



Exploring changes to coastal participation and environmental impacts since COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

Coastal tourism dominates the Australian tourism market with coastal areas providing access to “blue spaces” positively linked to health and wellbeing. Coastal locations are attractive destinations and coastal areas are also important places for domestic recreation and sport. Environmental impacts of tourism and recreation are complex and often linked to visitor numbers. Associated environmental pressures include pollution, degradation, natural habitat loss, erosion, and increased demands on local resources and infrastructure. Recently the unprecedented combination of bushfires and a global pandemic have changed tourism and recreation profiles in Australia. Anecdotally, different working arrangements and restrictions placed on many Australian communities, are thought to have altered behaviour and coastal participation. Behavioural changes may include how coastal environments are used or which locations have been visited. This paper explores behaviour changes by Australian adults in relation to coastal visitation and participation in popular coastal activities. Popular coastal attractions for residents and tourists are to participate in recreational activities including swimming/wading, boating, fishing (land-based and rock), surfing, snorkelling, scuba diving and non-powered watercraft (e.g. kayak, canoe, paddle boarding, wind surfing). This may help to identify areas in need of enhanced service delivery.

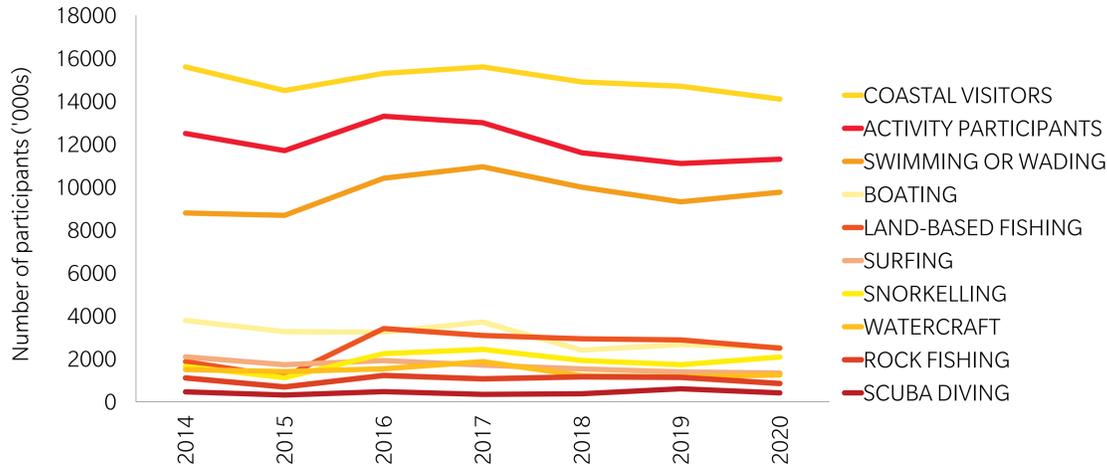


Fig. 1 Coastal visitation and activity participation over time for Australian adults aged 16 years and above.

METHODS

National Coastal Safety Survey (NCSS)

The NCSS is conducted in April each year and collected information about coastal visitation, activity participation, community swimming ability, behaviours and attitudes to coastal safety. The survey is conducted annually by Newspoll Market Research and OmniPoll and is run online each April among a national sample Australian adults aged 16 and older.

To reflect the population distribution, results were post-weighted (by age, gender, geographic strata and education) and projected to Australian Bureau of Statistics data. The study is carried out in compliance with ISO20252 - Market, Social and Opinion Research.

RESULTS

Recent surveys (NCSS2014-20) reported more than 14 million Australian adults visit the coast each year and at least 11 million participants in coastal activities annually (Fig. 1), with over 500 million individual visitations to the coast by Australian adults estimated in 2019/20 financial year alone. Participation levels across popular coastal activities for Australian adults (16 years and over) in these activities have remained consistent (Fig 1).

However, since the onset of COVID-19 in Australia, there have been changes to how often Australians have visited the coast and participated in their favourite coastal activities compared to previous years (Fig 2). Thirty-eight per cent reported visiting the coast less, with most (60%) attributing this change to COVID-19 movement restrictions, followed by unfavourable weather (11%; Fig. 2).

Sixteen per cent reported visiting the coast more than previous years, reporting a move closer to the coast (19%) and travel being restricted to within Australia (15%) as the dominant reasons (Fig. 2). Forty-one per cent of Australian adults reported their coastal visitation to be about the same as last year (Fig. 2).

Participation changes differed for each coastal activity. Most activities were participated in less than previous years (Fig. 2), except for surfing. Thirty-five per cent of surfers generally went surfing more than in previous years (35%), compared with most rock fishers (43%), swimmers (38%), snorkellers and scuba divers (37% each) participating less in their favourite coastal activity (Fig. 2).

