PEOPLE DROWNED IN NT WATERWAYS BETWEEN
1 JULY 2002 TO 30 JUNE 2011

NORTHERN TERRITORY
9 YEAR DROWNING REPORT.
A CALL FOR CHANGE

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Some of the Locations Where Drowning Deaths Occurred
July 2002 to June 2011

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Royal Life Saving Society (Australia) NT Branch Inc
Royal Life Saving Society (Australia) NT Branch Inc has a proud history of serving communities, families and individuals across the Northern Territory. Whether you live in a city, town, regional or remote community, Royal Life Saving is the leading water safety education and training provider. Our offices are in Darwin and Alice Springs but our services of providing face-to-face education and training extend to all locations.

Royal Life Saving NT formed a stand-alone Branch of the Royal Life Saving Society – Australia in 1965 and since then has played a critical role in reducing drowning deaths in the Territory, particularly in under five-year-olds, through raising water safety awareness and equipping children with water safety and swimming skills.

Royal Life Saving Society NT believes that everyone can be a lifesaver. Through innovative training practices, such as the e-learning course First Aid-in-a-box, we are continuing to find new ways to serve our community and help Territorians develop the skills to save lives. Royal Life Saving Society (Australia) NT Branch Inc is an Incorporated Entity (A 1328) and a Public Benevolent Institution.

This nine-year report covers 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2011.
Executive Summary
Drowning is a significant and long-term health, recreation and community issue in the Northern Territory; per capita the Northern Territory records more drowning deaths than any other State or Territory in Australia.

Despite reductions in the number of drowning deaths in some age groups during the period 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2011, the Territory still lags behind the rest of Australia in reducing the incidence of drowning.

The drowning deaths documented in this report are not attributable to a single factor or circumstance. There are, however, several contributing factors which urgently need to be addressed if the Territory is to reduce this toll. Specific recommendations to reduce the number of lives lost to drowning in the Northern Territory are included at the end of this report.

These were the key findings of the research undertaken:

- 74 deaths were recorded over the nine-year period
- 84% of those who lost their lives were males.
- 50% of those who drowned lost their lives in rivers and creeks, with 15% directly related to flooding
- One-third of all deaths occurred in January and February.
- 82% of those who drowned came from the Northern Territory.
- Almost one-quarter of those who drowned were aged 25 to 34 and all of those were males.
- 80% of those who drowned were from regional and remote locations
- 38% of those who drowned were indigenous
- Alcohol was present in 51% of drowning deaths of people aged 15 and over in the Northern Territory

The only age group to record a sustained reduction in drowning deaths in this period is the 0-4 age group which has been actively targeted through the successful Water Safety Awareness Program and pool fencing legislation.

Drowning in the Northern Territory has become a silent epidemic, sadly the people who lose their lives don’t understand; the environmental conditions in the Territory; that combining alcohol and water-based recreational activities such as boating is dangerous; that older, less physically fit people are more at risk than young men.

Royal Life Saving acknowledge the suffering of the family and friends of all those who lost their lives to drowning and extend our deepest sympathies.
**How This Report Was Compiled**

This report was compiled from numerous publically available sources, including media reports, and the data collated and cross-checked by staff of the Royal Life Saving Society. All recorded deaths included in this report have been verified as far as possible.

Previous readers of the annual reports produced by the Royal Life Saving Society (Australia) NT Branch Inc will note some differences in the figures included here. The annual reports are traditionally compiled at the end of each financial year for the previous financial year with a key source being the National Coroners Information System (NCIS). Because of the time it takes to investigate each individual death that means often cases are still open at the time the annual report is released.

Where new information has come to light in the time since our annual report was released we have included it in the data in this report. Where there is a discrepancy between the annual report and this nine-year report, this report should be used as the authoritative report.

Examples of circumstances where a death previously classed as a drowning has been removed include where the coroner’s findings have determined there may have been foul play or self-harm involved in the death; or where an underlying condition, such as a heart condition, was found later to be the primary cause of death.

Similarly, deaths have been added in some years because additional information about individual cases has become available.

As part of Royal Life Saving Society – Australia’s agreement with the NCIS, no identifying information about individual cases can be included. This is especially important in the Northern Territory where a close sense of community means that individuals are more readily identifiable even where detailed information isn’t included. The only exception to this is where the family of Daniel Browne specifically agreed to be part of this report.

