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TOURISTS AND BEACH SAFETY IN QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA

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Surf Life Saving Queensland (SLSQ) is a leading authority on beach safety, providing patrol, education, and rescue services to both tourists and local residents along the coast of Queensland, Australia. SLSQ recognizes that tourists are a target group requiring special attention due to their unfamiliarity with ocean beaches and surfing activities, and in some cases having the additional challenge of poor swimming skills, language barriers, and disorientation in a foreign vacation environment. This article describes SLSQ initiatives to provide beach safety for tourists through a focus on service delivery and partnerships with the tourism industry and relevant government agencies. The positive involvement of SLSQ in tourism is a model for other coastal destinations, given that drowning is the second most frequent cause of injury death among international travelers.

Key Words: Surf lifesaving; Tourism; Beach safety

Introduction

Australia is known internationally as an island holiday destination, with considerable marketing emphasis placed on the nation's public access beaches. Images of golden sand and rolling surf stretching for miles along many sections of the coast suggest that it is possible for tourists to get away from the crowds and surf in relative privacy, close to nature in an unspoiled environment.

This imagery is often at odds with the reality of beach safety for tourists and also the efforts of Surf Lifesavers to protect visitors from potential hazards in unfamiliar environments. According to the Australian Water Safety Council (1998), inbound tour-

ists are a particular target group for water safety education and injury prevention initiatives, based on the numbers who experience problems related to aquatic activities.

This article describes aspects of the Frontline First (FLF) initiative developed by Surf Life Saving Queensland (SLSQ); an initiative aimed at focusing the organization's collective energies and resources to support "frontline" service delivery—the lifesavers—through building capacity and capability. The choice of SLSQ is very appropriate, as the organization is a national leader in promoting safety for overseas visitors, having won the Australian Tourism Industry's Award for General Tourism Services in 2001, 2002, and again in 2003.

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Three consecutive national awards have placed SLSQ in the Australian Tourism Hall of Fame, a semiretirement position for 2 years to allow other groups to compete in the category. However, as this article will show, rather than retire SLSQ has redoubled its efforts and substantially reduced the number of fatalities on Queensland beaches during 2003–2004.

Surf Life Saving Queensland

SLSQ is a community-based organization with more than 26,000 volunteer members. Among the adult group, 7500 certified members actively patrol 65 of the state's beaches on weekends from September to April each year. Additional patrol coverage is provided on 41 beaches at other times of the year, especially school holidays, by SLSQ professional lifeguards. These beach patrols are further strengthened by SLSQ Support Services, which include inflatable rescue boats (IRBs), jet skis, jet rescue boats, and helicopters (Wilks, Dawes, & Williamson, in press). However, despite the efforts of lifesavers, 17 people drowned in unpatrolled areas of the Queensland coastline during the 2001–2002 season. This prompted SLSQ to develop their Frontline First (FLF) initiative, an integrated program of service delivery supporting the organization's vision of "Zero Preventable Deaths and Injuries on Queensland Beaches."

Frontline First

Figure 1 presents the core elements of FLF. This article focuses specifically on SLSQ activities related to tourists, particularly the Patrol Smart 7/52 program, although it should be clear from the various elements of FLF that tourists and local residents both benefit from the range of lifesaving initiatives. Indeed, one of the consistent findings of research on beach incidents (drowning and near drowning) in Australia is that international visitors and people living more than 50 km from the coast are two groups disproportionately involved (Surf Life Saving Australia, 2003). By definition, this makes inbound and domestic (inter- and intra-state) tourists two key target groups for prevention initiatives. SLSQ's tourism awards are an acknowledgment of the services provided to all visitor groups.

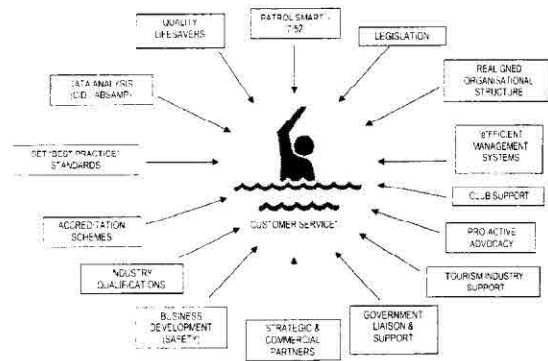


Figure 1. Frontline First.

