

Drowning prevention strategies for fishers wearing waders

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Background

The use of waders in recreational fishing, especially fly fishing, is widely adopted by participants. However, there is considerable speculation within the grey literature as to the role of waders as a contributing factor to fishing related drowning deaths. Anecdotally, some fishers voice concern about their capacity to remain afloat if they are submerged following a slip or fall while fishing. Following the drowning death of a local fisher, the University of Ballarat was approached by a Ballarat fishing group whose members were interested in fishing safety, particularly in light of their use of waders.

This study used an exploratory design in a controlled swimming pool environment to gain an understanding of the circumstances that occur when (i) a fisher wearing waders slips and the waders gradually fill with water, and (ii) a fisher suddenly falls into the water (e.g. simulation of slipping off a rock). It also explored strategies for fishers to remain afloat following submersion when wearing waders, and the potential for fishers in waders to reach safety following sudden unexpected submersion.

Methods

Part 1: In the first instance, an experienced recreational fisher (who was also experienced in the use of waders) attended the University of Ballarat pool for a pilot investigation. The fisher wore his usual fly fishing attire, including warm clothing and waders. For risk management, the fisher was first instructed in survival sculling skills in shallow water. Upon demonstration of sound survival sculling in shallow water (1.2m), the fisher gently entered deep water (2m). Under instruction, the fisher experimented with various strategies for remaining afloat, including survival sculling, sculling for movement and survival swimming. Finally, the fisher entered deep water (2m) simulating a fall in, and trialled various methods to achieve a safe survival sculling position. All activity in deep water was video recorded.

Part 2: Following completion of pilot testing, the researchers developed a short skill based education program which will be implemented with a small group of interested fishers in December, 2010. Fishers, wearing full fishing attire, will be instructed in survival strategies. This intervention session will also be video recorded.

Results

The pilot testing session illustrated that with minimal in-water instruction, a fisher could acquire the necessary survival skills to manage unintentional submersion when attired in fishing clothing, including waders. Contrary to the concerns of some fishers, the waders, although cumbersome, do not in fact cause a fisher to sink. When waders fill with water, the additional water is neutrally buoyant and therefore does not contribute to sinking. However, it is vitally important that a fisher who is unexpectedly submerged remains calm, and does not panic. With appropriate instruction, so that fishers are comfortable with their survival skills, they will find that it is not difficult to adopt a survival sculling position. The fisher can then use sculling skills to reach a point of safety. They may also be able to make use of currents to assist them to reach an exit point.

Further results will be reported, following the implementation of the intervention session with the group of fishers.

Conclusion

The development of an easily implemented drowning prevention intervention is a positive outcome of this study. The involvement of a fishing club as stakeholder in the project will facilitate the adoption of the intervention program and therefore contribute to drowning prevention.

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