Our aim is not to cause any further distress to the families and friends of those included in this report. We simply wish to prevent any more Territory families from suffering a similar loss.

It should be noted that despite the cause of death in a crocodile attack usually being drowning, all deaths involving crocodiles have been excluded from this report.
**Daniel Browne: A Personal Story of Loss**

*Julie Turner’s son, Daniel Browne, 13, drowned at White Rocks Water Hole, Rapid Creek on 16 February 2009. She shared her family’s story of loss in the hope of preventing other drowning deaths.*

Daniel was the youngest of six children. He was born in Adelaide and moved to Darwin when he was six weeks old. To stop mum and dad arguing over a name for the new baby, Daniel’s name was chosen by his oldest siblings.

Everybody said he was a gentle giant who always smiled. He was happy-go-lucky, very loving and caring. He always put other people first. He was wiser than his years. He was always a good kid that told us where he was going. He’d come home first to touch base.

On that afternoon, straight after school Daniel and about 20 of his school mates went for a swim, without my knowledge. Not one of these kids knew how to do CPR.

It wasn’t until other kids arrived (after Daniel was pulled unconscious from the water) that they could try to save him. From what I heard one of those three boys who tried to save Daniel was deeply traumatised by it all. He suffered from a deep depression. We nominated them for a Pride of Australia award. We know they did everything they could to save Daniel.

From what the police told me, the accident happened at 4pm. By 4.30pm they were at the front door to say they had to pick me up to take me to the hospital. We got to the hospital quickly but the ambulance didn’t arrive until 5.15pm, I was panicking saying: where are the ambos? But they’d had to stabilise him first. Afterwards when I read the autopsy report I found out they’d worked on him for about 90 minutes, they didn’t give up on him. They’d got his pulse back only to lose it again. It was touch-and-go.

(Julie had already lost Daniel’s sister in tragic circumstances). I could sense my daughter’s presence in the room as they worked on Daniel. I kept telling her it wasn’t his time, to leave him with us.

We lost Daniel five or six times before he passed away.

The doctors kept saying, ‘Julie we’re losing him. Julie, we’re losing him.’

They said when one of the readings (on the monitors measuring Daniel’s wellbeing) got to 39 all hope was lost. So I told Daniel to run to his sister, I was hugging Daniel saying ‘you can go home now, I’m letting you go now boy. Mum will be alright.’ I looked up and the reading went to 39; I know that’s the exact moment he was gone.

Twelve doctors were working on him, but there was no more they could do. He passed away at about 8.30 that evening.

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Number of Drowning Deaths and Rate over Time

- There were 74 people who drowned in the Northern Territory over the period 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2011. Of these, 62 were male (84% of the total).
- The crude rate per 100,000 population ranged from 7.02 in 2002/03 to 1.36 in 2008/09. (Figure 1)

Drowning Deaths by Sex and Age Group

- The average age at death was 36 years with females being slightly younger (average age 30 years) than male (average age 36 years), 84% of all drownings were male
- The most common age group was the 25-34 years age group (Figure 2).
Location of Drowning Deaths

- The most common location where people drowned was in rivers and creeks (50%), followed by lakes, dams and lagoons (18%).
- More than one-in-ten deaths occurred in a swimming pool. This includes both public and privately-owned pools.
- 80% of all drowning deaths in this period occurred in regional and remote locations.

Time of Year

- One-third (34%) of all drowning deaths in the Northern Territory occurred in January and February (Figure 4).
Activity Prior to Drowning

- The most common activity prior to drowning was swimming and recreating in the water (39%), followed by falls (15%).
- A total 15% of all deaths were a directly related to flooding.
- While as an activity driving seems to be incompatible with drowning deaths, too many Territory residents risk trying to cross roads that are flooded due to seasonal conditions. This accounted for 8% of all drowning deaths.
- When watercraft-based activities and the fishing categories are combined, they account for 10% of all deaths.
- Five per cent of those who drowned were participating in a rescue at the time they lost their lives.
- In a total 15% of all deaths there was no way of confirming the type of activity the person was engaged in prior to their death. (Figure 5).

Lack of Personal Flotation Devices (PDFs) Costs Lives

A routine fishing trip claimed the lives of three Indigenous men off the coast of the NT in 2006.

