

**Submission  
No 66**

## **INQUIRY INTO TOURISM IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

**Organisation:** Surf Life Saving NSW

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## Surf Life Saving NSW Submission

### Inquiry into Tourism in Local Communities

### General Purpose Standing Committee No 3

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#### **Brief Summary:**

Surf Life Saving NSW would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to submit a paper into this Inquiry. In particular, we would like to draw your attention to the fact that tourism impacts on Surf Life Saving heavily by placing higher demands on our services, which are often not considered. We would also like to raise your awareness about the value of our operations and services to the community of New South Wales and its international and domestic visitors.

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**Who we are**

Since 1907, Surf Life Saving has been committed to saving lives and is Australia's major water safety, drowning prevention and rescue authority. Surf Life Saving is the largest volunteer movement of its kind in Australia and it continues to grow.

Surf Life Saving NSW is made up of 129 Surf Life Saving Clubs, 11 Branches and 77,000 members. Since recording began in 1949, our volunteers have performed over 340,000 rescues.

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**Why we exist**

To save lives, create great Australians and build better communities.

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**What we do**

With a long history and tradition, Surf Life Saving has a unique role in Australia's culture, which is to save lives and prevent injuries to people who visit our beaches.

Our core activities include:

- Coastal safety and lifesaving
- Education and Training
- Member development
- Surf Sports

## **Our value to tourism and local communities in NSW**

A 2011 report by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) estimated the economic value of Surf Life Saving NSW's coastal drowning and injury prevention activities in the community to be worth \$3.6 billion nationally and \$1.6 billion in New South Wales. To put it another way, for every single dollar invested, donated or spent on Surf Life Saving it returns \$29. It is estimated that in the absence of Surf Life Saving's water safety services, almost 600 additional people across the country would have lost their lives.

Over the 2012/13 season, Surf Life Saving NSW showed their commitment to the community and tourists of New South Wales by contributing 667,000 voluntary hours on NSW beaches during the 2012/13 season. Through the voluntary efforts of our members, lifesavers performed 3,924 rescues across the state. Tragically despite our lifesavers best efforts there have still been 38 coastal drownings outside patrolled areas on NSW beaches, however this figure would undoubtedly be higher if not for the vigilance of the volunteers.

Last season was a busy season for our volunteers, with over 6.3 million people visiting the state's beaches. Lifesavers treated 18,560 people for first aid as well as performing 124,658 preventative actions during the season. These preventative actions include instructing swimmers to move out of dangerous areas and ensuring that visitors to the beach swim between the flags.

## ***A snapshot of our services and programs***

### Beach Safety Videos

As an indication of Surf Life Saving's commitment to ensure the safety of Australian and international tourists, Surf Life Saving launched a 'If we can't see you we can't save you' campaign with Virgin Australia in September 2012. Beach safety videos were shown on Virgin Australia's in-flight system across all international and domestic flights to promote our core public safety message of swimming between the red and yellow flags. Print advertisements were also included in Virgin Australia in-flight magazines and there were also print opportunities through our national media partner, News Limited and these were also translated into other languages to reach international audiences.

The aim of this campaign was to promote our core public safety messages and to educate all Australians and international tourists about the importance of why they should swim at patrolled beaches and between the red and yellow flags and the benefits of doing so; and also educating tourists about the unpredictable nature of the surf across our beautiful Australian beaches.

This campaign was also promoted throughout our Australian Lifeguard Service (ALS) during the 2012-13 season involving more than 350 employed Lifeguards patrolling 90 beaches across the state.

## Provision of Lifeguard Services in coastal areas at times of high tourist influxes

Through Surf Life Saving's subsidiary company, Australian Lifeguard Services (ALS), we provide commercial lifeguard contracts to cover busy times at our beaches where voluntary lifesavers are not on patrol, for example, during the week or on weekends outside of the lifesaving patrol season (in NSW the patrol season coincides with the beginning of September school holidays and finishes on Anzac Day or the Saturday after). Generally this is when there are school holidays and a high influx of both domestic and international tourists.

### ***Case Study***

An example of where lifeguard services have had to be extended due to the high number of tourists is in the Byron Bay area where in 2013, Byron Shire Council extended the lifeguard service at Main Beach for six weeks for the next two years.

