WESTERN AUSTRALIA
COASTAL SAFETY REPORT
2013
Foreword

Surf Life Saving WA (SLSWA) is a volunteer based not for profit community service association and is the peak coastal aquatic safety and injury prevention organisation in WA. SLSWA creates a safe environment in and around our beaches through our patrolling presence on the beach, on the water and through community and workplace education and training programs.

The Surf Life Saving movement began in WA at Cottesloe Beach in 1909 in response to a number of drowning incidents in the area. Over the next 20 years a number of additional clubs commenced patrol operations in country and metropolitan locations and to date SLSWA has more than 18,500 valuable members across 29 Surf Clubs, who assist in protecting lives at WA beaches and play a fundamental role in building healthy communities.

The inaugural WA Coastal Safety Report will be produced annually to inform coastal safety stakeholders about current drowning risks and trends at the beach. The information provided will assist all WA water safety agencies to achieve the aspirational goal set by the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2012-2015 of achieving a 50% reduction in national drowning deaths by the year 2020.

For information on drowning deaths that occurred in other aquatic environments please refer to the WA Drowning and Near Drowning Report compiled and published by the Royal Life Saving Society of WA. Collectively both the WA Coastal Safety Report and WA Drowning and Near Drowning Report provide an in-depth analysis of fatal and non-fatal drowning across all aquatic environments in WA.

Between 2009-10 to 2012-13 SLSWA lifesaving services were able to prevent 293 people from drowning and 176 people from permanent incapacitation. This saved the WA economy over $1.45billion.
Australian Water Safety Strategy 2012-2015

SLSWA strategies align with the priorities outlined in the Australian Water Safety Strategy (AWSS) 2012-15. The AWSS 2012-15 builds upon previous Water Safety Plans and Strategies and was developed by the Australian Water Safety Council (AWSC) in collaboration with National water safety agencies, government and other groups with an interest in drowning prevention.

Figure 1.0 Australian Water Safety Strategy 2012-2015

Executive Summary

Between 1 May 2012 and 30 April 2013 there was a record number of drowning deaths in WA with 17 people tragically losing their lives at the WA coast. All of these drowning deaths occurred where Surf Life Saving services were not present, or where there was no patrol on duty at the time.

The majority of drowning deaths were males (95%) and over 75% occurred in regional or remote areas of WA. As dynamic, unpredictable, free and largely unsupervised environments, beaches are amongst the most dangerous locations for aquatic recreation. High risk locations in WA include the South West, Great Southern and Perth Metropolitan areas.

Beaches also pose many other risks for drowning and injury including rip currents, large waves, tidal surges and dangerous rocky coast compared to other aquatic environments. Rip currents are a contributing factor in approximately 22% of coastal drowning deaths with a significant proportion of the community mistaking rip currents as the safe area to swim due to the presence of calm water.

Other factors such as an individuals swimming ability, knowledge of sea conditions and level of experience in an ocean environment can also play a significant role in drowning risk. Coastal activities that are high risk in WA include rock fishing, diving, snorkelling and swimming/wading.

In order to reduce coastal drowning deaths, drowning prevention efforts must be increased, particularly in areas of rock fishing, snorkelling and diving and particularly targeting young males aged 15-44 years and older males 55+ years. Equipping more members of the community with First Aid and CPR skills will also assist in reducing drowning deaths in WA.

The WA Coastal Safety Report aims to identify coastal drowning trends and will outline recommendations for future drowning prevention efforts for the WA coast.
Key Coastal Drowning Recommendations

The following are key recommendations from the 2013 WA Coastal Safety Report to reduce coastal drowning deaths in WA:

1. Increase reach of aquatic education programs, particularly rip current and sea condition education
2. Increase reach of ‘Swim Between the Flags’ message and continue to provide effective surf life saving services
3. Target young males 15-44 years and older males 55+ years
4. Target high risk locations including the South West, Great Southern, Goldfields and Perth metropolitan regions
5. Provide advocacy for safe diving, snorkelling and surfing practices
6. Support rock fishing safety campaigns
7. Increase community-wide First Aid and CPR training
8. Promote the Beachsafe.org.au website and smartphone app
9. Provide culturally appropriate drowning prevention solutions

