



Surf lifesaving: *Surf Life Saving Australia*

“As Australia’s population demographic becomes increasingly multicultural so must our approach to the recruitment, retention and awards we offer Australians who volunteer to become lifesavers”.¹

For nearly one hundred years, Australia’s trained surf lifesavers have been providing ‘a safe beach and aquatic environment throughout Australia’². In that time, they have rescued more than 500,000 people and provided first aid to a million others.

A surf lifesaver is a person who demonstrates the character, skill and service that epitomises the best of the Australian culture and epitomises the strength and character of the Australian way of life.³

SLSA organisation

Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) is a nation-wide organisation, recognised by the Australian Sports Commission, with more than 113,000 members, of all ages, in 303 surf life saving clubs around the Australian coastline.⁴ It is made up of a national body and state and territory surf lifesaving bodies. Some state branches – SLSNSW and SLSQ also have regional branches (11 in New South Wales and six in Queensland) that assist in coordinating the large number of surf clubs across the country. They are a source of volunteers, volunteer beach patrols, junior education (nippers), surf sports competitions and fundraising.

In addition, professional SLSA lifeguards are outsourced to many local councils, national parks and resorts. There are 520 SLSA lifeguards who service 200 beaches, across the country. SLSA operates around 70 per cent of total lifeguard services through an entity called Australian Lifeguard Services. SLSA lifeguards differ from surf lifesavers as they are full-time employees of the local government or a private organisation.⁵

Australia’s surf lifesavers also engage in regular competition. These competitions, or surf carnivals, are held at club, regional, state, national and international levels.

Youth and surf lifesaving

As well as providing surf rescue services around the country, SLSA is also a significant provider of education services. 40,000 nippers learn basic surf safety skills and trained surf lifesavers visit schools throughout Australia. *Surf Survival*, *Surf Awareness*, *Surf Smart* and *Surf Safety* are programs that teach students basic surf survival and rescue skills and an understanding of the surf environment.

SLSA plays a key role in the community in providing a safe and supportive environment in which young people can grow and develop into young adults. With 50,000 members (over half of SLSA's membership) under the age of 18, they are critical to all aspects of surf lifesaving. But diversity of youth membership from different multicultural backgrounds is recognised as a real issue for surf lifesaving and its future growth.

A cultural diversity workshop titled *'We are one but we are many'* was held as part of the 2006 SLSA National Leadership Camp. Feedback from the workshop suggested that 'we need to find out why other cultures are interested in surf lifesaving and what our organisation can do to accommodate their needs and wants'.⁶

SLSA has identified cultural issues that could impact on surf lifesaving involvement, including dress, gender, alcohol, prayer, diet and physical competency.

It was resolved that to remain relevant SLSA needs to give the whole community a sense of ownership of the surf life saving movement and surf clubs need to appeal to all members of the community.

Education is one part of this – as such, there are a range of simple beach safety tips on SLSA's website in the top 10 community languages spoken in Australia, including: Italian, Greek, Simplified Chinese, Arabic, Vietnamese, Traditional Chinese, Spanish, Tagalog (Filipino), German and Macedonian. But participation is another crucial element.

Inclusive membership



SLSA has adopted an inclusive policy where membership is open to anybody regardless of age, race, religion or sex. SLSA believes that there is a place for everyone in surf lifesaving – if someone is unable to perform the duties of an active surf lifesaver, then perhaps they can assist in the administration, communications or fundraising areas.

In a 2003 research paper, the Productivity Commission noted that:

*'many traditional community organisations – including trade unions, the mainstream churches, scouts and guides, service clubs such as APEX and Lions, and the Country Women's Association – had experienced significant declines in memberships over the period from the 1960s to the 1990s. ABS surveys suggest that the level of participation in voluntary groups declined significantly between the early 1980s and the mid 1990s.'*⁷

In contrast, SLSA has experienced the opposite trend in membership. Between 1961 and 1999, SLSA experienced a 350 per cent growth in memberships and between 1978 and 1999, a 38 per cent growth in volunteers. In the last five years SLSA has had growth of 12.7 per cent in memberships and 29.4 per cent in volunteer surf lifesavers.⁸

While SLSA is committed to a process of inclusiveness, which provides all Australians with an opportunity to experience some form of surf lifesaving activity, they understand that there are perceived barriers to participation. As such, engagement of broader community groups is one of the core community goals, which forms part of SLSA's *Future Directions 2004–2010* strategy

They also understand that their membership growth has been limited to a predominantly white Anglo-Australian demographic and that they need to target other ethnic communities to participate in life saving, which represent a significant portion of the Australian population.

