

REDUCING BOATING & WATERCRAFT RELATED DROWNING DEATHS

Forum Declaration



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The Australian Water Safety Council (AWSC) is deeply committed to drowning prevention in Australia and is a collective voice for Australia's leading water safety organisations. The Council acts as a consultative forum comprising of the major water safety 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 is committed to improving water safety in Australia as demonstrated through the production and implementation of four National Water Safety Plans/Strategies. These documents have generated bipartisan support for water safety in Australia and have seen the improvement of water safety throughout the country.

The Australian Water Safety Council member bodies continue to demonstrate their commitment to water safety by directing resources of their respective organisations towards the development and implementation of the Australian Water Safety Strategy.

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AUSTRALIAN WATER SAFETY COUNCIL BOATING SAFETY FORUM

In August 2017, more than 40 delegates including regulators, policy makers, advocates, practitioners, and researchers convened at the Australian Water Safety Council Boating Safety Forum during the Marine 17 Conference in Sydney. The Forum aimed to extend knowledge and commitment to boating and watercraft-related safety and drowning prevention and covered three sessions. Each session provided unique insights into related risk factors, emerging trends and strategies for improving safety.

Session 1: Goals of the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2016 – 2020

Goal 9: Reduce boating, water and recreational activity related drowning deaths.

- i. Increase access to drowning prevention education and skills for the use of recreational boats and watercraft
- ii. Advocate for best practice in policy, legislation, enforcement and promotion of lifejacket use

Conduct research into boating and watercraft-related drowning incidents which assists in the identification of risk factors and prevention strategies for such drowning deaths.

The first session examined the findings from cutting edge research into boating and watercraft safety across all environments, including a focus on behavioural insights and policy implications.

- **Introduction: Boating safety, drowning prevention and the Australian Water Safety Council**
Justin Scarr, Royal Life Saving Society - Australia and Australian Water Safety Council
- **Boating and Watercraft related fatal drowning - A 10 Year Australian Study**
Stacey Pidgeon, Royal Life Saving Society - Australia
- **Surf Life Saving and coastal boating safety**
Shane Daw, Surf Life Saving Australia
- **Transport for New South Wales 10 year research findings with a specific focus on policy implications**
Jack Hannan, Transport for New South Wales
- **Behavioural studies and exposure information – the Victorian experience**
Gareth Johnson, Maritime Safety Victoria

Session 2: Lifejackets & opportunities for improving safety

The second session discussed key issues with lifejackets including maintenance of inflatable lifejackets, wearing lifejackets incorrectly and the issues of lifejackets when rock fishing. This was facilitated in a panel discussion, before concluding with a presentation on rock fishing deaths.

- **French Perspective on wearing lifejackets**
Pierre Brugnon, SNSM (French Sea Rescue Organisation)
- **Success of lifejacket wearing in Tasmania**
Peter Hopkins, Marine and Safety Tasmania (MAST)
- **Lifejacket wearing rates in New South Wales**
Neil Patchett, Transport for New South Wales
- **Rock fishing deaths in New South Wales**
Owen Li, Behavioural Science PhD, University of Wollongong

Session 3: Risk Factors and their impact on boating and watercraft safety

The third session examined risk factors associated with boating and watercraft related activities including the role of alcohol on our rivers, supervision and the need for a proper lookout and the role of the weather in boating safety.

- **Alcohol and its role in boating and watercraft related drowning deaths on Australian rivers**
Amy Peden, Royal Life Saving Society – Australia
- **Weather Impact & Opportunities**
Neal Moodie, Bureau of Meteorology

DECLARATION ON REDUCING BOATING AND WATERCRAFT-RELATED DROWNING DEATHS

This Declaration reflects the key insights, outcomes and actions shared by the participants and committed to on behalf of the many Australians who have lost their lives when participating in boating and watercraft activity. Whilst the Australian Water Safety Strategy is concerned with reducing drowning deaths, it is important to acknowledge that the full burden of injuries and death that occurs when boating and using watercraft. In many cases the key risk factors are often the same therefore prevention strategies should be able to address a wider variety of factors. As an industry we have a common goal to prevent all boating and watercraft fatalities, not just drowning.

A range of data and research is being conducted across the sector.