Definitions

- A **coastal death** is a fatality arising from various circumstances (e.g. heart attack, shark attack, fall, boat collision) occurring where the location of the death is coastal.
- A **coastal drowning death** is where the location of the drowning is on the coast, in the ocean up to 2NM off-shore or inland up to five times the width of the inlet/river.
- A **Lifeguard** is a professional paid employee at a beach or other aquatic environment whose role is to rescue people in danger of drowning or prevent them getting into that situation.
- An **ocean death** is a fatality arising from various circumstances (e.g. heart attack, shark bite, fall) occurring where the location of the death is in the ocean greater than 2NM off-shore, but no greater than 12NM.
- An **ocean drowning death** is where the location of the drowning is in the ocean greater than 2NM off-shore but no greater than 12NM.
- A **rescue** is when intervention by a lifesaving resource removes a person/s from a life threatening or potentially life threatening situation.
- The **SLSWA season** begins on 1 May and ends on 30 April every year.
- A **surf lifesaver** is a volunteer at a beach or other aquatic environment whose role is to rescue people in danger of drowning or prevent them getting into that situation.
- An **undetermined case** – Cases that are not associated with a closed coroner’s report on NCIS are often left ‘undetermined’ until an official cause of death has been determined. Some examples are cases where bodies have been found washed up on the beach or reports of individuals struggling in coastal environments are made and the bodies are not found. These deaths will all be followed up on and the incident category updated once coroner determinations are made accessible.
- A **preventative action** is when intervention by a lifesaving resource averts a person/s from entering a life threatening or potentially life threatening situation.
- **Westpac Emergency Response Teams (WERT)** is a lifesaving service which is part of the BeachSAFE Program and uses jetskis as a rapid response search and rescue resource to assist emergency response stakeholders 24 hours a day, seven days a week at WA beaches.
- **The Westpac Lifesaver Helicopter** is part of the BeachSAFE Program and performs aerial patrols in the Perth Metropolitan area, and the South West region as part of the Aerial Surveillance Program.

2012-2013 Coastal Drowning Snapshot

**OVERALL**
- 17 coastal drowning deaths
- 42% increase over the six year average of 12

**DEMOGRAPHICS**
- 95% were males
- 50% were in the 25-54yr life stage
- 53% were known to have an overseas nationality

**TIME**
- 47% occurred in Summer
- 70% occurred in the afternoon

**ACTIVITY**
- 29% were surfing or body boarding
- 29% were rock fishing
- 23% were diving/snorkelling

**CONTRIBUTING FACTORS**
- 30% were attributed to rip currents

**LOCATION**
- 76% were in regional or remote areas of WA
- Of these, 65% occurred in the South West, Great Southern and Goldfields regions
Introduction

Coastal drowning deaths have been increasing every year for the last four years in WA with an average of 12 drowning deaths occurring at WA beaches every year.

This report provides an overview of coastal drowning deaths that have occurred between 1 May 2007 and 30 April 2013 and submersion/immersion hospitalisations that have occurred at WA beaches between 1 January 2007 and 31 December 2012. The report will also outline the patrol information recorded by SLSWA lifesaving services at 29 locations from 1 May 2007 to 30 April 2013.

This information will be used to inform and support evidence based decision making in regards to coastal drowning priorities for water safety stakeholders in WA.

Methodology

Coastal drowning data was obtained from the WA Coastal Safety Report Database compiled by SLSWA through media monitors and verified with National Coronial Information System data provided by Surf Life Saving Australia. The data has been analysed by gender, age, year, nationality, location, time and activity. All care is taken to ensure the information contained in this report is correct, however pending coronial investigations this data may be amended over time.

Hospitalisation data was accessed and verified through the Inpatient Data Collections, Performance Activity and Quality Division of the Department of Health WA. This data was analysed by gender, age, year, location and country of birth. Surf life saving service statistics were obtained from the SLSWA Surf Guard Database and was analysed by patrol hours, rescues, preventative actions and First Aid treatments.

The data in this report will be presented in line with Priority 1 of the AWSS 2012-15 Strategy which is to take a life stages approach to drowning prevention.

Please note all coastal drowning death data is presented as a SLSWA season from 1 May to 30 April each year and immersion/submersion hospitalisation data is presented by calendar year 1 January to 31 December each year.

