



# Lives on the line : Rock fishing drowning deaths in Australia

## Mr Shane Daw ESM and Dr Jaz Lawes



### What's the problem?

Rock fishing is a popular coastal activity and has been dubbed Australia's most dangerous sport. Consistently ranked as the third highest cause of coastal drowning deaths, rock fishing is a significant focus for coastal safety research initiatives in Australia.

### METHODS

#### SLSA's National Fatality Database

The National Fatality Database collates information on all deaths that have occurred around the Australian coast since July 1<sup>st</sup> 2004. The primary data source is the National Coronial Information System (NCIS) is an electronic database of deaths notified to Australian and New Zealand Coroners for which the Department of Justice and Community Safety is the source organisation of the data. Data on decedent and proximate circumstances were collated from the NCIS (including coroner's findings, police narrative of circumstances, autopsy and toxicology reports), media reports and Surf Life Saving Australia's SurfGuard Incident Report Database.

#### National Coastal Safety Survey (NCSS)

The NCSS is conducted in April each year and collected information about community swimming ability, behaviours and attitudes to coastal safety. The survey is conducted annually by Newspoll Market Research and OmniPoll and is run online over a four-day period each April among a national sample of approximately 1,600 respondents 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.



### Profile and behaviours of Australian Rock Fishers

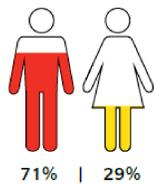
**1.1 MILLION**  
ROCK FISHERS 2019



**500,000**  
FREQUENT ROCK FISHERS  
(AT LEAST ONCE A MONTH)

**190**  
HOURS PER YEAR  
FOR FREQUENT ROCK FISHERS

**7%**  
AUSTRALIANS PARTICIPATE IN ROCK FISHING



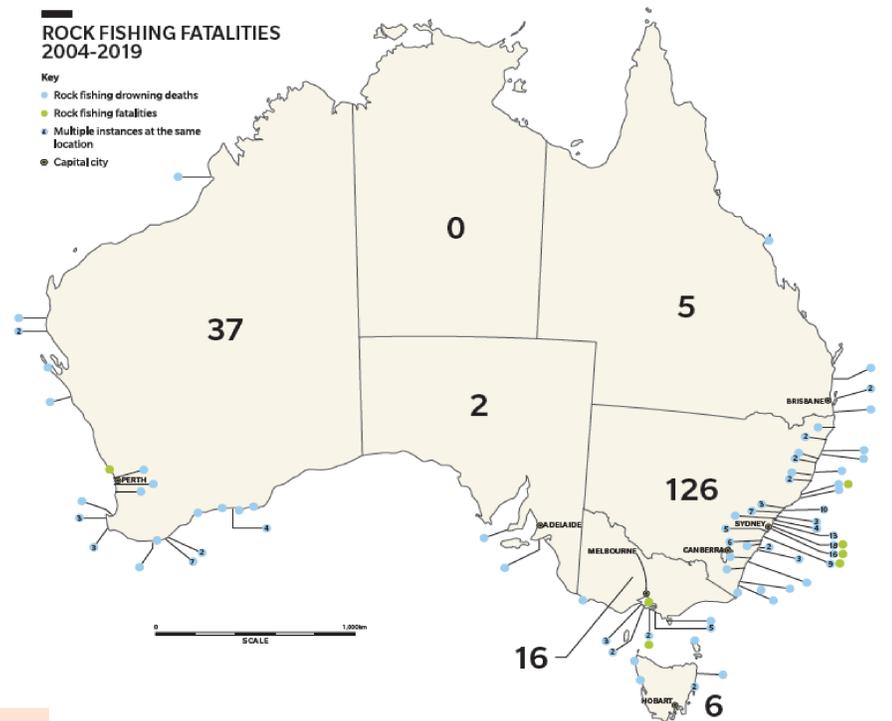
**23%**  
ROCK FISHERS ARE 16-34 YEARS OF AGE

**25%**  
ROCK FISHERS ARE WEAK SWIMMERS OR UNABLE TO SWIM IN THE OCEAN



**48%**  
ALWAYS GO FISHING WITH AT LEAST ONE OTHER PERSON

**33%**  
NEVER CARRY EPIRB, MOBILE PHONE OR RADIO FOR EMERGENCIES

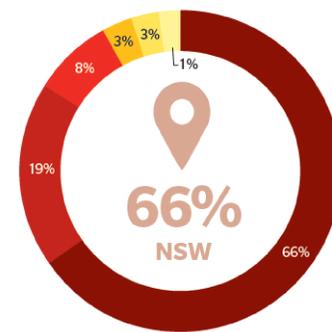


### PROFILING ROCK FISHERS

In 2019, there were 1.1 million rock fishers (7% of Australian adults 16+), 500,000 of who go fishing frequently (at least once a month) and spend approximately 190 hours rock fishing each year. The majority (71%) are male, and aged between 16-34 years of age (23%). A quarter (25%) are not able to swim or are weak swimmers in the ocean, yet only 21% always wear a lifejacket and 41% *never* wear one. One in three (33%) never carry and EPIRB, mobile phone or radio in case of an emergency, but 48% always go with at least one other person.

### EPIDEMIOLOGY OF ROCK FISHING FATALITIES

Between 1<sup>st</sup> July 2004 and 30<sup>th</sup> June 2019, there were 185 rock fishing drowning deaths and 7 non-drowning related fatalities recorded nationally. Two-thirds (n=126, 66%) occurred in NSW. Rock fishing decedents are predominantly male (n=182, 95%), aged between 40-59 years old (n=99, 51%) and two-thirds (65%) were fishing with friends or family. Waves and slippery surfaces are prevalent causal factors in rock fishing deaths, with 77% washed off by waves, but 83% (n=159) of fisher decedents were not wearing lifejackets. But this could be much higher with 13% remaining unknown.



**71%**  
ROCK FISHERS WERE WASHED OFF BY WAVES

**95%**  
MALE

**83%**  
NO LIFEJACKET

**65%**  
FISHING WITH FRIENDS OR FAMILY

### Key influencers



### DISCUSSION

The extensive rocky coastlines of NSW, WA and VIC, combined with frequent hazardous surf conditions, create high-risk environments for fishers. Research exposed the concept of 'freak waves' as a myth and has identified a strong understanding of wave periods is necessary to reduce risks of drowning. Rock fishers have a strong community identity and can be a challenging group to reach with traditional safety messaging approaches. Social research has identified key influencers of rock fishers who are central to effective communication of safety messages and preventative strategies.

In response to the high numbers of drowning deaths a coronial inquest (2015) recommended mandatory and enforced lifejacket usage. Compulsory lifejacket usage has been trialled within high risk local government areas in NSW and WA and provides an excellent example of multisectoral collaboration between government and emergency service providers. In NSW, the Rock Fishing Safety Act 2016 was passed to support this recommendation. These preventative measures have initially appeared to be effective (despite recent spikes) although the true impact will need to be monitored over time. Surf Life Saving Australia are committed to continually strive for greater uptake of safe fishing practices and towards zero drownings.