The Byron Shire Mayor, Simon Richardson, welcomed the extra patrols stating "Our beaches are a magnet to visitors and residents. They are simply beautiful. To be able to extend the lifeguard service is vital."

The ALS currently has contracts for lifeguard services in the following areas:

- Tweed Shire Council – 8 beaches service delivery over 7 months
- Salt Resort – 1 beach and 2 resort pools over 12 months
- Byron Shire Council – 9 beaches service delivery over 9 months.
- Ballina Shire Council – 5 beaches service delivery over 7 months
- Richmond Valley Council – 1 beach service delivery over Spring, Summer and Autumn holidays
- Clarence Valley Council – 5 beaches service delivery over Spring, Summer and Autumn holidays
- Nambucca Shire Council – 3 beaches service delivery over Summer holidays
- Kempsey Shire Council – 5 beaches service delivery over Spring, Summer and Autumn holidays
- Greater Taree Council – 5 beaches service delivery over Summer holidays
- Great Lakes Council – 4 beaches + pool service delivery over Spring, Summer and Autumn holidays
- Port Stephens Council – 3 beaches service delivery over 7 months
- Lake Munmorah – 1 beach service delivery over Summer and Autumn holidays
- Pittwater Council – 9 beaches service delivery over 7 months
- Royal National Park – 2 beaches over Summer holidays
- Shoalhaven City Council – 8 beaches service delivery over Summer holidays
- Magenta Resort and Country Club – 1 beach service delivery 2 weeks
- Bega Valley Shire Council – 7 beaches service delivery over Summer holidays

**Snapshot of statistics for the 2012/13 season through the Australian Lifeguard Service (ALS)**

<b>Area</b>	<b>Attendance</b>	<b>Rescues</b>	<b>Preventative Actions</b>	<b>First Aid</b>
Kempsey	266,835	34	9,465	279
Bega	194,137	178	10,652	672
Bellingen	19,658	1	2,702	8
Clarence	136,967	13	6,274	309
Taree	43,505	4	3,887	23
Royal National Park	8,862	3	457	66
Salt Resorts	26,748	0	874	9
Nambucca	39,979	2	1,967	41
Magenta	2,479	3	170	13
Frazer Beach	23,948	5	1,132	62
Pittwater	873,845	178	50,808	2738
Great Lakes	166,415	27	7,762	313
Tea Gardens Pool	10,508	0	1,159	7
Port Stephens	N/A	173	N/A	522
Shoalhaven	132,582	51	13,811	682
Richmond	23,767	1	1,082	43
Ballina	103,857	29	9,218	153
Tweed	175,177	47	21,602	237
Byron	834,549	78	46,086	1064

Coastal Accommodation Beach Safety Network

Last year Surf Life Saving NSW joined with the North Coast Destination Network, an entity formed out of the two regional tourism organisations – MNC Tourism and Northern Rivers Tourism, which is endorsed by the 15 Local Government Areas between Tweed Heads and Port Stephens, to educate international visitors about beach safety. Pamphlets, posters, counter displays and DVDS were distributed to visitor centres, airports and international language schools in north coast towns frequented by international visitors. *(Please see appendix for copies of resources)*. This information has also been distributed to backpacker providers in the Sydney area.



This campaign focuses on key beach safety messages, such as always swim at patrolled locations, between the red and yellow flags, read the safety signs, and if you are unsure of surf conditions, ask a lifesaver or lifeguard.

This information is available in seven languages including Traditional Chinese, Simplified Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Hindi, Malay, Arabic and is supported by linkages to the [www.beachsafe.org.au](http://www.beachsafe.org.au) website, on all information distributed, through social media channels, partner sites and the visitor centres. In addition, this safety information is supported with multilingual videos and audio materials, which can be viewed in over 30 languages.

During the 2012-13 season, the Australian Lifeguard Service (ALS) was responsible for the delivery of over 10,000 multilingual beach safety flyers to coastal accommodation providers, for placement in guest rooms, rest rooms or lounges.

#### On-Beach Surf Education

In addition to our lifeguard contracts, the Australian Lifeguard Service also runs a Surf Education program in the Pittwater Council area, which involves providing Surf Education presentations to beachgoers at popular locations during key holiday periods.