'It is important that there is more ethnic participation in order to sustain member numbers and be able to serve the Australian population effectively. The situation will only become more critical as Australia continues to increase its cultural diversity.'⁹

'Sound the Siren' report

In 2000, SLSA commissioned a research report into the changing face of SLSA called '*Sound the Siren*' to address why the range of nationalities that make up their total membership was not comparable with the overall population of Australia.

The initial brief included both ethnic and Indigenous Australians, however Big Picture Consulting Group (who produced the report) subsequently recognised that these are two distinct groups which each require comprehensive research and strategic planning. As a result, due to the limits of the project the focus was on ethnic Australians.

The report looked at: barriers to ethnic Australians joining surf lifesaving clubs; attitudes of ethnic Australians to volunteerism and how these affect SLSA; and strategies to boost ethnic membership.

Research findings to the beach culture survey from the report concluded that the majority of beach goers are familiar with the SLSA and surf clubs and are aware of their duties or roles. Findings also indicated that Australians of European, Middle Eastern and Rest of the World backgrounds actively participate in volunteering, sporting and leisure activities on a regular basis. Australians of an Asian background also have a high rate of participation in local volunteering activities; however 'they do not exhibit strong swimming skills or a strong beach going culture adopted by other segments of society'.¹⁰

Half of the participants in the report's major ethnic population survey agreed that the surf clubs lack multicultural membership. The top three barriers to joining a surf club were identified as lack of time, not having friends in the organisation and physical restrictions (low level of swimming ability).

The report recommended that SLSA target ethnic Australians who: have a high level of sporting participation; have an average surf swimming ability; and live no more than 30 minutes from a surf club. It was also recommended that Australians with an Asian background should be part of a longer-term strategy to address low levels of beach going and poor swimming ability.¹¹



Increasing social networks – the full value of surf lifesaving

A report to Surf Life Saving Limited by The Allen Consulting Group in October 2005 titled '*Valuing an Australian Icon: The Economic and Social Contribution of Surf Life Saving in Australia*' estimated the core dollar value of surf lifesavers at \$1.4 billion in 2003–04.¹²

But measuring the value of volunteer surf lifesavers is not restricted to the cost of an employee, the value of a life saved, or the value of an injury avoided. To understand the full value of surf lifesaving in Australia it is important to analyse the wider impacts that providing such a service has on the community.

Surf life saving increases 'social capital'. This is an umbrella term used to describe the institutions, relationships, attitudes and values that govern interactions among people

and contributes to economic and social development.¹³ Broadly speaking social capital is comprised of three components – norms, networks and trust. Surf lifesaving contributes to all three of these, particularly by fostering ‘a strong and growing network, which links members and volunteers in a common purpose and so instils a sense of belonging’.¹⁴

While social capital is hard to quantify, its benefits are very real and very significant, and should not be forgotten when identifying the value of surf lifesaving and its role and effect in community building.

‘On the Same Wave’ project



‘On the Same Wave’ is a partnership between the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Surf Life Saving Australia and Sutherland Shire Council. The program will include communities and surf clubs across Australia with an initial focus on NSW.

Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Andrew Robb said: “the project would focus mainly on young people aged 15–25 – but also involve primary and secondary school students initially from southern and western Sydney”.¹⁵

‘On the Same Wave’ aims to provide support to young Australians of all backgrounds, particularly young Australians of Middle Eastern background, to engage in Surf Life Saving around Australia. The partnership aims to achieve greater harmony between all beach users and promote a culture that ‘the beach is there to share’. It also aims to increase Surf Life Saving’s openness and responsiveness to cultural diversity and increase diversity within surf lifesaving clubs.

This project seeks to do this through:

- (a) working with community leaders from identified target communities, including the Middle Eastern communities in Sydney;
- (b) developing and implementing an extensive engagement strategy for these target communities;
- (c) enhancing the awareness of the beach amongst the Australian multicultural community;
- (d) encouraging diverse membership of volunteer surf life saving clubs amongst target communities; and
- (e) developing support for retention of diverse membership in clubs.

