

## Rock fisher safety in Auckland, New Zealand: Five years on

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### Background

Rock fishing is one of New Zealand's most dangerous pastimes with 11 fatalities on Auckland's west coast from 1999–2005. In response to this, the Auckland Regional Council, Watersafe Auckland, and Surf Life Saving Northern, established a collaborative, on-site fishing safety project in 2006, employing part-time safety officers to promote safety at high-risk sites during the summer months from November–April. The purpose of the campaign was twofold. Firstly, it piloted a fishing safety education programme that would help fishers identify and manage the risks associated with fishing on Auckland's west coast. Secondly, fishers were surveyed at the end of each summer in order to enhance understanding of fisher demographics and their safety knowledge, beliefs, and behaviours. A major focus of the safety promotion was the use of inflatable lifejackets.

### Method

During each of the five years since its inception, the project has annually surveyed fishers using a brief questionnaire that sought to elicit data on fisher perceptions of risk of drowning, and their knowledge and practice of fishing safety. Because of the ethnic diversity and recent residency of many of the fishers, the self-complete questionnaire was available in English, Mandarin, and Korean.

### Results

Results over the five-year period show that the fishing population is consistently predominantly male (80–89%), of Asian origin (64–68%), and of recent residency (31–33%, less than four years). Results also show that the population is transient, with less than one third (31%) of respondents each year having taken part in previous surveys. In each year, two thirds (67%) of the fishers had fished less than five times at the site where they were interviewed. Among the key findings, fewer fishers reported never wearing a life-jacket/buoyancy aid (2010, 35%; 2006, 72%) and more reported wearing them sometimes (2010, 35%; 2006, 23%) or often (2010, 31%; 2006, 4%). Consistently over the five-year period, one third of fishers sometimes or often consumed alcohol when fishing at these high-risk sites.

In 2006, one third of the fishers (32%) surveyed disagreed/strongly disagreed that drowning was a constant threat to their life, yet five years later only 15% were of that opinion. In addition the proportion of fishers who had agreed / strongly agreed with that statement had increased from half (50%) in 2006 to two-thirds (66%) in 2010.

### Discussion

The most significant behavioural change reported by fishers during the five years of the intervention was the more frequent use of lifejackets. While this is encouraging to water safety promoters, several other risky behaviours such as alcohol consumption and going down the rock face to retrieve snagged lines appear to be more resistant to change. Fishers's perception of the danger associated with fishing from rocks also changed over the five years with a more realistic appreciation of the severity of drowning risk. However, little change was noted in perception of their ability to manage the risk of drowning and, given their infrequent visits to the sites where surveyed, many held overly optimistic views in the protective value of their local knowledge.

### Conclusion

Changing behaviours among such a difficult-to-reach sub-population has been a challenge in Auckland's west coast fisher drowning prevention initiatives but these results over five-year period suggest that the education intervention has shifted some traditionally intransigent behaviours. Promoting fisher safety on Auckland's dangerous west coast is problematic because the population is transient, culturally and linguistically diverse, and not familiar with the high-risk sites where they fish. However, the results suggest that some unsafe practices persist and warrant further discouragement through continued safety promotion.

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