

Don't put your life on the line – A strategy to reduce rock fishing fatalities

Matthew Thompson¹, Anthony Bradstreet¹ and Shauna Sherker¹

Surf Life Saving Australia¹

Rock fishing related fatalities have continued and refuse to subside despite intervention measures tried over the past few decades. Each year they represent approximately 10% of coastal drowning fatalities which over time amounts to a significant number of tragedies. The 2009 National Coastal Safety Report produced by Surf Life Saving Australia found that of the 94 people who died by drowning around the coast during the twelve months to 30 June 2009, 12 (13%) were fishing on rocks or beaches at the time (1). Disturbingly the trend has continued into 2010, with 19 confirmed rock fishing related deaths including a quintuple drowning incident in New South Wales (NSW) at an unpatrolled location (2). The number and severity of non-fatal rockfishing injuries is unknown.

In 2010, people from Asian ethnicities made up 83% of fatalities. In particular, people from China, Korea, Vietnam and Hong Kong were over represented. The methods of wording and presenting safety messages to these target audiences are challenged by the difficulty of accessing the communities at risk and of overcoming cultural and language barriers.

A study was conducted by SLSA in early 2010 focussed on high risk demographic groups and rock fishing behaviour. In a startling indicator of how poorly prepared many rock fishers are, it revealed 75% of respondents interviewed admitted to never wearing a lifejacket, 42% don't always wear non-slip shoes, 38% don't always check the weather and despite all the deaths involving rock fishing during the past two decades, 41% still aren't convinced that being swept into the ocean is likely to result in drowning (3).

Over the past 18 months, Surf Life Saving has been developing a national rock fishing safety strategy to address the ongoing fatalities in conjunction with partners including the Australian National Sportfishing Association (ANSA) and the Australian Recreational and Sport Fishing Confederation (RECFISH) including their affiliated bodies.

The strategy attempts to address the cultural and language barriers, and safety attitudes of high risk demographics at high risk locations through interventions including the launch of a new safety program with an over-arching message 'always wear a lifejacket and don't put your life on the line'. The program consists of multi-lingual educational resources, community workshops and additional 'angel rings' (Public Rescue Equipment installed at popular or dangerous ocean rock fishing spots). The strategy also includes the first ever national review of rock fishing deaths and non-fatal rock fishing injury, as well as the development of a rock fishing specific coastal audit methodology for high risk locations and enhancement of hazardous rock fishing condition forecasting.

References:

1. 2009 National Coastal Safety Report, Surf Life Saving Australia, Sydney, Australia 2009
2. 2010 National Coastal Safety Report, Surf Life Saving Australia, Sydney, Australia 2010
3. SLSA–MMM Coastal Safety Survey, Australia 2010

Corresponding Author

Matthew Thompson
Coastal Safety Services Manager
Surf Life Saving Australia
Locked Bag 1010
Rosebery NSW Australia 2018
Email: mthompson@slsa.asn.au; pgeorge@slsa.asn.au
Website: www.sls.com.au
Telephone: +61 2 9215 8000