

Adapt between the flags: the experience of Surf Life Saving Australia

Summary

Climate change is a significant challenge for a national and volunteer based organisation such as Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA). Rising sea levels and more intense extreme events are likely to impact SLSA's infrastructure, assets and life-saving delivery services. Across Australia, Surf Life Saving Clubs will be affected in different ways, as they all face different levels of vulnerability. Since 2010, SLSA has initiated a process to cope with these changing climate conditions at the local and national level, identifying adaptation options and key factors to increase the organisation's adaptive capacity and resilience.

As a large coastal volunteer organisation, Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) has recognised the need to adapt its services and assets to climate change. The largest volunteer movement of its kind in Australia, SLSA has more than 166,000 members and 311 affiliated Surf Life Saving Clubs (SLSCs). Since its creation in 1907, SLSA has helped to provide a safe environment along Australia's beaches and coastlines. More than 620,000 lives have been saved by its members, and its efforts to prevent injuries and deaths across Australia have been valued at over \$3.6 billion (PwC 2011). The organisation is a fundamental part of Australia's culture and outdoor lifestyle.

Keywords

Coastal, risk, Surf Life Saving Club, decision-making, adaptation



Figure 1: SLSA patrol beaches Australia wide.
Source: © Dollar Photo Club.

SLSA is exposed to a number of climate change-related coastal management issues. Most SLSC assets and infrastructure are located at the forefront of the coastal zone and, for operational reasons, often within metres of the shoreline. An estimated 67% of SLSCs are situated in zones exposed to coastal erosion processes. Although SLSA members are trained to understand and manage these conditions, climate change related sea-level rise and changes in the occurrence and/or intensity of extreme events are expected to impact SLSA's infrastructure, assets and life-saving delivery services.

Finding a way to adapt

In 2010 SLSA recognised the urgent need to adapt to a changing climate and so commissioned a study to understand the range of risks posed by climate change and review available strategies to address those risks. The report *Climate Change Adaptation Road Map*, was the first step in a long-term commitment by SLSA to take action on climate change.

The study highlighted that SLSCs face different levels of vulnerability to projected climate change impacts, depending on factors such as their exposure to coastal erosion processes. SLSCs are managed and run locally, which means they have different levels of human or financial resources, and therefore different levels of capacity to address the risks.

This differential vulnerability provides a complex picture for management of the impacts of climate change, requiring a tailored rather than a 'one size fits all' approach.

To build on the findings of the 2010 *Road Map*, the *Adapt Between the Flags* project was initiated in 2012 in partnership with Griffith University with funding from NCCARF. The aim was to provide a better understanding of vulnerabilities at the national scale in the SLSA, and at the club scale, using four SLSCs as case studies, and to identify suitable adaptation options.

Table 1: Synthesis of workshops results at the local scale (four SLSCs) and national level. Source: Sanò et al. 2013.

Case Study	Main Issues	Possible Adaptation Option	Adaptive Capacity Determinants
Cudgen Headland SLSC	Coastal erosion	Defend – protection of clubhouse	Government funding, engineering design, knowledge, stakeholder management
		Planned retreat – remove clubhouse	Funding, council rate base, implications for water safety
		Improve water safety operations	Capacity of training, number of volunteers, surf life saving culture
Currumbin Beach Viking SLSC	Accessibility during storms, storm and sea level rise proofing	Accommodate storms and sea level rise – improve SLSC design	N/A
Ulverstone SLSC	Future erosion, storm tide inundation	Planned retreat – remove clubhouse	Inertia and will, funding, especially external
		Defend – Protection of clubhouse	Knowledge and expertise, funding opportunities
		Improve water safety operations	Experience of volunteers. Clubhouse design and accessibility
North Kirra SLSC	Operations	Operations	Trained members, equipment, club revenue
SLSA	Operational knowledge to support clubs, reputation and membership	Improve partnerships	Relationships, connections, reputation, operational experience
		Mainstreaming climate change in operations and procedures	Proactive attitude, capacity of inclusion in core business, member education awareness
		Capacity building	Network, communication, membership base, funding

Stakeholders played a vital role in this project. Surf life savers and local council and community representatives were asked to participate in a series of workshops. The results of these workshops are synthesised in Table 1, showing issues, adaptation options and key determinants of adaptive capacity at different levels in the organisation and different locations.

Following the workshops, the project developed a set of ten actions that can enhance the capacity of SLSA to adapt to climate change. To help implement these actions among all SLSCs across Australia, SLSA and Griffith University have produced a summary guidance available [here](#).



Figure 2: Kingscliff's Cudgen Headland SLSC in 2012.
Photo: © Marcello Sanò.

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Further reading

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