



TESTING THE WATERS

With a world-class coastline and an array of beautiful natural bodies of water within our borders, swimming is a quintessential part of the Western Australian lifestyle. Taking a swim can be enjoyable and refreshing but concerningly, the number of drownings is on the rise. Are we fully aware of what we're jumping into?

by Jenna Oliver



Western Australians are spoilt with seemingly endless stretches of turquoise beaches, world-class surfing spots, natural pools and rugged gorges unrivalled anywhere in the world.

The allure of pristine water can sometimes mask its dangers and it's not just visitors to the State that find themselves in trouble—locals are quick to become complacent when it comes to the risks in their own 'backyard'.

While faced with a global pandemic, locals are exploring their island home with greater enthusiasm and more people are seeking out locations off the beaten track to escape crowds and seek new adventures. However, unfamiliar and unpatrolled locations present increased risk.

Royal Life Saving Society Australia's (RLSSA) *National Drowning Report 2021* revealed a 20 per cent spike in drowning deaths across the country in 2020–21 compared to the preceding year, with unfamiliar locations and exhaustion considered key factors.

CARRIED AWAY

Compared with the ten-year average, beach drownings in 2020 recorded an alarming 25 per cent increase (*National Drowning Report 2021, RLSSA*).

Rip currents are one of the greatest, and most common, hazards on Australian beaches. Being dragged away from the shoreline towards the ocean at speeds faster than an Olympic swimmer can



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(*National Drowning Report 2021, RLSSA*)

achieve means rips simply cannot be outswum.

Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) suggests the best way to survive a rip is to stay calm and either float with the current (it may return you to a shallow sandbank) or if possible, swim parallel to the beach to escape it.

Large waves and swells can also occur in many coastal areas, even on calm days, and waves can sweep over rocky headlands without warning, so you don't even have to be swimming to risk drowning. Incidents are continually reported regarding visitors fishing from rocks, boating or simply being too close to a ledge and being swept in by strong waves. At least a quarter of the fatal drowning deaths in WA in 2019–20 were people who weren't prepared to enter the water (*WA Drowning Report 2020, Royal Life Saving WA*).

DBCAs visitor risk management coordinator Michael Phillips has seen first-hand the effects of people taking risks around water.

“Take Torndirrup National Park in Albany as an example where, despite warning signs and other measures like anchor points that are in place for safety, some visitors continue to fish from the rocks without any safety precautions and unfortunately, most years, we record some sort of incident,” Michael said.

“You only have to stand on the bridge at The Gap for a few seconds to view the full force of nature along that coastline.”

“While rock fishing might be tempting, it's not worth putting your life on the line. Keep the sand between your toes and fish from the beach. If you choose to fish from the rocks make sure you are wearing a personal flotation device and watching the ocean at all times.”

SLSA's *Beachsafe* app provides comprehensive information on nearly every beach of the almost 3500 in WA. Nearly all beach areas within national parks are not patrolled by lifeguards so check this information, ensure you are familiar with it and do not underestimate the risks in coastal environments.

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Clockwise from left Enjoying Greens Pool, William Bay National Park. *Photo – Tiffany Taylor*; Snorkelling around Rottnest Island. *Photo – Tourism WA*; Kayaking in Lane Poole Reserve. *Photo – Shem Bisluk/DBCA*; Swimmers in Karijini National Park. *Photo – Rick Dawson*

Above Large swells can sweep over rocks without warning.
Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA



As important as it is to know the environment you're entering, knowing your personal limits and swimming well within your capabilities are major factors in staying safe.

As Australians, many of us are confident swimmers having grown up surrounded by water, so we can be quick to overestimate our swimming prowess. According to research by the RLSSA, males are overwhelmingly the greatest risk takers and are four times more likely to drown than females; a statistic that has remained consistent over many years. Adolescent and young adult males exhibit the most apparent risk-taking behaviour.

Drowning incidents don't always meet the same end. In 2019–20 alone, for every fatal drowning incident recorded in

WA, there were six non-fatal drowning incidents (*WA Drowning Report 2020, Royal Life Saving WA*). Non-fatal incidents can have life-long consequences and could significantly impact an individual's long-term health outcomes and quality of life.

In an effort to make our beaches safer and improve emergency response times, many popular and remote beaches from Geraldton to the South Australian border

have been fixed with Beach Emergency Numbers (BEN).

BEN is a coding system where unique numbers are installed on fixed signage at beach access points. Quoting the information on the nearest BEN sign when calling for emergency services will help first responders accurately pinpoint the location in the event of a shark sighting, attack or other beach emergency.