## Surf Safety Day

As a result of the tragic drowning of a 23 year old South Korean foreign worker at Woolgoolga Beach in the 2011-2012 season, Surf Life Saving NSW sought funding through the NSW Government's Community Relations Commission to run 'Surf Safety Days'. The aim of the program is to present vital surf safety messages to families in the region who may not be familiar with the beach. The 'Surf Safety Days' include a focus on the five basic surf safety messages including who can help you at the beach, being sun smart, how to spot a rip, the importance of the red and yellow flags and the significance of signage at the beach. By engaging with migrant groups we hope to break down the barriers to recreating at the beach and strongly advocate that everyone can enjoy the beach if they have the knowledge and experience to do it safely.

## Surfers NSW

Surf Life Saving NSW has recently partnered with Surfing NSW to provide the CPR component of their *Surfers Rescue 24/7 program*. Through the NSW Government's Water Safety Black Spot Fund, Surfing NSW has obtained funding to give all surfers in NSW the opportunity to do a CPR and Board Rescue Course. To date, Surf Life Saving NSW has conducted 21 courses and trained 463 surfers who now have a nationally recognised Statement of Attainment to perform CPR. This program has been vital in training boardriders CPR/first aid skills, which will prevent a huge number of tragedies along the NSW and has already done so.

### **Case Study – Surfer rescues a Norwegian tourist**

*In November last year, near the Wreck at Byron Bay, a Norwegian tourist got into trouble in the surf. Onlookers pointed out that there was a swimmer in trouble and a surfer grabbed his short board and paddled out as fast as he could. The Norwegian tourist was 150m out in deep water and by the time the surfer got there, the surfer had to reach down a metre under the water to get him. It took the surfer 15 minutes to get him back to shore on his surfboard where the police and ambulance were waiting. The Norwegian tourist was unconscious and spent 24 hours in hospital after the ordeal and later said he was only seconds away from giving up on surviving. He is now back in Norway and said he wanted to thank the surfer who saved his life “I want to tell him how grateful I am, and thank him for saving my life. I would’ve died if it wasn’t for him.”*

### **Project Blueprint**

Surf Life Saving NSW has received funding through the NSW Government’s Water Safety Black Spot Fund to conduct a Coastal Public Safety Risk Assessment for every beach and rock platform in NSW. This project will provide a ‘Blue-Print’ for NSW from which an effective drowning prevention strategy can be developed to meet the National and State Water Safety Advisory Council’s goal to reduce drowning deaths by 50% by 2020.

This program is fundamental in addressing the coastal drowning issue in NSW in the short, mid and long term as it identifies aspects of the NSW coastline which contribute to the usage, hazardousness and risk of coastal areas, such as: hazards, access, signage, facilities, rescue equipment positioning and placement.

### ***Case Study***

*An example of where rescue equipment has been instrumental in saving lives is at Red Rock in the Coffs Harbour area where in March this year two men whose kayak capsized after it was hit by a heavy surf, had to rely on one of the lifebuoys mounted on the headland for rescue. It is understood one of the men couldn't swim properly, while his mate swam to the headland and used the ring to drag him to safety. Thankfully the man was saved. The lifebuoys (angel rings) were installed in 2006, about six months after the tragic drowning of a 24-year-old American exchange student. Since then it has saved several lives.*

### **Surf Emergency Response System**

Surf Life Saving NSW has met the growing demands on our services outside of patrol hours and areas by setting up a Surf Emergency Response System, which is a 24/7 callout system. Prior to 2007 there was no structured system in place for emergency services to request assistance from Surf Life Saving for in-water emergencies.

The Surf Emergency Response System, supported by the Surf Life Saving NSW State Operations Centre, was the result of a joint NSW Police and SLS initiative to create one main conduit for emergency services to request surf lifesaving assistance.

Last season there were 508 Emergency Response Callouts, which demonstrates that Surf Life Saving NSW has moved past undertaking weekend rescues and is now a full time network, still mostly reliant on volunteers. This compared to 373 callouts the previous year, which reflects the quickly growing demand on the Surf Emergency Response System.

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### **The impacts of tourism for Surf Life Saving on Local Government Areas**

The impacts of tourism has a great effect on the operations and activities of Surf Life Saving, as it places greater pressure on our services with increased numbers of domestic and international visitors to coastal areas, however these impacts are generally not considered or met with additional resources to meet the heightened demands on our services with the growing influx of tourists. In addition, it brings with it challenges such as language barriers and cultural differences.

