

# Accident Database

## Report ID# 62905

[Help](#)

2020-01-01

Date

Jean Claude Mutabazi

Victim

40

Victim Age

St. Joseph's River

River

a dam south of the Broadway Bridge, South Bend, IN United States Indiana, US

Location

Water Level

N/A

River Difficulty

## Cause Code(s)

– Caught in Low Head Dam Hydraulic

## Injury Type(s)

– Does not Apply

## Factors

– Cold Water

Private

Trip Type

Kayak - Other

Boat Type

4 kayakers

Group Info

Reported

Status

## Accident Description

Looking carefully at the photos, you can tell these were rec kayaks, not whitewater boats. I suspect they were trying new boats out and washed over the dam!

<https://wsbt.com/news/local/gallery/officials-identify-kayaker-who-died-in-the-st-joseph-river-in-niles>

Kayaker dies after falling into river in Niles, MI

WOODTV.com Grand Rapids, MI

NILES, Mich. (WOOD) — Authorities have identified the kayaker who died after falling into the St. Joseph River in Niles as 40-year-old Jean Claude Mutabazi of South Bend, Indiana.

Officials were called to the river near the Niles Dam around 8:30 a.m. Wednesday. Four people had been in individual kayaks, police say. Investigators say Mutabazi was swept downstream. He grabbed onto a tree branch, which had been entangled

on the top of the dam. He couldn't hold on and was swept out away, police say. He was ultimately found in the water around 12:30 p.m. and was pronounced dead at a hospital shortly after, police say. The medical examiner's office is investigating the cause of death.

One of the kayakers was found in the water clinging to a cable, and crews were able to save him, according to the Niles Police Department. Authorities say a third kayaker pulled himself out of the water. Another person remained in his kayak and tried to help those in the water, police say.

All four kayakers had been wearing life jackets at the time. Mutabazi was still wearing his when he was found in the river, police say. Authorities say the water temperature was recorded at 39 degrees with the air temperature at 25 degrees. Two of the surviving kayakers were taken to the hospital due to cold exposure. Both have been released as of Thursday afternoon.

Kayaker pulled from St. Joseph River Wednesday pronounced dead

South Bend Tribune, South Bend, IN

NILES — A kayaker who was missing for several hours Wednesday morning and later pulled from the St. Joseph River mid-afternoon has died.

Emergency crews were called at 8:30 a.m. Wednesday, after three adult male kayakers had entered the water near a dam south of the Broadway Bridge. A fourth man who had not entered the water called emergency crews when the kayakers "quickly had a problem," Niles police said.

One of the kayakers was able to make it to shore and rescue himself, according to Niles Fire Chief Larry Lamb. Another man had grabbed hold of a safety barrier above the dam and was rescued there, Lamb said. The final kayaker was initially unaccounted for. The body of that kayaker, who was wearing a purple life vest, was found in the river at 12:20 p.m. He had been swept under and trapped beneath a log lodged against the dam, Lamb said. Niles police say the kayaker was taken to a local hospital, where he was pronounced dead. The kayakers' identities have not been released.

Missing kayaker pulled from St. Joseph River in Niles has died

ABC News 57 South Bend, IN

NILES, Mich. -- The man who was pulled from the St. Joseph River in Niles around noon on Wednesday has died, according to law enforcement. Around 8:30 a.m., four men launched a kayak near the dam at a legal launch site, according to Niles Fire Chief Larry Lamb. "We had four adult males enter that actually entered the

water just up there on the other side of the dam. Two actually had a lot of kayaking experience and the other two didn't have any," Lamb said.

At some point all four men entered the water. One paddled to safety and called for help. A second male was out of the water by the time first responders arrived. The third was rescued from the water by first responders. All three were in stable condition.

Emergency crews spent the morning searching for the fourth kayaker. "The last known location for the fourth victim was up here near the dam area. So we investigated, there's a cable system up there and a large log and we were able to shake the log free and recover the fourth victim," Lamb said.

The fourth man was found and transported to the hospital. He was pronounced deceased a short time after being taken to the hospital, according to law enforcement. "We would like to make sure that people know that they shouldn't be going into the river unless they really know what they're doing, especially above a dam," Lamb said.

### Experts Weigh In on Kayak Tragedy in Niles

By Tana Kelly, ABC Channel 57, South Bend, IN

BERRIEN COUNTY, Mich. – "It's a tragedy, you hate to see it happen, but I always wonder when these things happen how experienced people are. It's probably a tragedy that didn't have to happen," Rob Pearce, a staff naturalist at Sarett Nature Center and kayaking expert said.

Early Wednesday morning, Niles police received a 911 call about kayakers whose boats had overturned. Thursday, we are learning their names, 40-year-old Jean Claude Mutabazi of South Bend passed away. He was with three other kayakers at the time, 81-year-old Ted Knudsen, 72-year-old Tom Lehman and 37-year old Pierre Celestin – all of whom survived.

According to Niles police, the four men launched kayaks near the dam at French Paper on the St. Joseph River at a legal launch site. When first responders got to the scene, one of the kayakers was spotted clinging to a buoy and was rescued by a boat. Another kayaker who was in the water swam ashore and the third kayaker was still in his kayak and was trying to help the others.

The fourth kayaker is now identified as 40-year-old Jean Claude Mutabazi was missing for four hours. Police say Jean Claude was swept downstream, grabbed onto a tree branch that was stuck into the top of this dam structure but he couldn't

hold on and that's when he went out of sight. They found him underneath that tree and he was taken to the hospital where he was pronounced dead.

ABC57 spoke to a kayak expert Thursday who explained exactly what happened and why. "When you got more flow when it's deeper flooded, it tends to flow faster so if you could get caught against a tree, it holds you against a tree and that's very dangerous," Pearce said.

Even though all of the kayakers wore floatation devices, he said: "you can get pinned and it will just hold you and sometimes you can get sucked down, even with your floatation device, you can go under."

And with the river temperature recorded at 39 degrees with an outside temperature of 25 degrees, he said: "you have to be careful about getting wet, develop hypothermia, our body can't keep its temperature up, you go numb and you can drown very quickly."

That's why Pearce says you need to be experienced if you go kayaking during this time of year.

"One of the cardinal rules of canoeing and kayaking – you don't grab a tree if you are near it. It can cause the boat to capsize; you can get tangled in the branches. The current can suck you down to a degree under the water," he said.

Even experienced kayakers, he said, are wary to go near the dams because of the currents. If you do want to kayak this time of year, Pearce said you should only do so if you're experienced. Also, go in groups and wear a dry suit because of the colder than normal temperatures.



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