



Water Safety in the Bush: a community development initiative providing water safety and awareness instruction to remote farms and stations

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Introduction

Water Safety in the Bush is a community-based project aimed at reducing risk of drowning and near drowning across remote Australia. The project was developed by the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH), in consultation with the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing (DOHA) Injury Prevention Unit and the Royal Lifesaving Society of Australia (RLSAA), as a strategy to reduce childhood drowning and near drowning on farms and stations.

Rationale

Drowning and water safety are significant safety concerns in Australia. In 2005, 259 people drowned across the country, 18% of these were children aged 0–15 years.¹ For rural and remote communities water safety is a central child safety concern, with drowning is the principal cause of death for children aged 0–15 years living on farms, accounting for 41% of all child deaths in this environment.²

The project is targeted at rural and remote farm and station communities across the country. Throughout Australia, swimming and water safety training is most often provided to children through schools and local aquatic centres. While this reaches most children, many of those living in isolated areas do not have access to organised water safety education. The Water Safety in the Bush initiative is a community development strategy attempting to address this gap. In short, the project seeks to reduce the risk of drowning and near drowning across remote Australia by developing a model for the effective delivery of water awareness, familiarisation and safety education programs to remote communities.

Project aims

The primary aim of the Water Safety in the Bush project is to teach swimming and water safety knowledge and skills to children and their families living in remote locations. This includes the development of basic swimming skills, water hazard awareness, basic resuscitation and first aid competency. Additionally, the project aims to provide water safety signage for installation in local areas. These strategies are designed to increase local skills and awareness and to strengthen the community's capacity to create and maintain a water safe culture within the local community.

The Water Safety in the Bush Model

In the development of the project several features central to the delivery of a program of this nature were identified and used to structure a project model. Specifically this included three key elements:

- a collaboration of local stakeholders, including:
 - an isolated community;
 - a community organisation; and
 - a team of AUSTSWIM accredited swimming instructors
- a Swimming and Water Safety instruction program based on Royal Life Saving Society Australia *Swim and Survive* and *Infant Aquatics* curriculum. The program is to be delivered by nationally accredited AUSTSWIM instructors and is delivered to the target audience in their communities

- opportunities for sustaining the skills and water safety culture fostered within the training, including, but not limited to:
 - the installation of water safety signage in and around water hazards in communities
 - the provision of Royal Life Saving Society Australia teaching resources to participants and local library's, schools and/or shire office
 - the training of local community members as AUSTSWIM *Teachers of Swimming and Water Safety* to further build on the skills established within the Water Safety in the Bush program.

Project activity

The project was piloted in the Murchison Shire of Western Australia in 2005, targeting children living on stations within the Shire. Based on the success of the Pilot Phase, the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, Injury Prevention Unit, approved a National Phase of the project which rolled out in 2006. In addition to providing training to isolated children, the aim of the National Phase was to identify a viable and sustainable model for the delivery of water safety programs to isolated communities for use in the future.

The development and delivery of the National Phase was, and continues to be, overseen by the National Steering Committee. The Steering Committee is made up of representatives a variety of organisations with a vested interest in the project, including the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, The Royal Life Saving Society of Australia, the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety and several community interest groups.

The project was promoted extensively and communities were invited to apply for funding to deliver the program. To be eligible for funding, communities were required to meet several criteria, specifically:

- they needed to have an ARIA or remoteness rating of between 3.51 and 12, identifying the community as moderately accessible, remote or very remote
- the community could have no ongoing access to formal swimming instruction locally; access could be defined by distance or social disadvantage, and finally
- they needed to have identified an appropriate local organisation willing to co-ordinate delivery of the project.