Type of Coastal Fatality

A total of 95 coastal fatalities occurred at WA beaches between 1 May 2007 and 30 April 2013. Figure 2.0 displays the different types of fatalities that have occurred with coastal drowning deaths being the most represented cause of death with 75 occurring over the six year period. Please note the remainder of this report will focus on coastal drowning deaths only (75).

Coastal Drowning Deaths

Between 2007-08 and 2012-13 there were 75 coastal drowning deaths at WA beaches. The most recent season recorded the largest increase in the number of coastal drowning deaths to date with 17 occurring. This is a 42% increase above the six year average of 12 drowning deaths at WA beaches every year.

The crude incident rate for the 2012-13 season was higher than the six year average at 0.68 per 100,000 persons compared to 0.52 per 100,000 persons.

Figure 3.0 displays an increasing trend of coastal drowning deaths over time with an increase of 70% over six years.

Hospitalisations From An Immersion/Submersion Incident

There were five hospitalisations from an immersion/submersion incident that occurred at WA beaches during 2012-13. On average seven hospitalisations occur from a submersion/immersion incident at WA beaches every year. A dramatic increase occurred in 2010 with hospitalisations doubling from the previous year. Since 2010 hospitalisations from an immersion/submersion incident at the beach have been decreasing every year as seen in Figure 4.0 below.

Source: Hospital Morbidity Data System 2013
Who Drowns At The Coast?

Gender
Males are eight times more likely to be involved in a drowning death than females at WA beaches, and 2.5 times more likely to be hospitalised from an immersion/submersion incident at the beach.

The 2012-13 season saw most drownings occur in adults, with 50% occurring in the 25-54 year life stage and a further 33% in the 55+ life stage. Males were also highly represented which is a common trend across all life stages.

The average age of those who drowned between 2007-08 and 2012-13 is 44.5 years with a standard deviation of 19.10 and a range of 13 - 81 years.

The average for both males and females is similar with males averaging slightly younger at 44.5 years compared to females at 44.8 years.

The rate of coastal drowning deaths for males is higher than females in every age group; however it is significantly higher in the 31-51 year age group as seen below in Figure 5.0.

Figure 5.0 – Age Specific Coastal Drowning Rates by Gender WA 2007-08 to 2012-13

Source: WA Coastal Safety Report Database and ABS 2013

Nationality
During the 2012-13 season, 53% of coastal drowning deaths had an overseas nationality. This has increased from 38% in 2011-12. Most nationalities are unknown in drowning and hospitalisation data however data collected shows the majority of coastal drowning deaths and hospitalisations are people with Australian nationalities, followed closely by European nationalities.

Figure 7.0 – Number of Coastal Drowning Deaths by Nationality WA 2007-08 to 2012-13

Source: WA Coastal Safety Report Database 2013
Who Drowns At The Coast?

Figure 8.0 Number of Hospitalisations from an Immersion/Submersion Incident by Nationality WA 2007-2012

Source: WA Coastal Safety Report Database 2013

Who Drowns At The Coast?

Where And When Do They Drown

Region

People are 1.9 times more likely to drown at a regional or remote coastal location compared to the Perth Metropolitan area. Since 2007-08, 65% of people drowned at a regional or remote beach and the 2012-13 season was similar with 76% of coastal drowning deaths occurring at a regional or remote location in WA.

Of the regions, over 61% of coastal drowning deaths were experienced in the southern half of WA including the South West, Great Southern and Goldfields regions.

Figure 9.0 displays the number and crude rate of coastal drowning deaths by region in WA. The regions with the highest rate of coastal drowning deaths was the Gascoyne (71 per 100,000 persons) followed by the Great Southern (17 per 100,000 persons).

The regions that had the highest number of coastal drowning deaths including Perth-Peel (35%), the South West (23%) and the Great Southern (13%) and this is a consistent trend across most life stages.

Figure 9.0 Number and Rate of Coastal Drowning Deaths by Region WA 2007-08 to 2012-13

Source: WA Coastal Safety Report Database and ABS 2013

In the 2012-13 season 76% of coastal drowning deaths occurred at a regional or remote coastal location in WA.
Where And When Do They Drown

In contrast, people are more likely to be hospitalised from an immersion/submersion incident in the Perth Metropolitan area compared to regional and remote areas of WA. Figure 10.0 shows the highest crude rate of hospitalisations in WA are experienced in the Goldfields (five per 100,000 persons) and Wheatbelt regions (four per 100,000 persons).

