

RIPS, RESCUES, RELAXATION AND RIOTS: AUSTRALIAN BEACH CULTURE



Surf life saving organisations are just great places to have that support network ... it is amazing the interaction and the different networks you can have and the friendships that you can have with people across all age groups — it is great.

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Photo: Dragi Markovic, National Museum of Australia

Australians and the beach

We are a beach-going nation. Over 85 per cent of us live within an hour's drive of the coast, which is more than 35,000 kilometres in length and includes around 11,000 beaches. On average, our beaches receive about 80 million visits each year. Australian and international visitors descend upon the coast to surf, fish, swim, explore, relax and compete. Tragically some of these visitors struggle with, and succumb to, the power of the surf. It is this notion that has seen many of our beaches change from unguarded and potentially life-threatening environments to places patrolled by members of Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA).

Discussion point: Apart from having access to the beach, why do so many of us live close to the coast?

From bans to beach crowds

Early European settlers saw the coast as a raw, untamed place and a bitter reminder of their isolation and 'transportation'. Swimming usually took place in the sheltered waters of inland waterways. Farm Cove in Sydney was one such location. However even this was perilous. In 1791, Bennelong, a Wangal Aboriginal man who became famous as an intermediary between British and Indigenous people, swam with several others to the rescue of settlers whose boat had overturned.

Gradually, non-Indigenous people began to follow the example of the Indigenous population and took to the water in increasing numbers. This was noticed by the emerging media; the 18 February 1834 edition of the *Sydney Gazette* announced that 'bathing is now the favoured recreation in Sydney'. Beaches quickly became a recreational alternative.

The development of seaside spas and resorts in England soon translated to Australia. Beaches around the developing cities were soon the preserve of the upper echelons of society. A shift in social mores in the early twentieth century saw the introduction, in 1838, of a ban on swimming between 6 am and 7 pm. This ban was destined to fail as the lure of the surf compelled a few individuals (often middle-class professionals — doctors, lawyers, clergy and even a school inspector!) to challenge the ban. Eventually it was overturned, resulting in a rapid increase in the number of beach-goers.

Discussion point: Why were middle-class professionals compelled to challenge the daylight hours swimming ban?

An association is born

With more beach-goers came an increase in drowning. It was soon apparent that unregulated/unpatrolled beaches would claim many lives. In response, surf lifesaving clubs were established at Bondi and Bronte beaches in Sydney in 1906–1907. Initially these clubs were part of the New South Wales Surf Bathing Association which became the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia and, in 1991, Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA).

The establishment of surf lifesaving clubs soon spread to other states and territories. As public transport expanded, more people had access to beaches, and all around Australia the need for patrolling lifesavers to protect beach-goers increased dramatically. 'Black Sunday' at Bondi Beach on 6 February 1938 was a solemn reminder of the need for surf lifesaving clubs. A rogue wave set swept hundreds out to sea, which led to the rescue of some 250 swimmers. This mass rescue reinforced the importance of establishing surf lifesaving clubs at Australia's popular beaches.

Balancing recreation and regulation

Coping with larger numbers of beach-goers has meant that SLSA's role of rescue and regulation has become complex. We often see the beach as a 'free' place, where we can relax and express ourselves in many ways. The post-Second World War period in Australia has seen the beach take on a multi-faceted role in our society — playground, sports arena, creative muse and 'escape hatch'. Underpinning all of this is the reality that the beach may also be a dangerous place. Consequently, SLSA's task is to allow people to enjoy the beach safely and yet not feel constrained by rules and regulations.

Discussion point: How does SLSA balance regulation and recreation on our beaches?

SLSA reflecting society

Surf lifesavers increasingly reflect contemporary Australian society; they are male and female and are from increasingly diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Unfortunately, recent times have seen them targeted for verbal and physical assault, as occurred in 2005 in Sydney. SLSA has responded to this with a focus on determining the beach-going habits of multicultural Australia and encouraging people of non-Anglo-Saxon backgrounds to become part of surf lifesaving activities. Our culture of beach-going is strong; this initiative from SLSA may go a long way toward diminishing all manner of stereotypes on our beaches. It may also contribute to the revitalising of our beaches as 'neutral' places that cater to the needs of all who feel the sand beneath their feet.

ACTIVITIES



Activity 1

Rockin' the swells

In the 1960s Australia produced some extraordinary 'surf music' bands. The Atlantics were one popular example. Go to www.theatlantics.com and listen to some of their surf rock instrumentals, such as 'Bombora'. Analyse and discuss the music with the following ideas in mind:

1. Musical elements: Rhythm, timbre, texture, tone, harmony, dynamics, instrumentation, tempo, arrangement and improvisation.
2. Cultural elements: How does the music express the notion of surfing? Why was it popular with teenagers in the 1960s? Why is it instrumental music, with no vocal element? How does it compare with surf music of the era from other countries, such as the Beach Boys in the USA?

Activity 2

Australian beach idol

Ask students to compose and perform a surf rock song of their own. They may like to choose a theme from the beach, such as sunbaking, surfing, beach sports, etc., and try to express it in the music. They may like to add vocals or perhaps compose an instrumental instead. Get them to experiment with the instrumentation; introduce instruments that are not normally associated with 'surf rock' and see what effect they have upon the composition and performance.

Activity 3

Read it in the *Gazette*

The 18 February 1834 edition of the *Sydney Gazette* reported that 'bathing is now the favoured recreation in Sydney'. Ask students to imagine that they are a reporter for the 1834 *Sydney Gazette*; get them to interview a classmate who is to play the role of a non-Indigenous person living in Sydney at that time. The topic is the popularity of swimming in Sydney. What questions will they ask them? What do they think the readers of the 1834 *Sydney Gazette* would have found interesting in an interview like this? They should keep this in mind as they develop their questions and conduct the interview.



Photo: Dean McNicoll, National Museum of Australia

Activity 4

Keeping visitors safe

Australia's beaches are frequently visited by people of non-English speaking backgrounds. Surf lifesavers may have to communicate with them as part of beach patrol activities. Get them to discuss and record the problems and possible solutions to this situation. They should keep in mind that the goal is to ensure the safety of all beach-goers, regardless of their English language skills.

Activity 5

The art of beach-going

Look at the painting, *Australian Beach Pattern*, painted during 1938 and 1940 by Charles Meere. Get students to describe the people they see. What types of people are represented in the image? Who is not represented? Why? What does the image say about going to the beach in the 1940s? Compare this image to a contemporary beach scene. What are the similarities and differences?