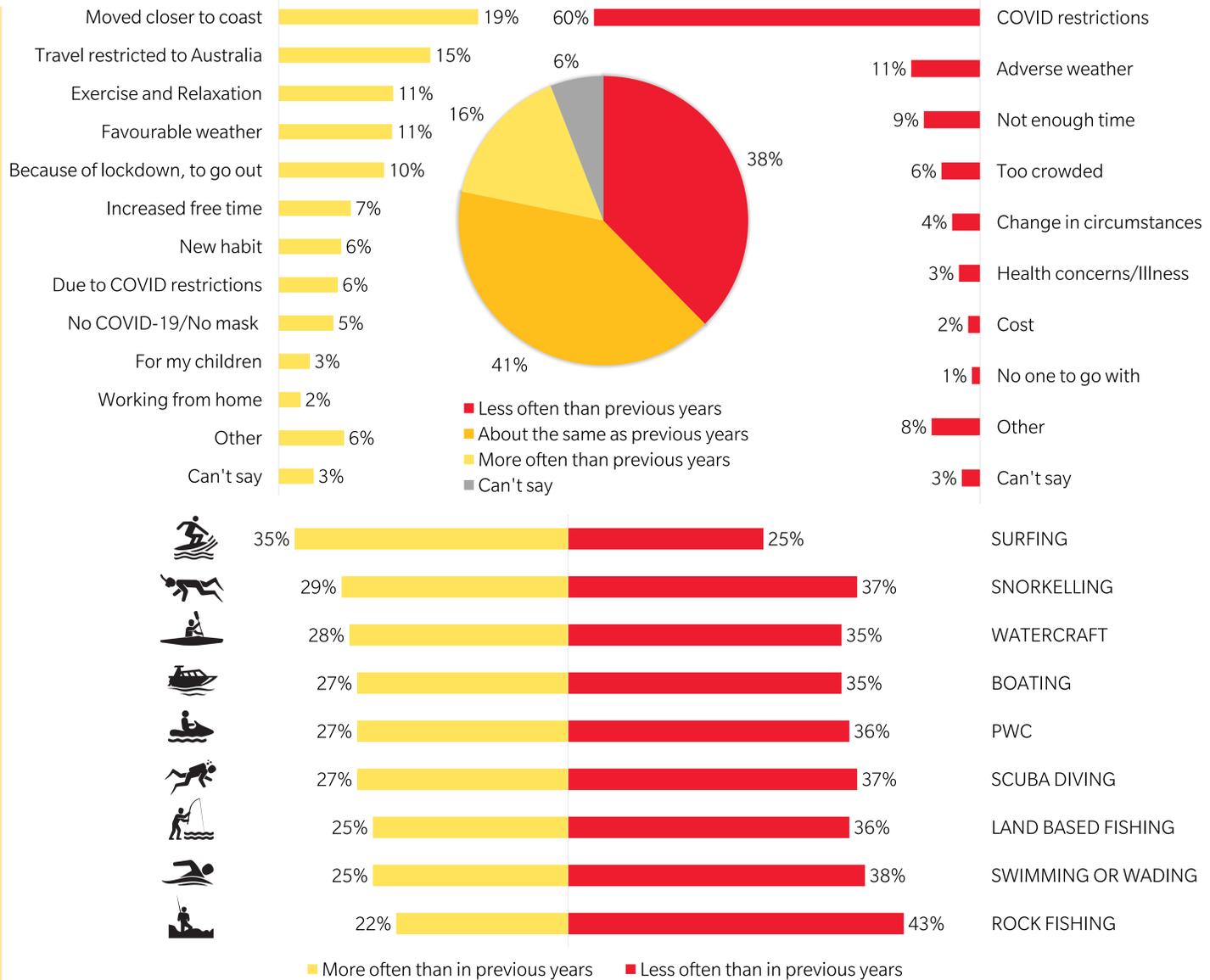


Fig. 2 Coastal visitation and activity participation 2021 compared to previous years. Red is less than in previous years, while yellow is more.

IMPLICATIONS

Coastal visitation and participation levels have remained consistent (Fig.1), which could suggest a similar pattern for associated pressures on the environment due to these activities. This is supported with the finding that most coastal activity participants reported less participation, especially those which may be considered to involve an element of environmental stress (e.g. rock fishing and boating). This results suggests that environmental stressors relating to these activities will be lower than usual.

Surfing is the exception – with surfers participating more than in previous years (Fig. 2), which may be linked to more flexible working arrangements and reported surfboard shortages. This results highlights the potential need for increased surfer safety at popular surfing locations in response to the increased participation and exposure to risk. This finding may warrant further investigation in relation to the recent spike of shark attacks recorded around Australia.

How behavioural changes influence coastal environment pressures remains to be seen, although will be dependent on the severity and longevity of their impacts. Recent evaluations of environmental responses to sudden reductions in anthropogenic stressors (i.e. pollution, noise, activities) at coastal beaches reported positive ecosystem changes with increased dune vegetation, higher densities of flora and fauna, and reductions in pollution and noise. These results highlight the resilience of coastal ecosystems and suggest that through careful management and increased awareness, coastal environments can be restored relatively quickly.