The project will comprise a number of pilots in Sydney which will be developed further through the establishment of a NSW and national delivery platform.

The President of Surf Life Saving Australia, Ron Rankin, said “the Living in Harmony partnership would involve bronze medallion and surf club membership programs, surf safety and survival courses and cardiopulmonary resuscitation training for adults”.¹⁶

It would also enlist help from other community groups to show young people the volunteer and career opportunities available through sporting and other networks.

“The program will begin by consulting representatives from community groups to gain input and support. This will include community meetings, surveys in specified areas and focus groups,” Mr Rankin said.¹⁷

The schools’ element of the project would feature half hour, half day and multi-week education programs to be delivered in the classroom and on the beach.

SLSA has appointed a National Diversity Manager and State Diversity Manager who will be joined by two project development officers to assist with the continued engagement of CALD communities and the ongoing surf education and training required. They will oversee the national and state programs to attract youth from diverse backgrounds to the beach lifestyle and attempt to repair the cultural divisions exposed by the December 2005 riots at Cronulla beach in Sydney.

Two overarching Reference Groups will provide feedback, and will include representatives from stakeholder groups:

- a National Reference Group, and
- a Local Reference Group, which includes representatives of particular demographic stakeholders (eg. gender, youth and aged ethnic community groups).

Drawing on a federal grant of \$600,000 in its first year (2006), the initial program will run to 2009.

Cultural diversity in surf lifesaving – the Scarborough SLSC (WA)

Scarboro SLSC organized a day at the beach for Perth Modern School – an Intensive Language Centre school for migrants and refugees – in 2001-02. From this start, a unique program developed.

Through a grant of \$30,000 over two years from the Foundation for Young Australians, Scarborough SLSC was able to implement a range of additional programs, starting with presentation at Perth Modern School and providing details for parents of potential members on the location, timing and activities.

In October 2001, 35 students aged 13-17 from a dozen nationalities (including Vietnam, Korea, Iran, Sudan and Yugoslavia) who had never been to the beach before took to the water at Scarborough beach. It was a challenging but rewarding day for the surf lifesavers as the students entered the water holding hands with the club members – all requiring one-on-one supervision. Organiser Marshall Walker was impressed by what he saw: “they can’t swim, but boy can they run”.¹⁸

The club provided bus passes for the students to reach the beach, equipment, swimming lessons in summer, fun nights and training towards awards such as basic resuscitation. At the end of the first year everyone had enjoyed the program although no-one had qualified for surf lifesaving awards and few were able to swim. While the new members were accepted by the club they were still very dependent on the committed few.



Gradually this changed. By the end of the second year there were club competitors including: Cheng the Chinese ironman and Soroush the Iranian board paddler. There were also 13 basic resuscitation certificate holders, seven bronze medallion holders and a range of competent swimmers.

Ocean Grove SLSC and Sandridge SLSC, both in Victoria, have since established similar programs.

'Lifesaving for Everyone' program – Sandridge Life Saving Club (VIC)

Sandridge Life Saving Club's approach to cultural outreach has in the past been mostly informal, however more recently, the club has introduced a more targeted lifesaving program for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities.

VicHealth and the Department for Victorian Communities both contributed funding for the 'Lifesaving for Everyone' program, which seeks to inclusively recruit and train new members who may not have otherwise felt comfortable to join a club.

The program, though in its infancy, caters for participants with different expectations by dividing them into smaller focus groups of like minded individuals. There are three focus groups: those who want to learn to use the beach safely; those who want to be lifesavers, and; those who want to gain a first aid qualification. Each group sets their own goals at the beginning of the program, outlines their own rules and determines their level of financial contribution to the club.

Lunch and transport to and from the club are provided, along with uniforms and training resources.

The CALD Lifesaving project was developed by Executive Officer of Sandridge Life Saving Club, Ellie Pietsch, who describes the program as "an opportunity for people from all backgrounds and abilities to connect with their community, participate in a healthy and vital service and improve their understanding of safety and first aid all under the auspice of a quintessentially iconic Australian activity".¹⁹



Harmony Day projects

Surf Life Saving Australia joined forces with Harmony Day in 2001 to tell all sectors of the community that the organisation values diversity. Each year, clubs have Harmony Day events and SLSA distributes posters and brochures.

