



Australian Water Safety Council

*N*ATIONAL *W*ATER *S*AFETY *P*LAN

*fostering cooperation and commitment
in the fight against drowning*

Published July 1998



Australian Water Safety Council

The Australian Water Safety Council (AWSC) was officially formed in February 1998 as a result of strong industry consultation and with the support of the Federal Minister for Sport & Tourism, The Honourable Andrew Thomson MP. The Council acts as a consultative forum comprising the major water safety organisations and related government agencies and focuses on the presentation of key water safety issues to governments, industry and the community.

The Australian Water Safety Council does not represent an additional layer of organisational bureaucracy and it will not receive funding directly. The Council will however, provide a collective voice for its member organisations. It will also liaise closely with kindred bodies at State, National & International levels.

The AWSC is committed to enhancing Water Safety in Australia - to producing a strong directional document, to generating bipartisan support and to overseeing the successful implementation of the **National Water Safety Plan**. The AWSC member bodies have demonstrated their commitment by throwing the resources of their respective organisations behind the Council.

On 5 May 1998 the AWSC conducted the **National Water Safety Conference** at the Melbourne Sports & Aquatic Centre involving a broad cross-section of the Australian Water Safety community and including representatives of government departments, agencies and statutory authorities from throughout Australia. The recommendations and spirit of cooperation engendered on 5 May have been incorporated into the objectives and priorities presented in this Plan.

The Australian Water Safety Council has pleasure in presenting this **National Water Safety Plan** to the Australian public with the great expectation that by following the recommendations contained herein there will be a significant reduction in the number of lives lost to drowning and aquatic related incidents.

Australian Water Safety Council

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FOREWORD



Australia has a reputation as a nation of water-loving people. Living, holidaying or simply just playing in and around water is very much a part of our lives. We often enjoy a day at the beach, river, pool or in a boat, and have an enviable record as a nation of champion swimmers. Our beautiful coastline is also a major drawcard for international visitors.

Unfortunately our love of the water also brings a number of problems, some with tragic outcomes. Each summer we are confronted with the tragedies of drowning at our beaches and in backyard pools. But its not just the beaches and pools that pose a risk, people also drown in rivers, dams, lakes and even baths and buckets.

Fortunately over the last 50 years, the number of drownings in Australia each year has gradually reduced. This has been due, in no small part to the efforts of the various national organisations concerned with water safety. In February 1998, in an effort to coordinate the efforts of these organisations, the Australian Water Safety Council was formed.

Despite this about 300 people die from drowning each year, and that is 300 too many.

The National Water Safety Plan has identified and prioritised four key areas, which need to be addressed. Implementation of the Plan will establish national water safety standards and ensure the effective utilisation of the programs, resources and facilities, which currently exist. It will also aim to identify and maximise the links across all organisations involved in water safety.

Since its release in July 1998 over 1,000 copies of this Plan have been distributed throughout Australia and internationally. The Australian Water Safety Council has made significant progress on the objectives identified in the Plan, and has taken great strides in improving the communication and coordination between Federal, state, territory and local governments, water safety organisations, and sport and recreation service providers.

I am pleased to say that the Federal Government already makes a significant contribution to water safety through grants to the three major safety organisations – Royal Life Saving Society Australia, Surf Life Saving Australia and AUSTSWIM.

The Plan is not just for those with a professional interest in water safety, it is for everyone. I urge all those interested in reducing drownings and aquatic accidents in Australia to support the implementation of this plan in whatever way they can.

Jackie Kelly
Federal Minister for Sport and Tourism

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The National Water Safety Plan has been developed by the Australian Water Safety Council, Sydney, July, 1998.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In February 1998 the **Australian Water Safety Council** was formed with the goal of providing a coordinated and cooperative approach to Water Safety in Australia. It was formed because despite the massive efforts of water safety organisations, governments, statutory authorities and individuals drownings continue to occur in unacceptably high numbers.

Drowning is the third highest cause of accidental death in Australia with over 300 deaths every year.

The major objective of the **National Water Safety Plan** is to more adequately resource and effectively utilise the significant programs, resources, facilities and world's best practice that currently exist. Through increasing resources, improving communication and encouraging the sharing of ideas within the Water Safety structure the nation's drowning toll will be significantly reduced.