Patrol Smart 7/52

A key component of the FLF strategy is Patrol Smart 7/52, described in the SLSQ Annual Report (SLSQ, 2002) as "the way of the future for Surf Life Saving services across the State" (p. 14). Patrol Smart 7/52 recognizes that SLSQ has a vast array of resources at its disposal and that it needs to use these resources in the most effective manner possible to ensure a "total integrated service" across Queensland beaches. This requires a clear and shared vision on how to best service its "customers"—the people who visit the beaches. In Queensland there are an estimated 30 million beach visitors each year (SLSQ, 2003a). Patrol Smart 7/52 therefore seeks to be an innovative, integrated, and "smart" lifesaving service—24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year.

The Patrol Smart 7/52 plan has 11 key strategies (SLSQ, 2004). These are:

- **Expand Services**—expanding lifesaving services to popular beaches that are currently unpatrolled;
- **Sunrise to Sunset Patrols**—extending times of patrols at popular beaches to reduce drownings that occur in areas and times outside of standard patrol hours;
- **Integrated and Coordinated Services**—improving the integration and coordination of all lifesaving services, including clubs, lifeguards, and support services;
- **Camera Safety Surveillance**—implementing camera technology to high-risk areas to enhance

surveillance capabilities (put more beaches under watch);

- **Westpac Lifesaver Helicopter Rescue Service Patrols**—operating the most efficient and cost-effective aerial services delivery;
- **Jet Rescue Boat Patrols**—operating the most efficient and cost-effective JRB services delivery;
- **Rescue Water Craft Patrols**—expanding the number of RWC (jet ski) operations in coordination with other lifesaving services;
- **Personalized Customer Service**—increasing the interaction and improving face-to-face “public relations” between lifesavers and beachgoers;
- **Central Communications**—establishing state-of-the-art communication centers (SurfComs);
- **Innovation**—researching and developing new equipment; analyzing incidents and adopting a beach management role to improve lifesaving service delivery; and
- **Develop Better Lifesavers**—providing for the education of future lifesavers; improving communication with members; increasing resources; involving lifesavers in the decision-making process and increasing interaction of patrol personnel with external agencies.

Lifesaving Services

In assessing whether Patrol Smart 7/52 is achieving its stated goals, perhaps the most important re-

sult is the objective performance of lifesaving services (Wilks et al., in press). According to the current SLSQ Annual Report (2004) the seven drowning deaths in the 2003–2004 season is the lowest number in the past 5 years (Fig. 2) and continues an observable downward trend in fatalities. At the same time, there has been a significant increase in the number of preventative actions performed by lifesavers (Fig. 3). A preventative action is defined as “interceptions to prevent rescues or problems occurring” (Fenner, Leahy, Buhk, & Dawes, 1999, p. 62).

While Figure 3 indicates that SLSQ services are currently reaching more people before they get into trouble in the surf, Table 1 shows that the delivery of first aid and emergency treatments remains high. Unfortunately, these figures do not distinguish between tourists and local residents, though industry surveys confirm that many of the people assisted by Lifesavers are visitors to the region (SLSQ, 2003b). The areas where tourists are clearly identified as experiencing problems are among the serious incidents.

Tourists and the Surf

Australian reviews have consistently reported that overseas tourists are a particular target group for water safety education and assistance, based on the numbers who experience problems related to aquatic activities (Australian Water Safety Council, 1998; Mackie, 1999; Wilks & Coory, 2000). For example,

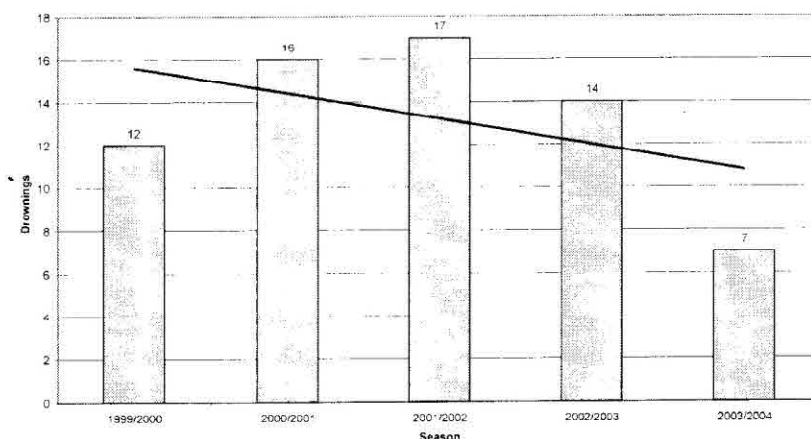


Figure 2. Queensland surf-related drownings 1999 to 2004.

