

Beach safety for visitors to Australian beaches – Tourist and immigrant drowning prevention in Australia

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Each year there are over 5.6 million tourist visitations (1) to Australia and coupled with over 543,000 permanent and temporary visas (2) that are granted annually, new arrivals continue to flow in and out of Australian society. As a consequence there are large transient populations cycling through popular tourist locations and the constant arrival of persons unfamiliar with Australia's unique hazards. Unfortunately, the result of these trends is a continuing over-representation of persons with foreign nationality or birthplace in drowning data, accounting for 20% of coastal drowning fatalities each year (3).

Nationalities featuring prominently in this fatality cohort include the United Kingdom, China, Korea and Japan (4) presenting a diverse blend of cultures, which is of further concern particularly considering visitations of these groups is projected not to decrease significantly.

These high risk groups may lack the water safety knowledge, skills and awareness required to use Australian beaches safely. Additional challenges presented by these high risk groups include limited English ability, often limited or over rating of swimming ability, unfamiliarity with the coastal environment and in the case of tourists, short duration of stay, a lack of regard for water safety and high beach exposure during that time.

In 2009, SLSA commenced development of an initiative to target tourists and immigrants in collaboration with industry, experts on 'All Cultures' and Tourism Australia. This initiative envisages to achieve the effective communication of essential beach safety messages given limited opportunities. It provides a balance of providing informative messaging and imagery that can be used by water safety practitioners, but is also acceptable to tourism providers and facilitators of immigration.

The initiative utilises multiple distribution streams across government, transport, tourism and education in high risk areas and will be exposed to the target groups on multiple occasions throughout their temporary and permanent stays. An insight into the resources, their development and delivery will be provided and results regarding the success of these methods through stakeholder feedback and short-term impact on the rate of drowning.

References:

1. Tourism Australia, 2007
2. Department of Immigration & Citizenship, Australian Government, 2007
3. National Coastal Safety Report 2009, Surf Life Saving Australia
4. Foreign Nationals Campaign Document, June 2009, Surf Life Saving Australia

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