Figure 10.0 Number and Rate of Immersion/Submersion Hospitalisations by Region WA 2007-2012

Source: Hospital Morbidity Data System and ABS 2013

Season

Coastal drowning deaths occur all year round however the majority occur in Summer and Autumn as seen below in Figure 11.0. These seasons are popular times of the year for beach recreation due to the warmer temperatures and generally favourable weather conditions.

Figure 11.0 – Coastal Drowning Deaths by Season WA 2007-08 to 2012-13

Source: WA Coastal Safety Report Database 2013

Time

The most common time of day for coastal drowning deaths to occur was the afternoon. This may be attributed to adverse weather conditions that are more likely to occur in the afternoon compared to the morning, such as a strong sea breeze, tidal changes and higher swells. It is important that knowledge about sea conditions and weather remains a priority in WA aquatic education. The 2012-13 season showed similar results with 67% of coastal drowning deaths occurring in the afternoon.

Figure 12.0 – Number of Coastal Drowning Deaths by Time WA 2007-08 to 2012-13

Source: WA Coastal Safety Report Database and ABS 2013

Half of all coastal drowning deaths in the reporting period occurred on weekends. This may be associated with higher beach attendance rates on weekends compared to weekdays. This was even higher for the 2012-13 season with 67% of coastal drowning deaths occurring on weekends compared to weekdays.

67% of coastal drowning deaths occur in the afternoon with 28 coastal drowning deaths occurring between 12pm to 4pm.
How Do They Drown?

During the 2012-13 season rock fishing (29%), surfing or body boarding (29%) and diving/snorkelling (23%) were the top three high risk activities for coastal drowning deaths in WA. This is similar to the overall count since 2007-08 where swimming/wading, diving/snorkelling and rock fishing were the most common activities at the time of a coastal drowning incident. Rip currents are a contributing factor in almost 22% of all coastal drowning deaths since 2007-08.

Figure 13.0 – Number of Coastal Drowning Deaths by Activity WA 2007-08 to 2012-13

Source: WA Coastal Safety Report Database 2013

High Risk Activities

Swimming/wading
Over 41% of swimming/wading drowning deaths occurred due to the presence of a rip current.

Diving/snorkelling
The majority of snorkellers become distressed and unable to cope in their environment for reasons unknown. Diving however is a higher risk aquatic activity due to the use of more technical equipment, higher risk environments and effects from an individual’s health status. Safe snorkelling and diving practices should be promoted in the community to assist in reducing drowning deaths.

Rock fishing
Anecdotal information suggests once a person enters the water whilst rock fishing (through slipping or being washed in) their chance of survival is low. For this reason rock fishing safety efforts need to focus on preventing people from entering the water through education and use of safety equipment.

Demographic

Children 0-14 years
Children between the ages of 0-14 years rarely drown or are hospitalised from a drowning incident at WA beaches. Since 2007-08 there have been zero drowning deaths in the 0-4 age group and less than five hospitalisations from an immersion/submersion incident at the beach, and this can be attributed to parents, carers and surf life saving services providing adequate supervision, as well as parents and carers choosing to swim between the red and yellow flags. Since 2007-08 there has been one drowning death in the 0-14 age group. In order to achieve zero (0) drowning deaths, efforts must be continued to expand the ‘Swim Between the Flags’ message to all Australians and visitors to Australia. Current challenges include Australia’s increasing population as well as effectively accessing and educating smaller sub populations as Australia becomes more culturally diverse.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue implementation and further promotion of supervision programs, particularly the ‘Swim Between the Flags’ message.
2. Continue implementation and further promotion of aquatic education programs particularly Beach Activities in schools.
3. Promote the beachsafe.org.au website and smartphone app to parents and carers of young children.
4. Continue supporting surf life saving services to provide effective patrols and search and rescue solutions.
5. Provide culturally appropriate solutions to diverse groups, particularly about the role of surf life saving services and the ‘Swim Between the Flags’ message.
6. Work with land managers to ensure appropriate coastal aquatic safety signage is installed at beaches.
#### Demographic

**Young People 15-24 years**

Young people aged 15-24 generally show more risk taking behaviours than any other age group. During the 2012-13 season two people in this life stage drowned at WA beaches. All coastal drowning deaths in this age group were male, one was rock fishing at the time of the incident and the other was body boarding. Rip currents were a contributing factor in both deaths and both also identified as having an overseas nationality.