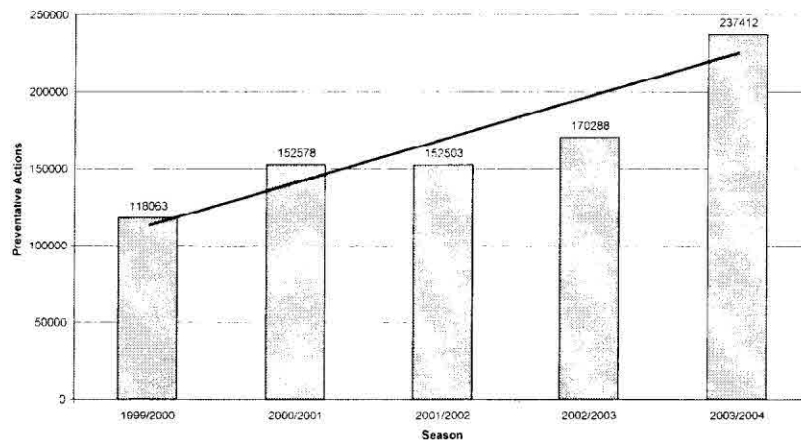


Figure 3. Total preventive actions 1999 to 2004.

Mackie (1999) found that 88 tourists from 12 countries drowned in Australia during 1992–1997. Mackie's analysis showed that 61% of these tourists drowned at surfing beaches or elsewhere in the "ocean," while a further 24% drowned while scuba diving or snorkeling.

Queensland has historically recorded the largest number of tourist drowning deaths, compared with other states (Australian Water Safety Council, 2000), although the figures provided refer to "open water" and do not distinguish between surfing beaches and other open water environments. Nonetheless, Table 2 confirms that overseas visitors are disproportionately represented in surf drowning events.

Two important points must be highlighted in relation to the information presented in Table 2. First, all of the drowning deaths occurred at unpatrolled beaches—none where tourists were swimming in a designated "flagged" area under the supervision of SLSQ Lifesavers. Second, the range of nationalities

involved shows that education and prevention initiatives must have a broad reach if they are to be successful. Current Patrol Smart 7/52 initiatives directly related to tourism are discussed below.

Patrol Smart 7/52 and Tourists

Expanding Services

The first key strategy mentioned above concerns expanding lifesaving services to popular beaches that are currently unpatrolled. The fact that all international tourist deaths included in Table 2 occurred on unpatrolled beaches highlights the importance of greater coverage. A recent assessment of service gaps undertaken for SLSQ revealed that of the total number of beaches in Queensland (714) there were at least eight that still needed full-time services, and a further 15 needing part-time service. This assessment took into account current visitation rates, population growth, and history of incidents (Ernst & Young, 2004).

In the recent case of *Enright v Coolum Resort Pty Ltd & Anors* [2002] QSC 394 the Supreme Court of Queensland dismissed a AUD\$120 million civil action for compensation claimed by the widow of a US tourist who drowned on an unpatrolled beach.

Maureen Enright, of Connecticut, had sued the Hyatt Coolum Resort where her husband Robert was staying, and the Maroochy Shire Council, which controlled the beach where he drowned on March 3, 1993. The plaintiff alleged that both defendants failed

Table 1
SLSQ Lifesaving Actions During the 2003–2004 Season

Action	No.
Lives saved (rescues)	3,683
Resuscitations	80
First aid treatments	9,384
Marine stinger treatments	6,438
Spinal injury treatments	22
Preventative actions	237,412

Table 2
A 4-Year Comparison of Drowning Deaths in Queensland

	2000–2001	2001–2002	2002–2003	2003–2004
Total	16	17	14	7
Males	16	14	12	2
Females	0	3	2	1
Overseas visitors	4	11	8	1
Nationalities				
Chinese	1	2		
Czech			1	
English	1	3	2	
Fijian			1	
German			1	1
Indian	1			
Japanese	1	3	2	
Singaporean		1		
South African		1		
Swiss		1		
Taiwanese			1	

Source: Surf Life Saving Queensland, unpublished data.

in their duty of care to the deceased, a Harvard-educated tax lawyer and vice-president of Pepsico, by failing, among other things, to erect sufficient clear signage.