In 2006, the SLSA National Championships on the Gold Coast had a Harmony Day theme with the following activities:

- an Australian Citizenship ceremony on the beach;
- Harmony Day was referred to in the official program;



- event organisers and presenters wore the Harmony Day ribbon;
- displaying the Harmony Day Surf Life Saving feathers, and
- the 2006 Patrol Award was sponsored and presented by a Harmony Day official representative.

Indigenous participation in surf lifesaving

While there are no accurate figures on Indigenous participation in Surf Life saving, it is clear that there are many Indigenous members in the 303 surf lifesaving clubs around Australia, particularly in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

SLSA and state bodies have a number of initiatives to increase Indigenous participation in surf lifesaving and to develop the skills of Indigenous surf sports athletes.

Telstra Beach to Bush Program

This program takes the message of surf safety throughout Australia to those school-aged students who do not live close to a surf environment.

Classroom-based surf safety lessons are delivered by facilitators in an attempt to increase awareness of the risks associated with the surf and local waterways, as well as ways to minimise these risks.

From September to December 2005, more than 70 trained surf lifesavers travelled throughout rural and regional Australia, introducing the basics of beach and aquatic safety to approximately 40,000 primary school children aged between seven and 12 years, as part of the 2005 Telstra Beach to Bush program. The program also visited Indigenous communities and remote areas with Indigenous participants.

Indigenous Sporting Development Program

Queensland

Surf Life Saving Queensland (SLSQ) was instrumental in fostering surf lifesaving in the Torres Strait Region. The region boasts an Olympic pool, well structured existing sporting structures and a wealth of previous members of Surf Life Saving Australia. A trip to the Island in 2003 by senior SLSQ Surf Sport Management led to an application for a 'Living in Harmony' grant for further development in the area. The successful application helped promote the profile of the sport in the Torres Region and allowed Torres teams to travel to the North Queensland Branch Lifesaving Championships and the Northern Australian Lifesaving Championships.

The experiment was well received by the Torres Region, North Queensland Lifesavers and SLSQ. Training has continued on Thursday Island by members of the association who linked with Sister Club, Ellis Beach SLSC.

The 2004–2005 program saw two SLSA assessors travel to Thursday Island to assess candidates in the Bronze Medallion and Surf Rescue Certificates and teach Surf Sport Training techniques.

A development squad of eight Indigenous Surf Sports athletes (four male, four female), who were already members of SLSQ affiliated clubs, were selected for a SLSQ Indigenous Surf Sports Development Squad. The squad attended an intensive two-day team development camp at Thursday Island in March 2005.

Northern Territory

The NT Program attracted volunteers to undertake training to attain SLSA's Bronze Medallion and Certificate Two in Public Safety (Aquatic Rescue) and increase the number of local Indigenous youth competing in Surf Life Saving competition. During the training, participants developed surf life saving competition skills and fitness to enhance their ability to perform aquatic rescue activities.

NSW

Surf Life Saving New South Wales (SLSNSW) conducted an Indigenous Sports Program (ISP) during Summer 2003–2004. This program was a community-based program designed to induct Indigenous people into the organisation. As this program was not fully completed during Summer 2003–2004 it tied over the next Summer and was completed by February 2005.

The ISP events (including swim, board, sprint and flags) were held at three SLSNSW Premiership Carnivals. The SLSNSW Indigenous Surf Sports Development Squad, comprising eight Indigenous Surf Sports athletes (four male, four female), were selected on their participation at these events.

The squad attended an intensive two-day team development camp at the Sydney Academy of Sport, Narrabeen, in March 2005 and a three-day development camp in Darwin ahead of competing at the Arafura Games.

The long term outcomes of all these programs were achieved. That is: to boost the overall number of Indigenous members within Surf Life Saving; increase retention of Indigenous surf sports athletes and lift the profile of achievements of Indigenous Surf Life Saving members.

Member Safety and Wellbeing Policy

Surf Life Saving Australia has a Member Safety and Wellbeing Policy which aims to ensure its core values, good reputation and positive behaviours and attitudes are maintained. It assists in ensuring that every person involved in surf life saving is treated with respect and dignity, in a safe and supportive environment. This policy also ensures that everyone involved in Surf Life Saving is aware of his or her legal and ethical rights and responsibilities.

This is the national policy for surf lifesaving and is implemented by SLSA through its state centres, branches and surf lifesaving clubs.