Sadly, between 2007-08 and 2012-13 nine young people drowned at WA beaches. Comparatively another 12 young people were hospitalised from a submersion/immersion incident at the beach.

Of the nine young people that lost their lives, all were male and the majority were either rock fishing (3) or diving/snorkelling (3) at the time of the incident, with rip currents being involved in 50% of all drowning deaths in this age group. Other activities included boating, swimming/wading and operating a non-powered watercraft.

80% of these drowning deaths occurred in the regional areas of WA with the majority occurring in the South West and Great Southern regions. The remainder of drowning deaths occurred in the Perth Metropolitan area and the Kimberley region.

The incidents occurred all year round with 40% occurring in Autumn and 30% in Spring. Over half occurred in the afternoon which is likely to be associated with adverse weather conditions such as a strong sea breeze, high swells and tidal changes.

The majority of coastal drowning deaths in this age group (60%) identified as having an overseas nationality however Australians were more likely to be hospitalised for a submersion/immersion incident at the beach (78%).

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Address emergency preparedness education in young people, particularly for rock fishing and diving/snorkelling.
2. Address aquatic education, particularly rip currents and in high risk regions including the South West, Great Southern and Perth Metropolitan area.
3. Promote beachsafe.org.au website and smartphone app to young people 15-24 years.
4. Continue to support Surf life saving services to provide effective patrols and search and rescue solutions.
5. Develop and implement culturally appropriate programs and resources for this life stage.

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**Young People 15-24 years**

During the 2012-13 season eight people lost their lives at the beach which is the highest number across all life stages. An equal amount of people were surfing, diving/snorkelling, swimming/wading and rock fishing at the time of the incident. All were males and 89% of incidents occurred in the regions. 62% of people also identified as having an overseas nationality.

Between 2007-08 and 2012-13 a total of 38 adults aged between 25-54 years drowned at WA beaches which are the highest recorded out of all life stages. Of these, 46% were aged 25-36 years, and another 43% were aged 45-54 years. Hospitalisations follow a similar trend with 24% of all hospitalisations occurring in the 25-34 year age group and another 15% in the 35-44 year age group.

In a trend across all life stages, males were predominantly represented at 86% of coastal drowning deaths.

In another trend, 40% of drowning deaths occurred in the South West, Great Southern and Goldfields regions and a further 30% occurred in the Perth Metropolitan area. Drowning deaths occurred across all seasons however over 65% occurred in Summer and Autumn.

In nearly 25% of all drowning deaths in this age group, rip currents were identified as being a contributing factor. An even distribution of activities was displayed in this age group with 27% swimming/wading, 22% rock fishing, 22% diving/snorkelling, and another 14% boating.

Nearly 60% of drowning deaths occurred in the afternoon, coinciding with common adverse weather conditions experienced in the afternoons.

In this age group, only 35% identified as having an overseas nationality however it is worthy to note that 46% of nationalities were not able to be identified. Similarly, 40% of hospitalisations in this age group were born in a country other than Australia.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Address aquatic education, particularly rip currents and sea condition education
2. Address emergency preparedness education, particularly rock fishing and diving/snorkelling
3. Target high risk areas including the South West, Great Southern, Goldfields and the Perth metropolitan area
4. Promote the beachsafe.org.au website and smartphone app to adults 25-54 years
5. Increase support to Surf life saving services to provide fast and effective emergency response services
Demographic

Older Adults 55 years+
In the 2012-13 season six people lost their lives at the beach in this age group. 83% occurred in the regions including the Goldfields, Great Southern and South West and the majority (83%) were males. Most incidents occurred in the afternoon and during activities including surfing (2), diving/snorkelling (2), rock fishing (1) and one was unknown.

As the population ages, the 55+ age group is the second highest life stage for coastal drowning deaths in WA with 26 people that have lost their lives at WA beaches between 2007-08 and 2012-13. Comparatively seven people were hospitalised due to a submersion/immersion incident at the beach.

Males represented 88% of all coastal drowning deaths and the majority (27%) were found to be surfing at the time of the incident. Furthermore, there was an even distribution of people identified as swimming/wading, diving/snorkelling and boating at the time of the incident.