The court found that it was reasonably foreseeable that someone might swim in the surf and drown on an unpatrolled beach, but that the facts in this case did not support a breach of the defendants' duty of care. An assessment of the case also revealed that the resort, in particular, had gone to considerable lengths to provide a safe swimming environment for its guests (Wilks & Davis, 2003). This high level of attention to risk management policies and procedures is clearly a critical factor in reducing claims exposure for tourism operators. It also emphasizes to local government councils the importance of examining the lifeguard and beach management services they provide, both in terms of legal and social responsibilities for their beaches (Ernst & Young, 2004).

Sunrise to Sunset Patrols

The second key strategy outlined for Patrol Smart 7/52 concerns extending the times of patrols at popular beaches to reduce drownings that occur in areas and times outside of standard patrol hours. This initiative was specifically introduced in response to the two deaths involving tourists on the Gold Coast of

Queensland. These two deaths occurred some 50 hours apart in an almost identical location at Surfers Paradise Beach, in March 2001; both deaths were prior to the commencement of normal patrol services.

For overseas tourists the key educational issues in beach safety include: awareness of "swimming between the flags," beach signage, recognition of Surf Life Savers (by uniform and the yellow and red colors worn), appreciation of swimming only during daylight hours, and an understanding of what to do if they experience trouble (Pendergast, Wilks, & Dawes, 2003). All of these issues highlight the limited experience most tourists have when it comes to swimming safely in the surf (Wilks, Pendergast, & Wood, 2003).

One SLSQ program that seeks to address these educational issues for Japanese tourists on the Gold Coast is the daily guided beach walks. Beginning at 7:00 am each morning SLSQ uniformed lifesavers provide informative group walking tours along the beach at Surfers Paradise. The lifesavers involved speak fluent Japanese. The program is supported by local tourism accommodation providers and offers the opportunity to blend beach safety and general tourism information. The guided walks are free and while they are specifically offered to Japanese visitors there is no restriction on anyone else joining the group and conversing in English.

Personalized Customer Service

The Gold Coast beach walks are a good example of increasing the interaction and improving face-to-face "public relations" between lifesavers and beachgoers. Another program involves uniformed SLSQ members meeting visitors arriving at the Gold Coast's Coolangatta Airport. Visitors are handed a brochure. The "Staying Alive" program reaches more than 150,000 tourists at the Gold Coast Airport and a further 70,000 via information placed in accommodation houses. Almost 9 million tourists have been reached with surf safety information via this program (SLSQ, 2003a). While the current brochure is only produced in English, there are plans to extend the material to other languages and to undertake follow-up evaluation on the effectiveness of the initiative.

Innovation

An important aspect of innovation for the Patrol Smart 7/52 program is the continuous monitoring and analysis of safety incidents in order to improve lifesaving service delivery. Some of this strategic knowledge is generated internally by SLSQ, while some is developed by external agencies or partners. For example, a recent university study supported by SLSQ found that cultural issues might contribute to unsafe beach behavior (Ballantyne, Carr, & Hughes, 2003). The survey of 176 tertiary students (30% overseas students) revealed that:

- Visitors from Southeast Asia and Pacific Islander nations dislike being in close proximity to scantily dressed swimmers, and consequently avoid swimming in crowded areas such as between the flags.
- International visitors do not believe that beaches can be dangerous because they have little experience or knowledge of ocean swimming.
- International visitors swim in unsafe areas because they seek activities that are adventurous or risky.

Of particular relevance to the Patrol Smart 7/52 program was the study finding that although rips are a common cause of beach accidents, the majority of international students (77%) and 21% of the Australian students were unfamiliar with the term. Rip currents are a relatively narrow, seaward moving

stream of water. They represent a mechanism for returning water back out to sea that has been brought ashore by breaking waves (Short, 2000). Even those students who claimed to know what a rip was had difficulty explaining how to recognize one, and when they were shown photographs, 61% selected a rip as the area where they would be most likely to swim.

SLSQ uses the findings of external research and its own internal monitoring programs to respond to the surf safety needs of tourists, both domestic and overseas visitors, through multilingual beach signage and the placement of surf safety information in tourist accommodation venues. Targeted education is also provided. For example, the "Beach to Bush" program is conducted in rural schools and local communities throughout Queensland to educate students and their families on a number of areas of aquatic safety and involves some 12,000 participants. This program aims to educate potential visitors to Queensland beaches before they leave home (SLSQ, 2003a).

