

“Don’t get sucked in by the rip!” Beach Safety Campaign

Nearly 60 people drown at Australian beaches every year (1), and up to 600 people are hospitalised as a result of near drowning (2). Rips are one of the greatest physical dangers to swimmers at the beach, with 89% of rescues on NSW beaches occurring in rips (3).

Rip currents are strong currents that take water back out to sea. Rips are dangerous because they can be powerful and can sweep even the strongest swimmer a long way from the shore very quickly- often resulting in panic and fatigue. Rips often occupy deeper channels between sandbars, so wave breaking is reduced and the water appears calm.

We have developed a campaign to improve beach safety. This campaign is based on the results of a survey we conducted last Easter on beaches in Pacific Palms and Mollymook.

We asked 175 males and 200 females questions about beach safety knowledge and behaviour.

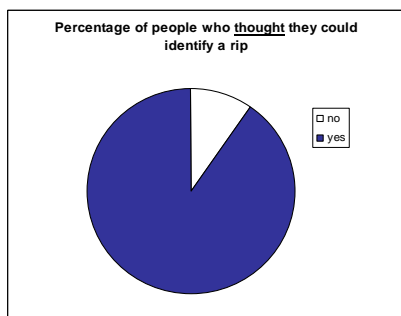
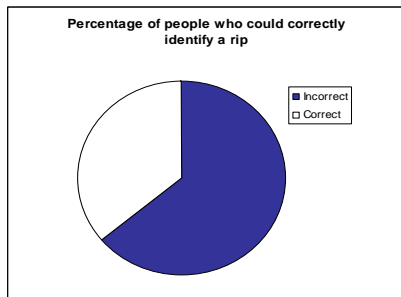
We found that only 40% of people could confidently identify a rip in a picture- even though 80% thought that they could.

Even if you think you know what a rip looks like, there is a good chance you don’t.



We showed people a photo like this and asked them where they would swim. Nearly half of these people pointed straight at the rip! They explained that they would swim here because it looked calm. People who could confidently identify a rip were more likely to choose a swimming spot away from the rip.

Some people who have drowned in rips swam in the rip because they thought it looked calm.



The good news from our survey is that most people know that it is smart to swim between the flags. 85% of our respondents said that they would swim between the flags, and 90% know that flags are positioned in the safest place on the beach. Unfortunately, we still saw a lot of people swimming outside the flags- relying on their guesses about where is safe to swim.

Our survey showed that most people know what to do if they get caught in a rip. 70% said to swim across the rip and not against it, and 57% said to signal a lifeguard. Unfortunately, it is easy to panic when you feel like the water is taking control of you. But remember, the rip will not pull you under and it will weaken. Then you can take control of the situation and get back to the beach.

Beach locals and males were more likely to correctly identify a rip than holiday-makers.

1. Surf Life Saving Australia. Sydney: Surf Life Saving Australia; 2004.
2. Health and Aged Care. Canberra; 1999
3. Short AD, Hogan CL. J Coast Res 1994;Special Issue no. 12(Coastal Hazards):197-209