The **National Water Safety Plan** presents a broad framework for all stakeholders to utilise in improving Water Safety Standards and Action Programs. The framework has been generated from the experience, research and consultation with AWSC Member bodies, the three tiers of Government and the wider Water Safety community.

The **National Water Safety Plan** will:

- Identify and prioritise the major Water Safety issues
- Establish the Water Safety Standards to be applied nationally
- Commit to support, bolster and improve the expertise, programs and resources that are already operating effectively within the system
- Identify and maximise organisational linkages to ensure that duplication of effort and resources are avoided so that positive ideas and best practice are shared throughout Australia.

The **Key Result Areas** proposed within the Plan are:

1. Water Safety Research
2. Management of Aquatic Locations
3. Water Safety Education
4. Targeting of Key Drowning Demographics

National Water Safety Priorities

Water Safety Education provides the base from which all other water safety issues flow and is arguably the single most critical factor in the Drowning Prevention mix. Quality Water Safety Education must be made available to every Australian - the enhancement, strengthening and support of the current system must be assured.

Research must be undertaken to ensure that existing programs, services and strategies remain effective and also to identify future initiatives and direction.

"If you can't measure it - you can't manage it !"

The three highest **At Risk Priority Groups** identified for immediate action are:

1. Children in the 0-5 Age Group
2. Males 16-35 years - the traditional risk-taking group
3. The Rural Community

The greatest challenge to the success of the **National Water Safety Plan** will be to gain the cooperation and commitment from across government, from across the States and Territories and from the water safety community to **together** make the Plan work. Ultimate success will depend on the extent of this cooperation. The **Australian Water Safety Council** is committed to implementing the recommendations contained in this Plan and will be working tirelessly to ensure that responsibilities are discharged and that results are achieved.

The Prize for successfully implementing this **National Water Safety Plan** is immense - indeed the Prize is.... **Life itself!!** ... the saving of up to 300 Australian lives **every year**.

Summary of Recommendations

Key result area 1: water safety research

- **Recommendation 1:** That a Research Coordinating Body be established as part of the AWSC to identify water safety research needs and to facilitate research opportunities and projects. This **Australian Water Safety Research Committee** would facilitate research through organisations like National Health & Medical Research Council (NHMRC), Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), National Injury Surveillance Unit (NISU), National Coronial Information System (NCIS) and Research Departments of Universities.
- **Recommendation 2:** That a **National Water Safety Audit** be conducted to determine all currently available services, programs and resources.
- **Recommendation 3:** That Drowning Statistics be collated from ABS and State Coroners with subsequent dissemination and access to relevant Water Safety organisations.
- **Recommendation 4:** That Coroner's Reports on aquatic incidents be provided directly to a central collection agency.

Key result area 2: management of aquatic locations

- **Recommendation 5:** That Safety Audits must be conducted on all Aquatic Locations in particular on all areas used as regular swimming locations - beaches, pools and inland swimming holes.
- **Recommendation 6:** That State Legislation be enacted to ensure that **if an aquatic facility is part of a development, or a development is proposed adjacent to an aquatic environment, the Building Application and Development Application must include an appropriate Safety Plan.**
- **Recommendation 7:** Appropriate Safety Services must be provided at all locations of aquatic recreation.

Key result area 3: water safety education

- **Recommendation 8:** That Water Safety Education in schools comply with the competencies contained in the **National Curriculum Framework.**
- **Recommendation 9:** That **Water Safety Competency Targets** be set for all Australian children - established at appropriate Age/Developmental levels.
- **Recommendation 10:** That specific attention be provided to ensure access to Water Safety education by people in rural and particularly remote country locations.
- **Recommendation 11:** That national safety standards be established for Learn to Swim & Water Safety programs be conducted by Swimming School operators.
- **Recommendation 12:** That all Swimming Teachers and Coaches hold an appropriate level of accreditation equivalent to the **AUSTSWIM Teacher of Swimming and Water Safety.**

Competencies in Related Aquatic Fields

Specific Safety Standards must be met in relation to all Aquatic Recreational pursuits:

- **Recommendation 13: (Boating)** That PFD's (Personal Flotation Devices) be worn as a mandatory piece of Safety Equipment by all persons on board boats crossing off-shore sand bars. Liability for the wearing of PFD's in this circumstance to be directed at the boat's skipper/driver.
- **Recommendation 14: (Diving)** That all trainees comply with the requirements of the Standards Australia AS4005.1 - **Training and Certification of Recreational Divers.**
- **Recommendation 15: (Fishing)** That improved access to educational programs and safety systems be provided for recreational fishers.