In partnership with Tourism Queensland, SLSQ has also contributed expert information to national visitor safety campaigns (Tourism Ministers Council, 2002) and taken a leadership role in the Queensland government's Irukandji Jellyfish Response Taskforce. Risk management of marine stingers is especially important to protect the tourism industry in tropical waters. The Irukandji Jellyfish Response Taskforce was established to achieve a collaborative approach to deal with the impact of this marine creature. Two working groups, a Research Working Group and a Preventative and Response Working Group, were also established in 2002 (Cooperative Research Centre for the Reef, 2002).

In addition, SLSQ has taken a lead role in community education on marine stingers by coordinating education forums, producing a range of brochures and posters, and hosting a website (www.marinestingers.com). SLSQ also coordinated the production of a Community Service Announcement (CSA) for television and an educational DVD titled "Dangerous Tropical Jellyfish" (Surf Life Saving Queensland and Digital Dimensions, 2004).

Tourism Industry Support

A separate core element of the SLSQ Frontline First initiative is the ongoing development of part-

nerships with the tourism industry (Fig. 1). The red and yellow uniformed Surf Lifesaver is both a national icon and an internationally recognized part of Australia's tourism image. According to the Australian Water Safety Council (1998) "some 9% of tourists—that is, over 400,000 people a year come to Australia specifically to 'have a swim' " (p. 11).

Feedback from tourism operators continues to highlight the fact that many of these visitors require targeted assistance in order to safely enjoy their time at the beach. For example, a recent survey of 91 Queensland tourism operators (including 28 resorts and 21 hotels/motels) found that 59% of respondents said visitors to their area had only "medium awareness" of the dangers of surf beaches. Medium awareness was that visitors usually go to patrolled areas and swim between the flags but do not know how to recognize dumping waves, rips, or marine stingers. Importantly, 14% of industry respondents said visitors to their area had "low or no awareness" of the dangers of surf beaches (SLSQ, 2003b).

A range of responses is required to address this lack of awareness. In terms of strategic knowledge, it is now well accepted that tourists do not take the time to independently seek out and read detailed safety material after they have arrived at their destination (Wilks, Watson, & Hansen, 1999). So it is important that tourist operators actively draw safety issues to the attention of their customers. In the survey of 91 Queensland tourism operators, however, less than one third were using most of the government or industry brochures, posters, or videos available to them (33/91 reported using the government "Safety Tips for Visitors Brochure," a multilingual product that covers the four areas of Beach, Road, Bush and Outback safety). On a positive note, the vast majority of tourism operators surveyed (72/91) reported that they were willing to adopt a range of measures to promote beach safety for their customers.

Future Directions

As a peak authority on beach safety SLSQ is responding to the needs of tourists in a variety of ways. Patrol Smart 7/52 provides an integrated lifesaving service on the beaches, acknowledging that visitors are likely to experience problems because they are in an unfamiliar environment and in many cases do not have well-developed swimming skills. The de-

livery of a quality lifesaving service is also enhanced by appreciating that tourists will frequently swim on unpatrolled beaches and at times outside of standard patrol hours. Expanding coverage, introducing sunrise to sunset patrols, and personalizing customer services are specific initiatives that address these areas of concern. However, the challenge remains to constantly monitor and evaluate these interventions and to work with government agencies and tourism industry groups to prepare visitors before they arrive at the beach destination.

In order to effectively target tourist groups who might be at particular risk, further research is required to distinguish and profile overseas, inter- and intrastate visitors separately. In particular, it is important to identify which nationalities are involved in first aid treatments and preventative actions by lifesavers, as well as any cultural or social barriers that might be operating to perpetuate unsafe beach behaviors. This knowledge can then be used in the development of language-appropriate education materials.

While all of the core elements of the SLSQ Frontline First initiative directly or indirectly affect the beach safety of tourists, the importance of developing active partnerships with the tourism industry must be highlighted. As the recent survey of Queensland tourism operators revealed, 56% of respondents actively show visitors how to find the beach (using a map or directions). At this point of communication lies the best opportunity to also provide some safety advice and information that will enhance enjoyment and possibly save a life.

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