

Sauble Beach deserted Saturday despite May 2-4

Owen Sound Sun Times

May 18, 2014

By Scott Dunn

It was the first May 2-4 holiday weekend with free municipal parking in at least seven years but the beach was practically deserted Saturday.

Cold weather and the possibility of rain were the main culprits, people there said.

The Victoria Day long weekend, which kicks off Sauble's tourist season, saw one person in the water and fewer than a dozen on the beach as far as the eye could see Saturday afternoon. The weekend's chilly start improved as temperatures climbed into the teens through the rest of the weekend.

But few cars parked Saturday where now-removed ticket spitters had charged \$15 per full day, until South Bruce Peninsula council in a business-pleasing move voted to get rid of them.

Tourists and tourism operators alike also said Saturday there's been a general decline in May 2-4 visits to Sauble over the past several years, a weekend which used to draw crowds rain or shine. Some said the beach has become quieter all season long for several years.

Paid parking also bore the brunt of criticism but other less obvious explanations were also suggested. Some who declined to speak on-the-record said the beach is over-policed, with too many drunk-driving spot-checks hassling law-abiding people.

Peter Metcalfe, formerly of Owen Sound and now of Burlington, said it's probably the quietest he's seen the beach on the Victoria Day long weekend. Wearing a wetsuit after paddle-boarding in the lake, he said 2 or 3 C at night and in mid-single digit temperatures by day kept people away Saturday.

Mark Hunter, of Guelph, agreed. "I commented as we were driving down, I said wow, it's really quiet down here." The cottager for 40 years blamed the weather forecast which called for rain which didn't come, at least during the day. He's "never" seen the beach so quiet on the Victoria Day weekend.

Both Hunter and his wife Sandy applauded the return of free municipal parking for businesses' sake. "It's become quieter and quieter over the last say 10 to 15 years," he said. "Whether it was paid parking or not, I don't know," he added.

James Carrick, a surfing and paddle boarding instructor at Sauble for 15 years, largely blamed the weatherman's unfulfilled threat of rain for scaring people away. But charging for parking has scared some day-trippers away too, he said. "'Cause I remember this beach exactly being packed from end to end, for even the May 2-4 weekend no matter how bad the weather was."

He's hoping eliminating the parking fee will bring a lot more people to his lessons this summer, though finding parking could be harder on busy weekends, he said.

Family campground operator Paul Gresel said restoring free parking is "going to let us reintroduce the beach. Because that poisoned a lot of people."

Sauble Falls Tent & Trailer Park had 31 of its 53 sites for night-to-night visits were booked Saturday; good compared with past recent years. He has 110 sites for trailers for his regulars.

May 2-4 is a "non-event for us," unlike in the recent past, he said.

"May 2-4 is a different animal . . . people used to come camping in the snow," he said. "That really started to change about seven, eight years ago," he said. "It used to be the young crowd that come up here. And yeah, they partied. But that was the next generation that became our seasonals. Like everybody in here (in the trailers) spent their teenaged years up here," he said.

He said paid parking has hurt his business "especially the last couple of years," so now he's talking up free parking with people who contact him. It's looking like people are booking an extra day or two as a result, he said, but it's too early to say.

He continues to see working couples who can't schedule a full week off together who return twice for three- and four-day getaways through the season, he said.

But dirty beach washrooms are still tourist turn-off, he said.

North Sauble Sands Camp bills itself online as "the party place catering to singles," but the singles were virtual no-shows Saturday, owner Brad Casemore said. Usually the 16- to 24-year-old crowd shows up there on the Victoria long weekend. In 2002 there were 2,300 people in the park for May 2-4, with people turned away. There were just more than 100 people in the campground Saturday, with most campsites in view empty. All campers were aged 20 and up, Casemore said. He saw fewer regulars and smaller groups booked.

The weather contributed to this year's "terrible" bookings, but reduced bookings during the season has been a problem or five or six years, Casemore said.

Paid parking is less a concern for his clientele, but Casemore suggested the economy is a factor. Many young people don't have jobs and they all have cellphone bills to pay, he suggested. High fuel prices also discourage visitors, he said.