

Body found at river; homeless couple held



JONES



HITT



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Officers on Friday remove the body of the man, presumed to be a transient, found dead Thursday near the river in Santa Cruz.

Cops sought pair in molest case, uncovered slaying

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SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz police brought a Texas couple in for questioning in a molest case Thursday night and ended up arresting them on suspicion of homicide.

James Landrum Jones, 22, is being held on a murder charge. His girlfriend, 20-year-old Tia Lauren Hitt, will be charged as an accessory. Both are from the Fort Worth area.

The strange case began about 2 p.m. Thursday when officers began searching for the couple near the Metro bus station on Pacific Avenue. It ended around 8 p.m. when officers discovered a body on the banks of the San Lorenzo River.

The victim appeared to be a white male in

Lt. Joe Haebe said neither the victim nor the suspects were part of the homeless group that lived by the river until heavy rains forced their evacuation in early December.

his mid-50s, possibly a transient, police Lt. Joe Haebe said. The body had been covered by thick branches and leaves.

Police had yet to identify the man Friday evening, and did not know how he died. An autopsy is planned.

According to Haebe, officers began searching for the couple after their names came up

in the investigation of an unrelated molestation case.

Haebe said the two were hard to miss: They wore matching fatigues, army boots and leather jackets. Both sport mohawk haircuts, with Hitt's dyed purple and Jones' a yellowish-gold.

Haebe declined to comment on the molestation case, saying it remains open, but Hitt was also booked on suspicion of having sex with a minor.

Investigators aren't saying exactly what the couple said during the interview, but authorities said one of them mentioned a body when first approached by authorities.

The couple eventually steered officers to

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the victim.

The corpse was found about 30 feet from the river and 50 feet north of the area where a group of homeless people established what came to be known as Camp Paradise.

Haebe said neither the victim nor the suspects were part of the homeless group that lived by the river until heavy rains forced their evacuation in early December.

While officers discovered the body Thursday night, they decided to preserve the crime scene and wait until Friday to remove it.

Early Friday, police used hedge clippers to cut away the thick brush that covered the body, then wrapped it in a blue plastic tarp. A small flock of ducks paddled by on the river about midday as a procession of officers hoisted the tarp.

The body was found within sight of the Santa Cruz Memorial Park cemetery. A funeral was being conducted as officers loaded the body into a coroner's van.

Haebe said investigators believe Jones and Hitt argued with the man over a campsite, and he was killed.

The area, near the Highway 1 bridge, is filled with homeless campsites and is known for drug dealing.

Haebe said he did not know when the slaying occurred. He said the body appeared to have been there for possibly a few weeks.

Hitt's father, Jerry Hitt of Texas, said Friday afternoon that he was shocked by his daughter's arrest.



Santa Cruz police and a coroner's investigator work near the body on the bank of the San Lorenzo River on Friday, near the site of the former Camp Paradise homeless enclave. Police have arrested a couple from Texas on suspicion of killing the man, reportedly during an argument over a campsite.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

He said his daughter met Jones in Texas a few months ago. He said his daughter went to California because Jones wanted to move here, and she wanted to be with him.

Haebe did not know how long the couple

had been in the Santa Cruz area.

He said they had no local criminal record, and he did not know if they had a record in Texas.

Jones and Hitt are both in County Jail.

Jones is being held on \$1 million bail, and Hitt is being held on \$100,000 bail.

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