

SAMURAI OF THE SURF: BEING A SURF LIFESAVER



Being a Nipper, I have lots more knowledge than most other people. It has given me lots of confidence, out there every Sunday with Water Safety ... Now I teach younger children at Nippers ... I am helping with Water Safety.

Keesha Whitford, Nipper, Mollymook SLSC

Photo: Dragi Markovic, National Museum of Australia

Celebrating 100 years of surf lifesaving in Australia!

Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) will be 100 years old in 2007. In many ways the history of SLSA mirrors Australians' growing love of beach culture and the changing values of our society.

SLSA is one of the largest volunteer organisations in the world with a mission to 'provide a safe beach and aquatic environment throughout Australia'. Its origins can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century, when very different attitudes towards the beach prevailed.

Daylight bathing had long been considered a threat to public decency and order, and was banned until 1902 when a newspaper editor from Manly, William Goucher, forced the issue by defying the law and bathing during daylight hours. The police refused to prosecute Gocher, and the ban was lifted, paving the way for a dramatic increase in bathing. Unfortunately there was also an increase in the number of bathers who got into difficulty in the surf. In 1902, 17 people drowned at Manly alone. Local government councils realised that they would have to establish safety mechanisms, which gave rise to the surf lifesaving movement.

Discussion point: Why do you think daylight bathing was considered a threat to public decency and order in 1902?

Attaining the 'bronze'

The surf bronze medallion award was introduced in 1910. To obtain the bronze medallion you must be over the age of 15 and demonstrate proficiency in surf awareness, survival, patrol and rescue procedures, emergency care, and anatomy and physiology. You are also required to complete a 200-metre run, a 200-metre swim, another 200-metre run — all in less than eight minutes!

Discussion point: Why do you think it is so hard to qualify for the bronze medallion award?

The diggers' legacy

After 1919, a significant number of ex-diggers joined surf lifesaving clubs, and membership was seen as a community service that provided mateship and support for these ex-servicemen. It was during this period that surf lifesaving clubs became male-dominated and militaristic in style.

Discussion point: How hard do you think it would be for returning servicemen to fit back into civilian life?

The authority of the surf lifesavers

From the 1920s to the 1950s, lifesavers were accepted as authorities on the beach. However, not all members of the public liked to be told where to swim and some began to challenge the authority of SLSA.

This challenge grew in the 1960s when surf culture shifted and the idea of individualistic freedom emerged. Surfers took their boards where they wanted and did not appreciate 'clubbies' telling them where they should swim or surf.

Discussion point: What impact would boardriders have had on the use of the beach?

In come the Nippers!

A combination of the perceived male-oriented militaristic approach of surf lifesaving, combined with the anti-authoritarian attitudes of the 1960s, saw a serious decline in SLSA membership. In the 1970s, the introduction of the Nippers program saw SLSA change direction. The Nippers program allows boys and girls aged 7 to 13 to join SLSA to learn water safety and basic lifesaving skills as a foundation for the bronze medallion. Nippers has been one of the movement's greatest success stories, providing the training ground for future generations of surf lifesavers.

Discussion point: How would the introduction of children to clubs open them up to the wider community?

Women take patrol!

Women were originally barred from patrol and rescue operations because it was believed that they were not strong enough to undertake the rescue work, even though there was clear proof to the contrary. One woman, Edie Rowe, passed the surf lifesaving exam in 1923, registering only her initial and surname. When SLSA discovered that E stood for Edith, they withheld her award. 'I was never told why they refused the award except that it was not lady-like for a woman to be a surf lifesaver,' Edie said in 1991.

Responding to government pressure and dwindling membership numbers, SLSA finally admitted women as full members in 1980, and the number of active surf lifesavers almost doubled. Women now hold senior positions throughout the country in both voluntary and professional capacity, and females make up more than 40 per cent of the total membership of SLSA.

Discussion point: How has Surf Life Saving Australia mirrored the changing attitude towards women in Australia generally over the past 100 years?