Based on the applications submitted, and the ability of applicants to meet the selection criteria, eleven communities were selected from around the country. These included:

- the Shire of Halls Creek; in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, targeting a small Catholic school located just outside of Halls Creek
- station owners around Newman and Meekatharra in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, targeting children living on stations in the area
- the Shire of Mt Magnet in the Mid West of Western Australia, targeting station families living in the shire of Mt Magnet and the surrounding shires of Yalgoo, Cue and Sandstone
- WA Country Health Service, Goldfields South East targeting children living in and around the town of Eucla on the Nullarbor Plain
- the Thamarrurr Regional Council, the local government authority managing the community of Wadeye in the Northern Territory, targeting children living on the outstations surrounding the community



- the Cairns School of Distance Education in Queensland, targeting children within the schools catchment area which stretches north to the Torres Strait, west to Normanton and Karumba and south to Cardwell and Oak Park, effectively incorporating an area of over 350 000 square kilometres
- the Longreach School of Distance Education in Queensland, targeting children across the schools transmission area, including the shires of Aramac, Alpha, Barcaldine, Barcoo, Blackall, Diamantina, Flinders, Ilfracombe, Isisford, Jericho, Longreach, Tambo and Winton; covering 402 712 square kilometres
- St Joseph's Primary School Barcaldine in Queensland, targeting all children within the school community
- Charters Towers School of Distance Education, in Queensland, targeting children drawn from the school's outreach areas, including Richmond, Townsville, Cape River, Clermont, Ewan, Hughenden and Whitsunday
- Open Access College Port Augusta Campus in South Australia; targeting children drawn from across the schools enrolment region, reaching from far north South Australia to the Eyre Peninsula, into the Yorke Peninsula, the Flinders Ranges and east to the New South Wales Border
- and finally, the Riverland Regional Health Service, in the Riverland region of South Australia, targeting Indigenous children in and around Berri and Barmera, including the Gerald Aboriginal Community.

Together these eleven sites provided a broad national coverage, they represented a diverse range of applicant organisations, including schools of the air, shire offices, regional health services and small community groups, and in their diversity, they employed a variety of delivery models.

Project outcomes

The Water Safety in the Bush project is now in the final stages. Of the twelve sites, including the Murchison Pilot, seven have completed the delivery of the project; four are to be completed by the end of March 2007; and one has withdrawn from the project owing to staffing issues.

Each site has approached the project differently. Most have delivered several swim camps, run over 2 or 3 days, others have provided shorter more intensive workshops, and one site has delivered a full 2 week *Swim and Survive* program. The nature of the project has also varied from site to site, depending on the co-ordinating organisation and the community. For example, some sites have focused on parental and community involvement, while several of the schools have incorporated the Swim and Survive theory into teaching and learning programs. Several sites have developed the first aid and resuscitation elements of the program, facilitating the delivery of courses by the St John Ambulance Australia.

While initially it was anticipated that the project would reach 180 children, a total of 492 children across Australia have participated in a Swimming and Water Safety program to date. In the next four weeks it is expected that an additional 158 children will take part, bringing the total participation to 650 children nationwide. Across the various project sites, roughly 110 parents have participated both with their children in the Swimming and Water Safety training and in several first aid courses run by the St John Ambulance Australia and the Royal Life Saving Society of Australia.

As well as reaching a large number of children and parents living in rural and remote areas, the Water Safety in the Bush project has facilitated the training of 36 members of isolated communities as certified AUSTSWIM *Teachers of Swimming and Water Safety*. This has included parents, local teachers and staff at the co-ordinating organisations. The up-skilling of local communities in this manner provides an avenue for the long term sustainability of the project across the country. This has been an exciting

development, the potential for which was identified in the Murchison pilot, and has been additional to the stated outcomes of the national project.

Discussion

The National Phase of the Water Safety in the Bush project has validated the model developed in the delivery of the Pilot in the Murchison. The importance of each of the key elements has been affirmed and several additional considerations for the development of a large scale national model identified. Each of these will be detailed below.