In this age group, there was an even distribution of drowning deaths that occurred across all seasons and 54% occurred in the afternoon which is likely to be associated with adverse weather conditions.

A significant amount of coastal drowning deaths (42%) occurred in the South West, Great Southern and Goldfields regions of WA, with the remainder occurring in the Perth Metropolitan area, Midwest and Gascoyne regions. Rip currents were only reported in 7% of drowning deaths within this age group, which may indicate this age group are aware of how to identify and avoid rip currents.

Over 25% of coastal drowning deaths in this age group were associated with pre-existing health conditions with 86% being conditions related to cardiovascular disease.

Over 25% of this age group identified as having an overseas nationality and another quarter identified as being Australian, however nearly half of the nationalities were not able to be identified.

SLSWA Patrol Statistics

Targeted WA beaches are patrolled by a combination of professional and volunteer SLSWA lifesaving services that both protect and save people’s lives at the beach. These services include:
• Volunteer lifesaver patrols
• Professional Lifeguard patrols
• Wesfarmers Emergency Response Teams (Jetski patrols)
• Westpac Lifesaver Helicopter aerial surveillance program

These services survive on community support and participation and without this contribution the number of coastal drowning deaths and related injury would be drastically higher in WA. It is a testament to the training, skill and dedication of patrol members for their ability to keep people safe at WA beaches.

Rescues
On average SLSWA lifesaving services rescue approximately 1,291 people every year at WA beaches. Without these services, a proportion of these people would have drowned and many more would be seriously injured.

Figure 14.0 displays the number of rescues performed by SLSWA services. Rescues are remaining steady due to a significant shift in patrol service proactivity around educating the public about beach safety. This means less people are requiring to be rescued as Surf life saving services are focusing on implementing ‘preventative actions’ which aim to prevent someone from getting into a potentially life threatening situation, such as educating people about how to avoid and escape rip currents.

Figure 14.0 – Number of Rescues Performed by SLSWA Services WA 2009-10 to 2012-13

RECOMMENDATIONS
1. Raise awareness of the importance of regular health checks and their impact on recreating in coastal activities.
2. Target high risk locations including South West, Great Southern and Goldfields regions.
3. Address aquatic education, particularly surfing safely by providing age and activity appropriate interventions.
4. Promote beachsafe.org.au website and smartphone app to older adults 55+ years.
5. Increase support to Surf life saving services to provide fast and effective emergency response services.
SLSWA Patrol Statistics

First Aid Treatment
The WA community has benefited from over 26,454 First Aid Treatments from SLSWA lifesaving services over a four year period and as beach attendance figures are increasing, this is predicted to continue increasing in future years. First Aid can reduce the severity of an injury acquired in a beach environment and can also preserve life until professional medical assistance arrives.

This is a valuable service offered by SLSWA lifesaving services. Patrol members are professionally qualified in a range of accredited First Aid courses.

Figure 16.0 – Number of First Aid Treatments Performed by SLSWA Services by Year WA 2008-09 to 2012-13

Source: SLSWA Surf Guard Database 2013

Patrol Hours
Over the six year period 2007-08 to 2012-13 the community benefited from over 615,000 supervision hours from surf life saving services at WA beaches.

WA is currently the fastest growing state in Australia and is one of the fastest growing urban sprawl cities in the world. With this large urban sprawl, more and more beaches are becoming accessible to the community. In addition, the popularity of beach recreation is increasing and a more diverse range of activities are occurring on the coast such as abalone fishing and kite boarding. This change in beach recreation places more demand on surf life saving services.

Supervision hours by surf life saving services have increased every year in WA since 2007-08 as seen in Figure 17.0 below.

Figure 17.0 – Lifesaver and Lifeguard Patrol Hours by Year WA 2007-08 to 2012-13

Source: SLSWA Surf Guard Database 2013

Preventative Actions
Preventative actions performed by SLSWA lifesaving services have been increasing since the 2008-09 season as displayed in Figure 15.0. Preventative actions are key to SLSWA lifesaving services having the most effect on the community in regards to drowning and injury prevention as educating the public about beach safety supports behaviour change, allowing the public to be better informed when recreating at the beach.

Social learning theories suggest that people learn from each other via observation and modelling, and the implementation of preventative actions provides a supportive environment for this type of learning to occur. It is likely that thousands of these people who have engaged with SLSWA lifesaving services through preventative actions may reduce their risk of drowning and injury in the future, as they increase their knowledge and awareness of how to be safe at the beach.