According to the *Surf Life Saving National Coastal Safety Report 2012*, in 2011-2012, 28% of drowning deaths were people known to be of a foreign ethnicity and 11% were international visitors. Despite the common misperception, drownings at beaches do not just take place within the summer months, with this report showing that 66% of drownings occurring outside of the summer months. Furthermore, almost 80% of drownings were within 5km of Surf Life Saving facilities highlighting the need to always swim at patrolled locations, during patrolled times. The most common causes of coastal drownings across the state were people swimming/being caught in rip currents and rock fishing accidents.

The *Australian Water Safety Strategy 2012-2015 (AWSS 2012-15)*, states that more than 50% of drowning deaths occur outside of normal patrolling times. These factors place high pressure on the ability of Surf Life Saving to intervene when people are swimming outside of patrol hours and patrol times and this is exacerbated in tourist hot-spots like Byron, Ballina, Manly and Bondi, where visitors lack of knowledge of the ocean tends to be a major factor.

In the 2011-2012 year Surf Life Saving NSW statistics show that there were 12 known drowning deaths by international tourists, representing 25.6% of the total coastal drowning deaths in New South Wales in that year. In the 2012-13 year there were 8 known drowning deaths by international tourists, representing 20.5% of the total drowning deaths in New South Wales. These figures may also be higher as the origins of approximately 40% of drowning deaths are unknown.

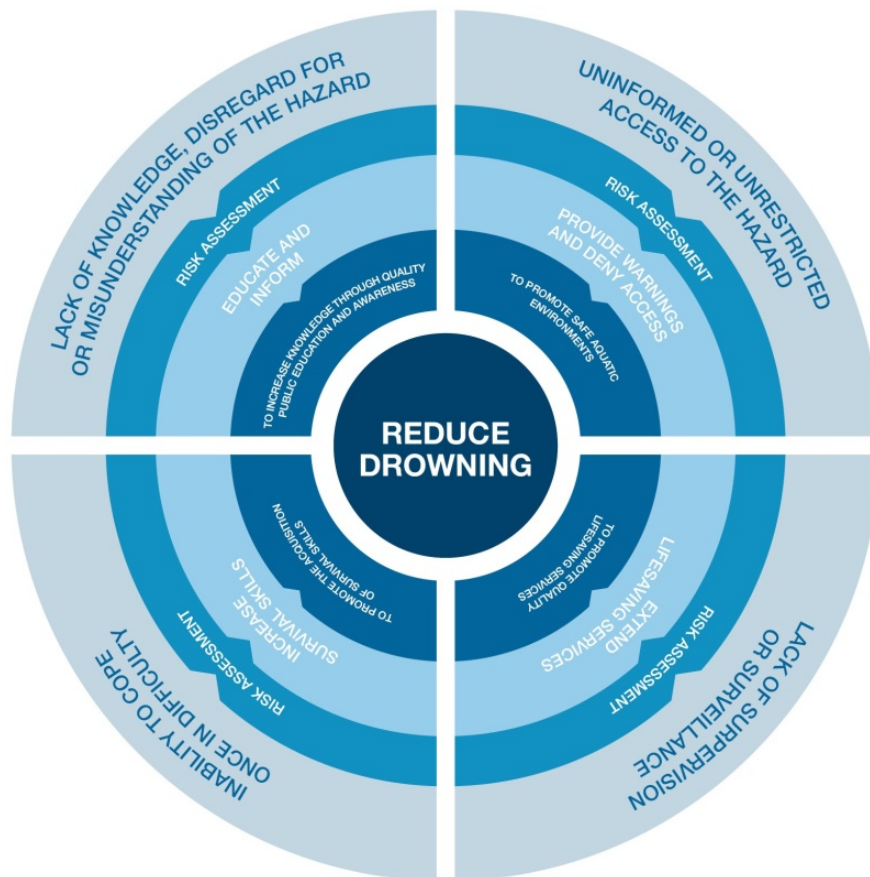
### ***Tourist Drowning Deaths***

The *AWSS 2012-15* states that one of the key goal areas is to reduce drowning deaths in high risk populations, of which tourists and international students have been identified by the Australian Water Safety Advisory Council as communities at an increased risk of drowning and aquatic injury when compared to the rest of the Australian population.

