



D38 Underwater Body Recovery Procedures in Adverse Conditions

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have a basic understanding of how to recover a body from an underwater scene, while enduring adverse conditions in a river and reservoir system. The attendee should understand the importance of the process and procedures for retrieving a body and items of evidentiary value, while preserving and maintaining their integrity.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating the consistency, accuracy, and versatility necessary to all investigation procedures.

Underwater recovery of a body from a reservoir and river system is difficult in the best of circumstances. Retrieval of submerged human remains subject divers to unique and often dangerous conditions. These include natural impediments, strong currents, zero visibility, toxic chemicals, entanglement, entrapment, and water temperatures in the 30 degree Fahrenheit range. Historically, body recovery has been a haphazard venture, using such archaic methods as chains and hooks to "drag" the bottom for the body. Oftentimes, untrained and inexperienced divers are sent into the water, jeopardizing their personal safety, as well as preservation of the body, evidence, and the scene. Failure to properly retrieve the body and evidence can lead to unreliable results, inaccurate analysis, and failure to resolve the case. This presentation will address why and how to successfully recover human remains and any evidence associated with them.

A successful underwater body recovery requires a precise, methodical, coordinated approach to locate, retrieve, and preserve human remains and associated evidence. Dive team members must be versatile due to the uniqueness of each dive operation. In this presentation, instruction begins with the point at which the body has been found. Divers must first document, diagram, and map the body's location and position, as proper documentation is crucial to an accurate chain of custody. Photographs should be taken of the human remains in situ to document their position and condition. When this is not possible, due to low or zero visibility, the body is photographed when returned to the land.

Divers must then search the area immediately around the body for additional items, using a radiating circular pattern. The size of the search area is dependant upon the condition of the remains and case circumstances. Items recovered often include detached body parts, weapons, clothing, or jewelry. Typically, divers work in low to zero visibility, using only the sense of feel and one gloved hand, as the other hand is tethered to a tender on the surface. "Feeling" for evidence must be slow and methodical to avoid missing potential items of evidentiary value. When searching for heavy or sunken items, a diver may have to immerse their arm into the thick, sludge-like muck of the river bottom.

Finally, the body should be placed in a specially designed body bag while still underwater, in the same position as found to avoid loss of evidence on or attached to the body. Such evidence may include blankets, ropes, chains, safes, and cinder blocks. Several divers and lifting devices may be required during removal to prevent damaging the body and related evidence. Bagging the body underwater also protects it from unwanted media attention and observation by the decedent's family. Bodies removed from the water are transported to the medical examiner's office for examination and autopsy.

Body, Underwater, Adverse Conditions