthony.

"We're from Deltona, but we come here at least once a month," Anthony said as he peered at a pile of shells looking for a shark's tooth.

"It's our 23rd anniversary today," Michelle Noto said as she looked up, "and we decided to spend it here."

Nearby, Rotonda resident Tina Eichstadt, caught a few rays and watched her daughter Farrah.

"I'm not worried," she said as her daughter and Michelle Noto stood up, then splashed into the water with a net to scoop out more shells. "The water is clear and there's no smell."

About a mile down the beach, beneath a big red, white and blue umbrella, Nancy Schoenfeld wiped a towel over her wet face and put her mask and snorkel on a beach chair. Her sons Timothy and James were still snorkeling in the water while husband Bob watched from the surf line.

"We heard about the advisory but we checked the water when we got here and it seemed pretty clean to us," she said. "It's very clear and I can't believe that with all that water out there, there's enough of a problem to stop us from going in."

The Schoenfelds recently moved to North Port from the Philadelphia area, she said.

"You want to see polluted water, try swimming in one of the rivers where we used to live. That," Schoenfeld said, "is polluted water."

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