Tourists, both domestic and international, are often unaware of the hazards and risks that they face on our beaches and in inland waterways. The *AWSS 2012-15* states that in the 2010-11 financial year there were 19 international tourists who drowned in Australia. The international tourists were from a variety of countries including Ireland (3), China (2), India (2) and Germany (2).

There have also been several drowning incidents involving international students who are often communicated with through the same channels as tourists, but differ from tourists due to the length and location of their experience in Australia, which increases the likelihood that they will be exposed to hazardous and unfamiliar aquatic conditions. The *AWSS 2012-15* cites a recent coronial inquest into the drowning of four people in NSW which found that overseas students are not routinely given water safety information as part of their orientation to living in Australia. A further study cited found that 77% of international students did not know what a rip was.

Four key factors have been identified that may lead to accidental drowning, known as the 'Drowning Chain'. Any of these factors alone, or a combination, could lead to a death by drowning, of which tourists are a high risk group. The four factors are: 1) Lack of knowledge, disregard or misjudgement of a hazard 2) Uninformed, unprotected or unrestricted access to a hazard 3) Lack of supervision or surveillance 4) Inability to cope once in difficulty. The subsequent drowning prevention strategies are: 1) Education and information 2) Denial of access, improvement of infrastructure and/or provision of warnings 3) Provision of supervision 4) Acquisition of survival skills (see diagram of Drowning Chain over the page).



Unfortunately informing tourists about key surf safety messages is difficult without adequate resourcing and a high presence of surf safety messages in areas where tourists frequently visit or access information. In addition, often core surf safety messages to tourists are lost in the media because although there are many hazards to be aware of at the beach, shark attacks generally result in media frenzy and draw the most attention. Marine creatures are a hazard in our coastal environment and it is understandable that when fatalities occur there will be media reports to alert the public, yet there has only been one fatal attack in NSW in the past 18 years, which is out of proportion to the number of people that lose their life in the ocean due to drowning attributed to rip currents, which is the highest contributing factor to a drowning death.



According to the *Surf Life Saving National Coastal Safety Report 2012*, rip currents cause at least eight times as many deaths. As such, tourists and visitors to our beaches, need to be alerted to the main hazard at beaches and ensure that they swim between the red and yellow flags where lifesavers and/or lifeguards are able to evaluate all hazards and provide supervision in a patrolled area.

Despite our efforts to promote our public safety message about 'swimming between the red and yellow flags', we know that some tourists still don't know these represent the safest place to swim. A recent example of a rescue undertaken through the Surfers Rescue 24/7 program, highlighted the lack of awareness about beach safety and that some people, particularly tourists, don't realise that the flagged areas of the beach are patrolled for the safety of all visitors to the beach.

***Case Study of two French tourists rescued through Surfers Rescue 24/7 program***

*Two French men were rescued in February this year in the Sydney Northern Beaches by a surfer who had just undertaken the Surfers Rescue 24/7 program (referred to in page 8 of this submission). Luckily the surfer was quite fluent in French as the two French tourists spoke virtually no English. When the surfer asked the French men why they weren't swimming between the flags, they said they thought the flags marked an area for 'club members only'.*

It is also vital that tourists receive information stressing the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol whilst recreating in, or near the water. The tourism industry and Surf Life Saving could use high profile people to feature in this type of awareness campaign, for example, US Actor Jonah Hill, who recently found himself in trouble when swimming after drinking alcohol.

**Case Study – Tourist caught in a rip under the influence of alcohol**

*Last year, US Actor Jonah Hill was in Sydney promoting 21 Jump Street when he was caught in a rip during a swim at Bondi Beach and dragged out to sea, where his life flashed before him as he realised he couldn't swim back to shore. On the US late night show, Conan, he admitted he was foolish to go swimming after a long, booze-filled flight.*

*"We got off the plane and immediately we're like, 'Let's go swimming!' and so we go to Bondi Beach...and there's such a bad riptide there that dumb tourists get off the plane and go swimming and drown, and get rescued."*

*He spoke about how he got in the ocean and what felt like a second later he realised his friend was a mile away from him and said "What's going on? Where am I? I start to swim as hard as I can and I'm not going anywhere and so I'm like, 'This is how I die...' I am a guy who died in the ocean in Australia...wasted." Fortunately in the end, a lifeguard rescued him on a jet-ski.*

It is not just international tourists who are at risk either of swimming under the influence of drugs and alcohol, as this is also a factor for domestic tourists, particularly over the 'schoolies' period in tourist hotspots like Byron Bay. Last year lifesavers reinforced a 'Don't get Ripped this Schoolies' message in key holiday hotspots along the NSW coast including Byron Bay. This campaign was a result of the growing number of incidents where schoolies were taking major risks swimming outside patrol areas, hitting the surf at night and under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

There are many examples year after year of volunteer lifesavers putting themselves at risk to rescue swimmers in distress and tragically over the last season or two we have witnessed some unfortunate drownings over the last year involving tourists.