The policy has attachments which provide the procedures that support SLSA's commitment to eliminating discrimination, harassment, child abuse and other forms of inappropriate behaviour. As part of this commitment, SLSA will take disciplinary action against any person or organisation bound by this policy if they breach it.

The policy features a code of conduct that requires every individual and organisation to 'respect the rights, dignity and worth of others'²⁰. It also has a rights and responsibilities matrix which states that members have a right to 'be protected from abuse, discrimination or

harassment by other members or outside sources' and have responsibility for 'co-operating in providing a discrimination, child abuse and harassment free SLSA environment'.²¹

Equity, Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Policy

The aim of SLSA's equity policy is to promote an environment in which all individuals are treated with respect and dignity. The issues of social justice, equal opportunity, discrimination and harassment are promoted at club, branch, state and national levels.

SLSA believes:

- i. **Social justice** is about ensuring all people – whether members of SLSA or the community – receive a “fair go”.
- ii. **Equal opportunity** is about ensuring every person is treated the same and has a similar chance to participate or receive SLSA services and products. Equal opportunity strategies also permit the introduction of special initiatives to ensure participation or receipt of SLSA services and/or products.
- iii. SLSA views any detrimental form of **discrimination** as serious and something that must be eliminated.
- iv. **Harassment** is offensive, humiliating and intimidating and is counter-productive conduct in the SLSA environment, and may occur in relation to a person's sex, race, religion, age, disability, pregnancy, marital status and sexual preference.²²

SLSA state that they will treat all complaints of discrimination and harassment seriously, and will ensure complaints are dealt with promptly, impartially, and confidentially. If discrimination or harassment are found to have taken place, action will be taken.

Member Safety and Wellbeing Officer (MSWO)

A Member Safety and Wellbeing Officer is a person trained to be the first point of contact for a person reporting a complaint under, or a breach of, the Member Safety and Wellbeing Policy. The MSWO provides confidential information and support to the person alleging harassment or a breach of the policy. They also operate as a sounding board while the complainant decides what action they want to take. The MSWO may accompany the complainant in anything they decide to do, if he or she feels that it is appropriate and they are happy to do it.

Complaints procedure

SLSA aims to provide an easy to use, confidential and trustworthy procedure for complaints, based on the principles of natural justice. Any person may report a complaint about a person/s or organisation bound by their policy if they reasonably believe that a person/s or SLSA has breached this policy. A complaint should be reported to the appointed official of the relevant surf lifesaving authority in accordance with this policy.

A complaint may be reported as an informal or formal complaint. The complainant decides whether the complaint will be dealt with informally or formally, unless the appointed official of the relevant surf lifesaving authority considers that the complaint falls outside the parameters of this policy and would be better dealt with another way.

Endnotes

- ¹ Letter from Robert Barnes, National Development Manager (October 2000) in *Sound the Siren: Exploring the changing face of Surf Life Saving Australia*, report by Big Picture 2000.
- ² Surf Life Saving Australia 2004, *A New Vision for Surf Lifesaving: 2004 Surf Life Saving Australia Annual Report*, Sydney, p. 1.
- ³ SLSA website www.slsa.com.au.
- ⁴ SLSA website at www.slsa.com.au.
- ⁵ SLSA website at www.slsa.com.au.
- ⁶ 2006 SLSA National Leadership Camp feedback survey.
- ⁷ *Productivity Commission Report*. P30.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* p23.
- ⁹ *Sound the Siren: Exploring the changing face of Surf Life Saving Australia*, report by Big Picture Consulting Group 2000. p12.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* p5.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* p6.
- ¹² *Valuing an Australian Icon: The Economic and Social Contribution of Surf Life Saving in Australia* October 2005, Report to Surf Life Saving Limited. The Allen Consulting Group. P8.
- ¹³ Productivity Commission 2003, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-11.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* p7.
- ¹⁵ The Hon. Andrew Robb AO MP, 'Harmony project for Australian Beaches' media release, 10 March 2006.
- ¹⁶ The Hon. Andrew Robb AO MP, 'Harmony project for Australian Beaches' media release, 10 March 2006.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Cultural diversity and SLSA – Scarborough SLSC – A case study powerpoint.
- ¹⁹ <http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/attachments/o13633.pdf>.
- ²⁰ SLSA Member Safety & Wellbeing Policy Statement. Oct 2005. p2.
- ²¹ *Ibid.* p3.
- ²² *Ibid.* p7.