Key result area 4: targeting key drowning demographics

- **Recommendation 16: (The 0-5 Age Group)** That the Drowning Prevention Program outlined in Appendix 1.(KRA 4) be implemented nationally as the **No. 1 Priority** of this National Water Safety Plan. **Zero Tolerance** of drownings in the Home Environment.
- **Recommendation 17: (Traditional Risk Takers: Male 16-35)** That research be conducted through NHMRC as to the best way to approach educating this demographic against “risk taking” behaviour. The research should investigate **Alcohol and Recreational Activity** in this age group generally with the water being one of the environments studied.
- **Recommendation 18: (Traditional Risk Takers: Male 16-35)** That the Drowning Prevention Program outlined in Appendix 1.(KRA 4) be implemented nationally.
- **Recommendation 19: (Rural Communities)** That the Drowning Prevention Plan outlined in Appendix 1.(KRA 4) be implemented nationally. Rural communities have been identified as one of the three High Risk groups of drowning victims.
- **Recommendation 20: (Tourists)** That all In-bound Tourists and Migrants receive important Water Safety Information through strategies outlined in Appendix 1. (KRA 4).
- **Recommendation 21: (Culturally Diverse Communities)** That key water safety messages be publicised in a variety of different languages and promoted directly to ethnic groups through Local Councils and through cultural specific publications.

INTRODUCTION - AUSTRALIANS AND THE WATER

Put quite simply - most Australians love the water. Whether it is splashing playfully in amongst the waves, riding the river rapids or being caressed by the crystal blue waters of the local swimming pool, Australians and millions of visitors each year enjoy our many and varied aquatic experiences.

Indeed the aquatic environment plays a huge role in moulding the Australian culture, in preparing our children for life ahead and in promoting our beautiful country and lifestyle to the rest of the world.

But it was the startling news of Summer 98 that really grabbed the public's attention. Four young children were carried out to sea at Victoria's Gunnamatta Beach, a Vietnamese family drowned on the Murray River, yet another toddler killed in a backyard pool and ... still it continued when on the June long weekend four fishermen drowned in two incidents off the NSW South Coast (none of them were wearing a life jacket) - these are the tragic realities when the water safety issue is not adequately addressed.

We know that over 300 Australians will drown this year. We know this because over 300 Australians drown **every year**. Drownings occur in rivers, lakes and dams, they happen at unpatrolled beaches, in the bathtub, in the swimming pool, in nappy buckets - in fact where ever there is water, drownings can occur.

Drowning is the third largest cause of accidental death in Australia overall and in the 0-5 age group it is the number one killer.

The real tragedy of drowning is that almost every drowning is preventable.

It is therefore essential that Water Safety organisations and Government at all levels take responsibility to ensure that people are adequately prepared to use our aquatic environment. Our community must be properly educated, skilled and well aware of the hidden dangers of water. Likewise owners, operators, managers and Government instrumentalities responsible for aquatic locations must assure public safety.

This **National Water Safety Plan** is built on the solid foundation of over 100 years of lifesaving in Australia, of generations of volunteer and professional lifeguards and on groundbreaking research including the benchmark report by Paul Giles² (1995) **Towards a National Water Safety Strategy**. This Plan will identify and highlight the requirements - the standards, programs, resources and legislation - necessary to ensure that Australians are prepared for and protected from drowning, near-drowning and injury in our vast aquatic environment.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997, *Causes of Death - Australia - 1996* - Brisbane.

² Giles P, 1995, *Towards A National Water Safety Strategy*, RLSSA and SLSA, Sydney.