***Case Study – Tragic drownings at Woolgoolga Beach***

*In October 2012, there was a tragic drowning of a South Korean tourist at Woolgoolga Beach, which was the second time in just four years that a South Korean tourist had drowned in this area. The victim went swimming after the flags were taken down and was swimming in a spot where a strong rip runs as the tide drops. He was with a friend who was fortunately pulled from the water, however unfortunately there was no sign of the victim. This tragedy occurred just a week after a group of four Koreans were stuck in a rip at the same beach and were fortunately rescued by a young, off-duty surf lifesaver who was at the beach and managed to bring them all back to shore.*

*Many tourists go to the Woolgoolga area to pick fruit and also take the opportunity to go to the beach and this is an area which has been targeted by Surf Life Saving NSW with beach safety brochures being distributed to real estate agents and places where visiting workers are employed.*

***Case Study - Tourist drownings on the Central Coast of NSW***

An article by Leila Cook, 'Beaches bite unwary or unwise' in the Newcastle Herald on 21<sup>st</sup> August 2012 summed up the dangers of tourists coming to Australia's beaches. "Australia is well known for its beaches, particularly those along the south-eastern coast. Many beaches visited by tourists and locals may appear to be sun-filled paradises but there are many dangers about which beach goers need to be aware.

*Many tourists are trapped in unfamiliar rips, tides and currents. In the past year, there have been 12 deaths at several beaches on the Central Coast. Nine of these were tourists.”*

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## **Recommendations**

- 1) That the option be explored of a special rate variation or similar be utilised to raise revenue to assist with the provision of additional infrastructure, including beach safety signage in popular tourist towns in NSW.
- 2) For greater resourcing and support for the enhancement and/or extension of lifesaving services to meet the growing demands in areas with high tourist numbers and a growing tourist influx.
- 3) For greater resourcing and promotion of surf safety education through targeted interventions for tourists aimed at ensuring drowning prevention strategies are put in place. These strategies should address the ‘Drowning chain’, which relate to promoting the acquisition of survival skills, increasing knowledge through quality public education and awareness, and promoting safe aquatic environments.
- 4) Surf Life Saving NSW concurs with the recommendation in the *AWSS 2012-15* that with increases in domestic tourism and tourists coming from Asia, the Australian Water Safety Council calls on the tourism industry to ensure the implementation of water safety and risk management plans in resorts, hotels and caravan parks.

This includes signage, effective barriers and education programs targeting supervision in order to reduce drowning incidents.

- 5) Surf Life Saving NSW concurs with the *AWSS 2012-15* that water safety education, including the identification of hazards, should be a mandatory part of student orientation, particularly in educational institutions exposed to known local water hazards.
  
- 6) The promotion of core water safety messages to tourists is vital. Surf Life Saving NSW recommends that the tourism industry actively promote to tourists that they visit [www.beachsafe.org.au](http://www.beachsafe.org.au) for all beach safety information. There is information about specific beaches in 34 languages and the website can direct swimmers to the nearest patrolled beach. Visitors to the website can view fact sheets on rips, bluebottles and other hazards in 18 languages. Visitors can also download the new Beachsafe Application on their smartphones, which provides access to patrol locations and hours; and real-time weather and surf conditions, anywhere along the coast.
  
- 7) Surf Life Saving NSW concurs with the International Life Saving Federation recommendation that all providers of lifesaving services should wear the prominent red and yellow colour scheme. Surf Life Saving NSW would like to see all paid and volunteer lifesaving services adopt a red and yellow colour scheme as this has proven to be the most widely recognised symbol of water safety services nationally and internationally. A national Newspoll study conducted last year showed that 80% of Australians would look for red and yellow uniforms during an emergency at the beach.

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