Key results from the four research presentations reported that:

- A total of 473 people drowned in Australia over 10 years (2005 – 2015) whilst participating in boating and watercraft-related activity (a rate of 0.21 / 100,000 population). This study found that drowning when using powered boats decreased and watercraft related drowning deaths increased over the 10 year period (1).
- In the coastal environment boating activity was recorded as the second highest activity for coastal related drowning deaths for 2015/16. In the 10 years from 2004-05 to 2015-16, 205 boating related coastal drowning deaths occurred, approximately 17 coastal related drowning deaths per year (2).
- In New South Wales (NSW), there are approximately 2 million people who go boating each year and 240,000 registered vessels, with boating registrations continuing to increase each year. Over a 25 year period (1993 – 2017), the overall boating incident rate has decreased. In particular, drowning has decreased, whilst non-drowning deaths have remained unchanged over time (3).
- In Victoria, in the last 12 months registered boat owners took 3.2 million trips, comparing to 4 million paddling trips taken by adults in the last 12 months. Paddling related deaths are increasing, with 27% of recreational boater fatalities since 2011 being paddlers. Deaths whilst paddling have tripled in the past 5 years compared to previous 5 years (4). Research showed that regular boaters believed that boating is a low risk activity.

Key themes were evident across all studies

- Males: At least 80% of boating and watercraft fatalities were of males
- Lack of wearing lifejackets: An increase in lifejacket wear was reported, however this is still a major issue across the country
- Alcohol (and drugs): About a third (33%) of fatalities involve alcohol in all studies
- Inland waterways: A common location for boating and watercraft fatalities and injury

Research presented across the three sessions emphasised the need to be responsive to emerging issues for boating safety as well as continuing to address existing factors such as lifejackets

- The 10-year study of boating and watercraft drowning found that 63.5% were local residents who were close to home, indicating familiarity with environment and possible complacency, low risk perception, 30.6% had drugs in their system, of which 31.3% were under the influence of illicit substances. Overall, those 65 years and over made up the most drowning deaths (1).
- The NSW study presented issues for boating safety as being non-drowning fatalities, PWC use, towing activities and speed as contributing to boating fatalities which are not reflected in the drowning reports (3).
- Qualitative research conducted in Victoria revealed that 31% of paddlers go alone, 21% don't tell anyone where they are going, a study of paddler deaths over the past 5 year found that 63% of were not wearing or carrying a lifejacket and 100% were unable to raise the alarm (4).
- In Tasmania, there is concern that inflatable lifejackets are not being maintained or serviced, lifejackets being worn incorrectly (therefore not aiding survival) and cold water immersion is becoming an issue (5).
- Other issues around lifejackets raised were concerning the minimum lifejacket standards (current AS and ISO). It was suggested that the standards should be reviewed to improve effectiveness, and should be tested in conditions better reflecting the scenarios people find themselves in. For example, lifejackets are currently tested in a pool with people wearing bathers and are not tested in realistic situations such as with clothes on, or in open water environments with waves. In addition, testing lifejackets with and without crotch straps was suggested. It was stated that the current AS and ISO as appropriate to ensure these performance standards are delivering the necessary level of safety and assurance to the public.

Boating safety at inland waterways and remote locations is becoming an issue:

- In Australia, over the past 14 years, rivers have been the leading location for drowning. Rivers are challenging because they are geographically dispersed and isolated. Boating in remote areas presented the highest risk of drowning compared to city locations (6).
- Over half of all paddling-related deaths in Victoria occurred at inland waterway locations, and 52% of boaters travel long distances to go boating at regional locations (4).
- Recommendations included installation of personal rescue equipment at boat ramps, emergency telephones and increased random breath testing for alcohol and drugs in key locations.

Legislation, policy and education strategies combined do make a difference. Mandatory wearing of lifejackets have decreased boating deaths in some states:

- In Tasmania, mandatory wearing of lifejackets was introduced in 2001, can be attributed to a reduction from 6.6 boating deaths per year (average) (1978-2000) to 2.2 deaths per year since, as well as to better safety equipment overall, and safety education (5).
- NSW reported an increase in lifejacket wear over their 10-year period which has contributed to a large reduction in boating-related drowning fatality rates. This reduction can be credited in part to introduction of mandatory wearing of lifejackets when crossing an ocean bar in 2009 (3).
- Victorian research reported an increase in boaters wearing lifejackets for safety reasons opposed to just compliance (4).
- Mandatory wearing of lifejackets for rock fishers is currently being trialled in Randwick Council, NSW (12).