Above Fishing from the shores of Salmon Beach, D'Entrecasteaux National Park.
Photo – Cliff Winfield

Above right Turquoise Bay in Cape Range National Park is not patrolled. It's important to check information on site.

Right Example of a BEN sign.
Photos – Tiffany Taylor



Above Fern Pool in Karijini National Park.
Photo – Rick Dawson

Far left Turquoise Bay in Cape Range National Park.
Photo – Livlodge Creative/Tourism WA

Left Coastline of D’Entrecasteaux National Park.
Photo – Cliff Winfield

Five top tips for swimming

1. Know your capabilities and your limits, and swim within them.
2. Check for and adhere to warning signs.
3. Never swim alone.
4. Enter the water slowly and feet first.
5. If someone gets into trouble, throw them something that floats and seek help—don’t put yourself in danger too.



a personal locator beacon (PLB) should be used to call for help instead of a mobile phone.

LOOKING INWARD

All bodies of water are far from equal, and each aquatic environment has its own particular way of behaving. It pays to become acquainted with the place you plan to swim.

Most inland waterways are made up of fresh water, defined as water that has a low salt concentration of less than one per cent. This makes it less dense and lighter than saltwater and therefore makes objects in it—including swimmers—less buoyant.

Some people get into trouble around water and don’t have the swimming ability or physical fitness to get themselves out of

dangerous situations. Even though inland waterways look inviting, especially when the surface is calm, they can pose hidden dangers such as strong undercurrents, underwater obstacles and unstable or deep-seated riverbeds.

On a national scale, rivers and creeks have consistently topped the list as the deadliest locations for drownings and in 2020–21 they accounted for 75 deaths across Australia (*National Drowning Report 2021, RLSSA*). Previous reports indicate this is due to the incidents occurring in isolated environments with changeable conditions and geographical remoteness. Of the 75 reported deaths, 69 per cent were male.

Risk-taking behaviour involving poor decision-making such as alcohol consumption and not wearing a lifejacket



While there are plans to extend the program north to Kununurra, where there are currently no BEN signs, using the free *Emergency+* app to contact emergency services will automatically give your GPS coordinates to first responders. If there is no reception at the location, the app will still give the coordinates; however,



“...if you’re in a gorge and it starts raining, the message is simple—leave immediately.”

can also increase the risk of drowning. Inland waterways are not patrolled by lifeguards and there may be no-one else around to assist, so it’s important never to swim alone. If someone gets into trouble, throw them something that floats and seek help—don’t put yourself in danger too.

WHEN THINGS HEAT UP

Karijini National Park is famed for its beautiful gorges and swimming holes, which are a major drawcard for tourists wanting to cool off from the hot Pilbara weather.

However, it’s not common knowledge that gorges may experience temperature extremes often up to 10 degrees higher, or significantly lower if shaded by steep walls. When swimming, the water can be a lot colder than it appears and, in some circumstances, can cause hypothermia, hyperventilation, shock and lack of mobility.

Gorges are also prone to sudden changes in conditions where you can

experience wind gusts, torrents or flash floods following heavy rainfall. Read surrounding warning signs before entering.

“Basically, if you’re in a gorge and it starts raining, the message is simple—leave immediately,” Michael said.

If travelling further north from Karijini, it’s important to note that crocodiles can be found in freshwater rivers and billabongs in the Kimberley up to 200 kilometres from the coast. Heed all risk warning signs. However, just because a sign isn’t there doesn’t mean crocodiles aren’t present.

If you’re unsure which parks are suitable for swimming, head to the Parks and Wildlife Service website (exploreparks.dbca.wa.gov.au). Park pages indicate whether you can swim in waterways and list places you can safely access. Before you go, always check for park alerts at alerts.dbca.wa.gov.au so you can safely visit and enjoy WA’s stunning parks and reserves.

Top left Hidden dangers of inland waters.
Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA

Above left Waterskiing on Lake Kepwari. Waterskiing is a high-risk activity on inland waters.

Above Canoeing in freshwater in a gorge at Kalbarri National Park.
Photos – DBCA

Below Torndirrup National Park.
Photo – Cliff Winfield



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Editor’s note: As this article was being produced, an incident occurred at Mount Frankland National Park that sadly resulted in the loss of a life. The LANDSCOPE team sends our condolences to the family and urges anyone visiting Fernhook Falls to take the utmost caution, especially around Deep River where the water can be fast flowing.