

Near-Drowning and Coastal Safety in the Area Surrounding Bremer Bay

Based on the Bremer Bay Community Coastal Safety and Near Drowning Report,
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Introduction

The death of a 15 year-old Albany boy, washed from rocks while fishing, sparked renewed community interest in drowning prevention activities along the Great Southern Coastline in 2003.

The Great Southern Population Health Service developed a coastal safety and near-drowning survey tool for use in Albany, with contributions from the Nathan Drew Memorial Trust and numerous community volunteers (Gill & Buttfield, 2004). The local Bremer Bay community subsequently showed an interest in this pioneering work first undertaken in Albany.

Community volunteers from Bremer Bay used the Coastal Safety and Near-Drowning survey to collect information from local residents and visitors to the region over the 2003/2004 summer holiday period. Assistance was provided to the community by the Royal Life Saving Society, the Great Southern Population Health Service, and Nathan Drew Memorial Trust.

The survey was completed by 285 residents and visitors to the region, who reported 36 individual near-drowning incidents on the coastline surrounding Bremer Bay.



Native Dog Beach

Findings - Coastal Use and Safety

The Bremer Bay coastline was used frequently for a wide range of activities throughout the seasons.

Common activities included fishing from the beach (68% of respondents), and swimming (66%). Also popular were walking (60%), boating (56%) and fishing from rocks (52%). Fewer respondents dived (18%) or surfed (15%) on the Bremer Bay coast. Diving and boating were more popular amongst visitors to the region, while locals were more likely to use the coast for walking.

However, almost 90% of respondents agreed that the general Bremer Bay area is a dangerous coastal location.

The major sources of coastal danger identified by respondents were environmental elements: Large and unpredictable swells, strong rips, the rocky nature of the area, and changing weather conditions were all suggested. Less often suggested were human sources of danger: A lack of awareness, unfamiliarity, complacency, or simply taking part in inherently risky activities, such as rockfishing, were the most common human errors suggested by respondents to the survey.

Findings – Near Drownings in the Region

Of the respondents, 13% reported knowledge of a near-drowning involving themselves or a family member in the coastal areas surrounding Bremer Bay. A further 6% reported a near-drowning incident that occurred on another stretch of Western Australian coastline.

In total, 53 near-drowning incidents were reported; 36 of these incidents occurred in the Bremer Bay area. Further detailed information was provided for 16 near-drowning incidents, allowing more extensive analysis.

Males were involved in 92% of these reported near-drowning incidents. This over-representation is very similar to general fatal drowning statistics (RLSSWA 2003).

92% of near-drownings involved males.

50% of near-drownings involved 20-29 year olds males.

81% of near-drownings occurred while fishing from rocks.

Males aged 20-29 were involved in half of all reported near-drowning incidents. This group is often over-represented in injury-related statistics and reflects the increased number of risky behaviours they exhibit.

The warmer summer months accounted for 60% of near-drowning incidents. However, incidents were also reported throughout winter, spring and autumn.

Those involved in near-drowning incidents were rockfishing in the vast majority of cases.

Doubtful Island was noted as a particularly dangerous location within the region for near-drowning incidents. All of the incidents that occurred at Doubtful Island involved rockfishing.

Swell was a major factor in 56% of reported near-drownings. In most cases, it was unexpected, often sweeping those people involved into the water while they were preoccupied with setting up, packing, or simply distracted.

The majority of incidents were of 'moderate' severity. That is, those people involved entered the water and required assistance to get out, but were not injured during the event. Only a small minority of these incidents required professional medical attention (12%) or the attendance of emergency services (12%) despite the potential for loss of life.

The low proportion of incidents that use professional medical services highlights the under-reporting that may have previously occurred when relying on hospitalisation figures to establish the prevalence of near-drowning.

Findings – Support for Intervention

Warning signs were identified as the most popular strategy to address near-drowning in the area surrounding Bremer Bay. Unprompted, respondents suggested signage (43%) and other educational programs (29%) as effective interventions. When prompted, support was strongest for placing further signage in the area (83%), providing safety rescue equipment (77%), brochures (54%), media awareness campaigns (53%), and the construction of memorials (41%)

The majority of respondents (58%) felt that existing warning signage is inadequate.



Signage at the entry to Native Dog Beach

Discussion

Three priority areas arise from these findings:

- Males
- 20-29 year olds males
- Rockfishing activities

In actual near-drowning incidents, the role of human behaviour is more significant than respondents generally acknowledge. The community needs better education of appropriate safe coastal behaviours, particularly within the priority areas identified above.

Recommendations

Six recommendations are made as part of this report:

Recommendation 1: Signage

Signage relating to coastal dangers and coastal safety appear to be inadequate. Revision and modification of current signage by the Bremer Bay community and the Shire of Jerramungup is recommended.

Recommendation 2: Public Education

A public awareness and education campaign identifying risks specific to the Bremer Bay coastal region and safety messages to manage these risks should be implemented.

Recommendation 3: Hazardous Locations

Doubtful Island has been identified as a high-risk location for rock fisherman. A risk and safety assessment of Doubtful Island should be undertaken and safety measures identified to manage the risks.

Recommendation 4: Safety Messages

Safety messages, resources or signage should include warning in regard to the identified environmental risks. Additionally, greater emphasis needs to be placed on appropriate human behaviour in these areas. Safety messages should ensure users of the area are aware of the risks, and the required precautions they can take to avoid these risks.

Recommendation 5: Community Action

Representatives from the community and the relevant local government authority should be involved in the development of a community action plan, with support from other interested community and industry groups. Strategies implemented will be most effective if implemented by the community itself.

Recommendation 6: Survey Utilisation

The Coastal Safety and Near-Drowning survey should be conducted in other coastal communities along the Western Australian coast, to provide better information relating to the prevalence of near-drowning incidents.

References

1. Gill L & Buttfield K (2004). *Albany Near Drowning Report*. Great Southern Population Health Unit, Albany, Western Australia.
2. Royal Life Saving Society – WA Branch (2003). *2002 State Drowning Report*. Perth, Western Australia.

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