A group of five men was reported missing after failing to return from a fishing trip. Two men survived by swimming to mangroves where they sheltered until help arrived the following day. They had swum through crocodile and box jellyfish infested waters to safety.

The boat was located the following day but no trace of the remaining three men has ever been found. It is understood the men were all strong swimmers.

There were no lifejackets on board the vessel as it sunk and alcohol had been consumed onboard the boat before it sunk.

Nine children were left without their fathers as a result of the tragedy.
Alcohol Usage by Age Group

![Alcohol usage by age group, Northern Territory 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2011 (N=65)](image)

- Alcohol was present in 51% of drowning deaths of people aged 15 and over in the Northern Territory.
- The largest number of cases (9) occurred in the 25-34 years age group.
- Proportionally, the presence of alcohol peaked in the 45-54 years age group with 64% of cases in this age group recording a positive alcohol reading (Figure 6).

Status within the Coronerial System

![Open and Closed Case by financial years, Northern Territory 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2010 (N=74)](image)

- The majority (93%) of cases were closed. Those cases which were not classified as closed predominately occurred in the past financial year (Figure 7).
Resident and Non-Resident Drowning Deaths by Age

![Graph showing resident and non-resident drowning deaths by age.]

Figure 8: Visitor status by age group, Northern Territory 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2011 (N=74)

- The majority (82%) of people who drowned in the Northern Territory were from the Northern Territory.

- 10% were international visitors, most commonly aged between 15 and 34 years, with one aged 45-54 years.

- 6% were interstate visitors, aged over 55 years (Figure 8).

If it’s flooded – forget it!

In 2010, a river in remote NT claimed the lives of two brothers from a desert community.

Media reports at the time suggested the older brother was swimming in the river when he got into trouble. His younger brother dived in, attempting to save his sibling. Both were washed away. It is understood another brother witnessed the tragedy. Despite two helicopters searching the length of the river, the younger man’s body was never located.

The river where the tragedy occurred is an ephemeral river, running only about once every 10 years. When it is running, the river can swell to up to 1km wide.

This tragedy was a tragic reminder of our harsh and unpredictable environment and if it’s flooded – forget it.
Recommendations

1. **The Water Safety Awareness Program needs to continue across the Territory and include funding for remote community access.** The only age group to record a sustained reduction in drowning deaths is the 0-4 age group which has been actively targeted through the successful Water Safety Awareness Program. This program provides practical information on emergency care, revival skills, water awareness and familiarisation and, when combined with active adult supervision and restricting a child’s access to water, can help keep young children safe from drowning. The Royal Life Saving Society (Australia) NT Branch Inc believes the lives saved can be directly attributed to this targeted, government-funded program which has been delivered across the Northern Territory at no cost to families, allowing equity of access to all Territorians. What this demonstrates is that education is an effective means of reducing drowning deaths and that residents of the Northern Territory not only attend these programs when offered but they implement the lessons learned in their everyday lives.

2. **A Northern Territory school-based water safety and swimming program urgently needs to be implemented and monitored through accurate reporting.** While children in age groups that are directly supervised tend to stay safe (up to 13 years), the high numbers of teenagers and young adults documented in this report who drowned show the consequences of not providing water safety education to children. Given the well-documented inequality of access to health measures based on socio-economics, geographic location and family background, a program that gives all Territory children equal access to these skills is imperative to achieving the goal of saving lives. By offering these skills and knowledge to school-age children, large sections of the Territory community would benefit. This includes long-standing adult residents of the Territory who haven’t re-visited the water safety lessons they learned as school children as well as new arrivals to the Territory. These new arrivals include communities as diverse as Defence Force families, mining families, migrants to Australia and those who are attracted to the Territory by the outdoors lifestyle it offers, including boating, fishing and swimming.

3. **A culture of water safety needs to be developed, fostered and respected.** As a community, we need to make small adaptations to our idyllic lifestyle to save lives. There is a reluctance to wear personal flotation devices (PDFs) for routine activities like boating. However on the water when things go wrong they tend to go wrong quickly, leaving no time to fit or find life jackets. Similarly, alcohol and water simply do not mix. Whether you are swimming, fishing, boating, camping around water or driving across rivers – you need to keep your wits about you to make the right decisions for yourself and your family. Royal Life Saving NT’s call for change is to keep the lifestyle and fun while ensuring water safety is first for everyone, everywhere, everytime.

“**Our People, Our Lifestyle, Our Water**”

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