Figure 15.0 – Number of Preventative Actions Performed by SLSWA Services by Year WA 2008-09 to 2012-13

Source: SLSWA Surf Guard Database 2013

SLSWA Patrol Statistics

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WA is currently the fastest growing state in Australia and is one of the fastest growing urban sprawl cities in the world. With this large urban sprawl, more and more beaches are becoming accessible to the community. In addition, the popularity of beach recreation is increasing and a more diverse range of activities are occurring on the coast such as abalone fishing and kite boarding. This change in beach recreation places more demand on surf life saving services.

Supervision hours by surf life saving services have increased every year in WA since 2007-08 as seen in Figure 17.0 below.

Figure 17.0 – Lifesaver and Lifeguard Patrol Hours by Year WA 2007-08 to 2012-13

Source: SLSWA Surf Guard Database 2013

32,595 preventative actions were performed in the 2012 - 2013 season compared to 27,574 in 2011 - 2012 season.
Economic Impact

Surf Life Saving offers a unique and valuable drowning and injury prevention service to the community which is largely supported and operated by community volunteers. Surf Life Saving is the largest volunteer organisation of its kind in Australia and without the selfless vigilance of many tens of thousands of volunteers the coastal drowning landscape would be vastly worse.

According to the PricewaterhouseCoopers Report ‘What is the economic contribution of Surf Life Saving in Australia’ (2011), 5% of people rescued by surf life saving services would have resulted in a drowning death, and a further 3% would have resulted in permanent incapacitation.

Between 2009-10 and 2012-13, SLSWA lifesaving services were able to
- prevent 293 people from drowning at WA beaches
- save 176 people from permanent incapacitation
- save the WA economy over $1.45 billion

Discussion

This report highlights a number of key drowning issues if which addressed will reduce the number of coastal drowning deaths in WA and will assist in reaching the AWSC goal of achieving a 50% reduction in drowning deaths in Australia by 2020.

Common trends identified across most life stages include:
- Aquatic education, particularly in rip currents and sea conditions
- Males as a high risk group
- Drowning risk increases with age for males and females
- Hospitalisation risk decreases with age for males and increases for females
- South West, Great Southern, Goldfields and Perth Metropolitan area are high risk regions
- First Aid and CPR training is essential for reducing drowning risk
- High risk activities include rock fishing, surfing and snorkelling/diving
- Continued need for ‘Swim Between the Flags’ message
- Culturally appropriate programs and resources

These are common trends which can be addressed in coastal safety initiatives however it is important to take a life stages approach to reduce coastal drowning deaths in WA. This ensures each target group can be engaged effectively by supporting community development and capacity building within each community and fostering sustainable partnerships to reduce drowning deaths in the long term.

The data provided in this report, provides water safety stakeholders with data to drive evidence based decision making in regards to coastal aquatic safety.

Key Coastal Drowning Recommendations

The following are the key recommendations from the 2013 WA Coastal Safety Report to reduce coastal drowning deaths in WA.

1. Increase reach of aquatic education programs, particularly rip current and sea condition education
2. Increase reach of ‘Swim Between the Flags’ message and continue to provide effective surf life saving services
3. Target young males 15-44 years and older males 55+ years
4. Target high risk locations including the South West, Great Southern, Goldfields and Perth metropolitan regions
5. Provide advocacy for safe diving, snorkelling and surfing practices
6. Support rock fishing safety campaigns
7. Increase community wide First Aid and CPR training
8. Promote the Beachsafe.org.au website and smartphone app
9. Provide culturally appropriate drowning prevention solutions
SLSWA would like to thank all partners who contributed to the WA Coastal Safety Report.

With thanks
- Surf Life Saving Australia
- Performance Activity and Quality Division, Department of Health WA
- Epidemiology Branch, Department of Health WA
- National Coronial Information System
- 29 West Australian Surf Life Saving Clubs
- 10 Professional Lifeguard Services
- Local Government Authorities with Surf Life Saving Clubs and/or professional lifeguard services

SLSWA would like to highlight the dedication and contribution of WA volunteer patrol members from the 29 WA Surf Life Saving clubs for their work in recording invaluable data into the Surf Guard database.

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