Development of the Water Safety in the Bush Model

The Water Safety in the Bush Model is outlined below, with a consideration of the features that emerged as important to the success of the project across the country, looking at: the collaboration of local stakeholders; the Swimming and Water Safety program; and avenues for local sustainability.

To begin with there was the collaboration of local stakeholders, including the local community which was the body charged with the management of the project and the AUSTSWIM instructors who provided the training program. This focus on community collaboration stood out as key factor in the success of each of the projects. A strong collaboration, a partnership, between these groups proved important for several reasons. Most significantly, it facilitated or built on a sense of community ownership of the project. Additionally, it allowed for the identification of local needs, ensuring the program was matched to the requirements of the community.

In terms of the Swimming and Water Safety program, in the communities where the project was most successful, the training program has been flexible and responsive to the specific local context, need and cultural specificity of the local population. While all training has been based on, and adhered to the standards of, the Royal Life Saving Society *Swim and Survive* and *Infant Aquatics* programs, most sites have modified the program slightly to suit the local community. Based on the environment from which these children come, and the nature of their ongoing exposure to water and water hazards, in most sites this has resulted in an emphasis on survival and water safety elements, of the Swim and Survive program.

The final element of the Water Safety in the Bush model is sustaining the water safety culture fostered within the training. Several avenues for the local sustainability of projects were identified in the development of the project. These included the installation of Water Safety Signage; the provision of Royal Life Saving Society teaching resources and the accreditation of AUSTSWIM *Teachers of Swimming and Water Safety* within the community. While each of these have their merits, the training of local parents and teachers as AUSTSWIM accredited instructors seems to be the most important. By developing these skills within the community, the community has an increased capacity to continue to deliver swimming and water safety training in the future.

In addition the avenues identified within the project framework, it was gratifying that several communities developed mechanisms for sustainability independently. These included sourcing continued funding from within the community and the inclusion of water safety messages in school's teaching and learning programs amongst others.

Additional considerations

Several other considerations for the development of a successful model have become evident in the delivery of the project. These have included project ownership and the appropriate agency of delivery.

Local ownership of projects consistently emerged as important to the success of individual projects. Projects appear to have been most successful when there has been a commitment and 'buy-in' from at least one figure within the community, acting as a 'champion' for the project. While it is difficult at this stage of the evaluation to accurately capture the characteristics that make this role significant, we have seen that generally these people have a real investment in, and enthusiasm for, the project model, for the local community and for the importance of water safety. The investment and enthusiasm of these people, perhaps their recognition of the value and importance of the program, appears to be somewhat



contagious within communities. In the sites where project ownership is apparent, the communities have clearly engaged in the project, issues around attraction and retention of participants appear to have dissipated and opportunities for project sustainability, such as ongoing funding support have been created. Alternatively, in communities where these figures have been absent, while the community has been provided with a swimming and water safety training program, the Community Co-ordinators have reported difficulty in attracting and retaining participants, difficulties in determining and meeting community need, and limited local opportunities to support the sustainability of the project.

Several important features of the delivery agency that facilitated the successful management of the project have become evident in the implementation of the National Phase. Together, these features support the effective delivery of the project and promise greater long-term efficacy and sustainability. Specifically, this has included: building existing positive relationships and rapport with children and parents; the presence of existing appropriate infrastructure, such as finance, administration and appropriate insurance; an orientation towards teaching and learning with the agency; and a commitment to and the capacity for sustainable skill development. The absence of any one of these elements increased the project management load at both the local and national levels.

Conclusion

Based on the broad reach of the project, the large participation and the training of local community members, CUCRH as the project managers considers the Water Safety in the Bush project to have been a great success. It is expected that the project will reach a total of 650 children and 110 parents across the country, and facilitated the training of 36 parents and teachers as AUTSWIM Teachers of Swimming and Water Safety. In addition to providing this access to training for isolated communities the evaluation of the project will identify a viable and sustainable model for the delivery of water safety programs to isolated communities which will inform policy development and direct the development of future projects.

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Presenter

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