In order to reach a wide audience, a range of strategies need to be employed:

- **In Tasmania**, education campaigns include the Boat Safe program in schools, and a BoatSafe partnership program with retailers, in which entails training staff in boating safety messages to pass onto customers at point of sale. Public awareness workshops on how to use and maintain their safety equipment are conducted around Tasmania to teach people how to use their safety equipment e.g. flare displays, and giving people the opportunity to wear/test their lifejackets in the water, fully clothed (5).
- **In NSW**: The Old4New Lifejacket Swap campaign around the state and a significant Wear a Lifejacket advertising campaign has been very successful, replicated around Australia and NZ; Partnership with Marine Teachers Association to get into schools; 'You're the Skipper, You're Responsible' campaign; Boating safety officers present at boat ramps, promotion of lifejackets for rock fishers (3).
- **In Victoria**: Website one stop shop for safety information, Paddle safety videos, 'Wear a lifejacket' campaign (4).
- **Royal Life Saving – Australia** national campaigns: The 'Respect the River' and the 'Don't let your males drink and drown' campaigns both have a focus on boating safety (7) (8).
- **Bureau of Meteorology**: weather app, dangerous weather and hazardous surf warnings, hazardous wind onset graphic to easily identify when weather will hit, translated material (9).

Learning from International approaches:

- In **France**, lifejacket workshops for the public have been successful in raising awareness and knowledge on how to use and maintain lifejackets correctly (10).
- In **New Zealand**, use of humour in short video clips posted to social media to reach a wider audience, Old4New lifejacket campaign (supported by Transport for NSW), and partnerships with local councils to enforce wearing of lifejackets; in some council areas an alternative approach is taken with a warning and request to buy a lifejacket instead of imposing a fine, the person has to provide proof of purchasing the lifejacket or fine is enforced (11). An innovative use of geo-fencing around the entire country, combined with smartphone technology has also enabled New Zealand to send out push notifications on boating safety to affect behaviour change.

Despite some encouraging progress, safety and drowning prevention of boat and watercraft users remain an issue.

Challenges include:

- Rural and remote locations where enforcement is less likely, limited mobile coverage and longer response time for emergency services.
- People going out alone without telling anyone of their plans.
- Issue of inflatable lifejackets and lack of servicing and/or maintenance.
- People consuming a large amount of alcohol when on the water and/or operating a vessel, especially at night.
- Registration of paddle-craft not required, hard to reach the paddling population; especially low user/recreational/beginner paddlers.
- Encouraging paddlers to adhere to lifejacket wearing regulations.
- More emphasis on preventing non-drowning fatalities, as drowning is decreasing.
- Confusion within the sector over who is collecting data, what information is being collected and how it is being reported.
- Improved data regarding demographics of boaters, paddlers and rock fishers is required to better target interventions for behaviour change.
- Under reporting of incidents is an issue; skippers/boat owners are supposed to report serious injury or deaths, minor non-serious incidents not requiring hospital are usually not reported therefore information is not captured.
- Older population participating for leisure and recreational purposes, but may not have the experience, fitness or health to participate safely.
- Improved education and promotional strategies to increase public awareness and knowledge to ensure that people choose the right type of lifejacket for the correct activity, and wear lifejackets correctly e.g. Lifejackets may not perform to the optimum at level 150+ unless crotch straps are being worn when you are in the water wearing clothes, and the higher the buoyancy the more likely you will turned into an up-right position, children should not wear an adult size lifejacket and vice-versa.

ACTION TOWARDS REDUCING BOATING AND WATERCRAFT RELATED DROWNING DEATHS

The boating and watercraft symposium delegates make the following recommendations:

Research

Research into boating and watercraft-related drowning should be strengthened by:

- Informing policy, public awareness and education through continued research
- Sourcing and linking National, State and Territory datasets to enable sharing of knowledge nationally
- Expand behavioural research nationally to further understand attitudes, knowledge, behaviour and motivations of the boating population
- Investigating the sector wide use of consistent terms definitions and data collection templates

Policy

Policies that support boating and watercraft-related safety should be strengthened by:

- Ensuring policy decision making considers the full impact of legislation and safety measures on people who use boats and watercraft
- Improving community, rescue and emergency services response, rescue equipment and training, especially in rural and remote locations
- Ensuring that boating safety organisations incorporate emerging risk factors into prevention programs and campaigns
- Advocating for increased enforcement of alcohol and drug regulations and promotion of the consequences when using a vessel under the influence of alcohol and drugs
- Consider use of a holistic approach to boating safety through a Safe System approach i.e. Safer People, Safer Vessels and Safe Waterways
- Collaborate on consistent priority safety messages to support public awareness regardless of borders

Advocacy

Boating and watercraft-related drowning advocacy should be strengthened by:

- Promoting Government, marine industry, media and community understanding and awareness of boating and watercraft safety
- Working with advocates and community members to champion safety and education campaigns.
- Support and use agreed terminology across the sector
- Raising community awareness of the benefits and techniques of boating safety practices, lifejacket wearing, basic rescue and cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, and general preparedness
- Highlighting case studies from 'survivors' of boating and watercraft incidents to raise awareness of what can go wrong and promoting 'lessons learnt'
- Promoting and share lessons from Australian and international best practice
- Advocating for increased enforcement and promotion of the consequences when using a vessel under the influence of alcohol and drugs

Partnerships:

Partnerships that enhance boating and watercraft-related safety could be strengthened by:

- Working through the Australian and New Zealand Boating Safety Education group (ANZBEG) to share information and successful education strategies
- Encouraging relationships with wider industry, education and recreation partners, for example: Retailers (Tasmania), the Marine Teachers Association (NSW), Scouts.
- Continuing to support boating safety education in indigenous communities across Australia and internationally.

Closing Statement

Having reviewed the available boating safety research and policy perspectives, the Australian Water Safety Council, AWSC member organisations, and all symposium delegates restate our commitment to;

- Promoting the many benefits of safe boating and watercraft activities across Australia
- Staying focused on reducing the impacts and numbers of drowning, boating fatalities and injuries
- Drive policy change, improved prevention strategies, investments in research to reduce boating and watercraft-related drowning
- Ensuring the Australian Water Safety Council and the boating safety sector take all necessary steps to reinforce and achieve the research, policy, advocacy and support actions
- Working together to reduce drowning, boating fatalities and injuries across Australia

Justin Scarr

Chair, Australian Water Safety Council

DELEGATE LIST

The AWSC Boating Safety Forum was attended by the following individuals:

Sarah Anderson, New South Wales Office of Emergency Management
Warren Bridge, Newman Senior Technical College
Pierre Brugnon, SNSM - French Sea Rescue Organisation
Dan Carty, Transport for New South Wales
Shane Daw, Surf Life Saving Australia
Geoff Duvall, Australian Power Boat Association
Brendon Fotheringham, Marine Teachers Association of New South Wales Inc.
Jack Hannan, Transport for New South Wales
Anthony Haworth, Captain Cook Cruises
Jody Hollow, Marine Rescue New South Wales
Peter Hopkins, Marine and Safety Tasmania
Lynda Hourigan, New South Wales Roads and Maritime Service
Tony Hystek, Paddle New South Wales
Gareth Johnson, Maritime Safety Victoria
Baz Kirk, Maritime New Zealand
Owen Li, University of Wollongong
Alison Mahony, Royal Life Saving Society – Australia
Greg McNeill, Marine Teachers' Association of New South Wales
Neal Moodie, Bureau of Meteorology
Shannon O'Brien, Sydney Harbour Kayaks / Mirage Sea Kayaks
Michael O'Connor, Marine Teachers Association of New South Wales
Captain Tony O'Malley, Northern Territory Regional Harbourmaster & Marine Safety
Lynn Parker, Paddle New South Wales
Neil Patchett, Transport for New South Wales
Amy Peden, Royal Life Saving Society - Australia
Stacey Pidgeon, Royal Life Saving Society - Australia
Malcolm Poole, Recreational Fishing Alliance New South Wales
Ross Powell, Bay of Plenty Regional Council, Rotorua, New Zealand
Dave Rathbone, NSW Marine Teachers Association
Eveline Rijkssen, Surf Life Saving Australia
Ian Ross, Marine and Safety Tasmania
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Justin Scarr, Royal Life Saving Society - Australia
Pania Shingleton, Maritime New Zealand
Sri Srinivas, Northern Territory Department of Infrastructure
Peter Tate, Paddle New South Wales
Jared Wilson, AUSTSWIM

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