Conclusions

SLSA, as a volunteer organisation, continues to grow and evolve. From its early, male-dominated clubhouses it has evolved into an inclusive community organisation. Its membership continues to expand, with women forming one of the largest growth areas. Anyone can now join SLSA regardless of age, race, religion or sex!

Education
at the
NATIONAL
MUSEUM OF
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ACTIVITIES



Photo: Dean McNicoll, National Museum of Australia

Activity 1

A day in the life of a surf lifesaver

Ask students to research the tasks a surf lifesaver on patrol might have to carry out. As a class, get students to brainstorm the things that could occur while surf lifesavers are on patrol. What are the hazards? What are the highlights?

Conduct a class discussion on the responsibilities a surf lifesaver undertakes when patrolling Australian beaches. Ask students to write a journal entry of their imaginary day as a surf lifesaver. Encourage students to illustrate their entries.

Activity 2

Surf lifesavers: A total makeover

Students have been commissioned to design a new uniform for Australian surf lifesavers. Working in small groups, instruct students to create an appropriate design using either digital imaging software or drawings on paper. Indicate to students that part of their brief is to ensure the uniform is practical as well as attractive. Students should then conduct presentations using PowerPoint or simple graphics to 'sell' their ideas. Vote for winners!

Activity 3

Initiation to Australian beaches

Ask students to imagine they have just migrated to Australia and have no experience of surf beaches. What are the dangers? How can surf lifesavers help? Ask students to write a letter home describing their first day at the beach and their first swim in the surf.

Facts to consider: By 2001, 43 per cent of the Australian population was born overseas or had one parent born abroad. Some 16 per cent of Australians don't speak English at home.

Activity 4

Recruiting surf lifesavers: We want you!

Patrolling the beaches as a surf lifesaver is only one of the many volunteer roles available within Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA). Working in small groups, encourage students to create mind maps of the potential volunteer roles within a surf club. Generate a class list. Still working in groups, ask students to produce a poster recruiting new volunteers for surf lifesavers. Consider what you would include in your recruitment campaign to encourage all types of people — lounge lizards included! Illustrate your posters with images of the different types of roles and people who can become volunteers within surf clubs.

Activity 5

Flotsam and jetsam: An installation of the beach

Note: This activity is for schools within reach of beaches.

Over a period of weeks, ask students to collect things that wash up on Australian beaches. Working in groups, create a small installation on tabletops — have them consider colour, text and spatial issues around the surface they are working on. Using digital cameras, ask students to photograph the installation and digitally enhance these photos to create photomontages representing aspects of the beach.

Activity 6

Profiling surf lifesavers

Ask students to consider the different types of people who volunteer as surf lifesavers. Using magazine cuttings, paint and pastels, ask students to create an A4-size portrait of a surf lifesaver. While each face should be different, they should all be wearing the surf lifesaver's cap. Combine the pictures to create a large work of art.

Activity 7

Harmony project for Australia's beaches

On 10 March 2006, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Andrew Robb, launched a \$600,000 partnership with SLSA to encourage young people from diverse backgrounds to join the surf lifesaving community and promote community cohesion.

Mr Robb said the living harmony partnership was a response to December 2005's Cronulla riots in New South Wales.

'The project will invite young Australians of diverse backgrounds to complete surf lifesaving qualifications and get involved with Australia's surf lifesaving movement,' he said.

'It will use Sydney's surf lifesaving clubs as a catalyst to draw together different communities. The pilot programs will be based in Sydney but could be rolled out nationally beyond 2006.'¹

The President of SLSA, Ron Rankin, also enlisted help from other community groups to show young people the volunteer and career opportunities available through sporting and other networks.

Working in small groups, ask students to research the Cronulla beach riots and carefully consider all aspects of the event. Look especially at media reaction; did this help or hinder the situation? Create a list of the ways people use Australian beaches and encourage students to consider how this might sometimes cause conflict. Ask them to suggest solutions that would avoid a repeat of such conflict.