

Reducing rip current drownings: Lessons from interviews with rip current survivors

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This study has responded to the call for a national campaign to educate Australian beachgoers on the potential hazards of rip currents. This hazard is well documented: Surf Life Saving (SLS) reported 94 coastal drownings and over 25,000 rescues during the 2008–2009 season – the vast majority related to rips. While a good scientific understanding of the flow behaviour of rip currents exists, much less is known about the actual beachgoers that are caught in rip currents. By surveying and interviewing people that have been caught in rips, this study has adopted a grass-roots approach to identifying what beachgoers know and understand about the rip current hazard and how this knowledge was utilised (or not) when they were caught in the rip.

This research had two primary objectives:

- To assess the demographic, surf knowledge and behavioural responses of swimmers who have been caught in rip currents;
- To provide information that will assist in the further development of safety messages and information associated with the SLS National Rip Education Campaign and other rip education strategies around the world.

The methodology involved both an online survey instrument comprising structured written responses to short answer questions (posted on various websites), and follow-up interviews with people who have been rescued from rips. Several beaches in the Sydney, Australia, were chosen as study locations. All are popular recreation beaches with high visitation rates encompassing a broad spectrum of beachgoers – locals, tourists, surfers; and all have a high incidence of rip current rescues. The online survey instrument was linked to a number of beach-related websites and the project received considerable radio media coverage and promotion. In addition to the online component, we also approached potential participants shortly after they had been caught in and/or rescued from a rip. Potential participants were given an information card by lifeguards, which included details of the research and contact information so that interviews could be arranged at a later date.

The ethnographic research sought to provide a clearer understanding of the multiple reasons why people may get caught in rips and better elucidate the variety of possible reactions. By utilising a mixed methods approach, particularly the combination of qualitative and quantitative data sources, the research methodology was purposefully flexible and designed to respond to, and acknowledge the diversity of experiences and previous knowledges of beachgoers and rip survivors.

This research will contribute to the SLS National Rip Education Program, by providing valuable social and ethnographic data on rip current survivors. A major outcome of this research has been a clarification of the demographic groups that should be targeted for rip current education, and how prior knowledge of rip currents and education campaigns influences behavioural response when caught in a rip. The authors of this paper welcome feedback and interest from other international researchers engaged in the social investigation of rip current drownings. This will enable further place-based comparisons that will better inform education programs and critically appraise current escape strategies.

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