

Selected marine incident profiles

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6.1 Commercial white water rafting

Commercial white water rafting is one of a number of adventure tourism activities increasing in popularity in Queensland. Rafting has been conducted on the Tully, Barron and North Johnstone Rivers in north Queensland since the late 1980s. The Tully River is the only river in the world to be commercially rafted on 365 days a year.



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There are three commercial white water rafting companies operating in Queensland, all based in Cairns. No precise data is available on the number of people participating in the activity each year however one company estimates it has 30,000 customers per year on the Tully River alone.

Since 1996 Maritime Safety Queensland has recorded five white water rafting fatalities, two of which occurred in 2007. Over the 12 year period this equates to one death every 2.4 years. While Maritime Safety Queensland data only records one serious injury over the same period, Workplace Health and Safety has recorded 15 serious injuries since 2003, Queensland Health has also recorded 17 hospital admissions from rafting accidents for the period July 2004 to June 2007.

While not diminishing the importance of safety management systems and procedures in white water rafting, it is recognised that the activity is by its very nature a high risk activity and participants enter in knowing and acknowledging the risk of personal injury or even death. In the context of white water rafting,

events such as a person overboard or capsizes are common. The safety challenge for operators is in managing the consequence of these events in a boiling maelstrom of water, rocks and crevices.

Commercial white water rafting operators are largely self-regulated as there is no affiliated professional body representing the industry in Australia or internationally. There is also no formal white water rafting guide qualification available in Australia.

The three commercial operators in Queensland apply their own similar and reasonably stringent standard of operator/guide training and safety management systems and procedures. They liaise with each other informally about safety matters such as unsatisfactory guides, equipment and safety procedures.

All three companies provide their own white water rafting guide training courses. In addition to this training the companies require guides to hold a *Senior First Aid* certificate and they must complete a formal induction process including river familiarisation.

Under the *Transport Operations (Marine Safety) Act 1994*, commercial white water rafts are 'non-registrable ships'. While there are no specific rafting safety requirements stipulated in the Act the operators are bound by the general safety obligation and the safety equipment requirements of the Act and Regulation.



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Two recent coronial inquests into commercial white water rafting fatalities in Australia, one in the Northern Territory and one in Queensland both noted the lack of documented operational safety standards and recommended government authorities develop safety guidelines/standards for white water rafting.

Currently Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia have adopted an industry-based adventure activity standard for river rafting. This standard, which is advisory in nature and voluntary in terms of compliance, is aimed at organisations, guides and leaders of commercial and not-for-profit rafting operations.

In 2005 the Director-General of the then Queensland Department of Local Government, Planning and Sport, established an inter-departmental committee on which Maritime Safety Queensland is represented, to assess the suitability of implementing Adventure Activity Standards based on existing Victorian standards. White water rafting is one of the standards being considered by the committee. The government has engaged the Queensland Outdoor Recreation Federation to undertake a formal public consultation process on behalf of the government during 2008 to garner community and industry input into this standards setting process.



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Coronial inquests may be commenced in 2008 into each of the two white water rafting fatalities that occurred on the Tully River in 2007. Maritime Safety Queensland will work with the Coroner and the Police assisting the Coroner to ensure that standards of safety for white water rafting are commensurate with the nature of the activity and the risks involved.



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6.2 Improving boating safety in the Torres Strait

The last two reports on marine incidents in Queensland (2005 and 2006) have highlighted the specific risks experienced by seafarers in the Torres Strait. In the geographically remote island and coastal communities of the Torres Strait there is a strong reliance on boating. Small aluminium and fibreglass dinghies are used across the region to fish, hunt, and transport people and goods long distances between island communities and the mainland. Boating is therefore a way and a fact of life in the Torres Strait.

The Torres Strait Marine Safety Program was developed by Maritime Safety Queensland in 2005 to:

- help seafarers in the region to identify and better manage their risk of becoming lost at sea through training, improved maintenance of vessels and trip planning;
- help lost seafarers survive until rescued by improving the carriage of safety equipment and distress signals;
- foster a community and industry that incorporates high standards of safety in all their marine activities; and
- develop strong trusting partnerships that make communities and the maritime industry safer.



The program is being implemented in partnership with the Australian Maritime Safety Authority and through the support of the Torres Strait Regional Authority, Tropical North Queensland TAFE and Tagai College (Thursday Island). To achieve sustainable changes in boating safety in the Torres Strait, the community and local stakeholders have been involved in shaping the program to ensure that it is focussed, practical, culturally appropriate and recognises local conditions.

To better understand the dispersed Torres Strait vessel fleet Maritime Safety Queensland conducted a vessel census exercise. The census identified general vessel and motor characteristics and condition, and the types of safety equipment most commonly carried. More than 1,700 vessels were observed and inspected. Engagement with the Torres Strait community continues to be vital to the success of the

program and the census provided a unique opportunity to discuss boating safety issues with vessel owners in an informal setting. The data gathered through this research is being analysed and will be used to design training, education and information programs tailored to the needs of the Torres Strait community and fleet.

Local communities highlighted the need for access to local training that addressed the unique environment and conditions faced in the region. The Torres BoatSafe recreational boat licensing course was developed in partnership with Queensland TAFE to respond to these issues and focuses on key areas identified during consultation including motor maintenance, breakdown prevention, carriage and use of safety equipment, emergency procedures at sea, general boating rules and seamanship, and vessel stability. The Torres BoatSafe course was trialled on Hammond Island and eight courses have been delivered by Tropical North Queensland TAFE across the Torres Strait in 2007. The delivery of further Torres BoatSafe courses in the region is planned throughout 2008.

Tagai College on Thursday Island, has also been active in ensuring that high school students model safe boating practices. In 2007 around 120 high school students completed BoatSafe training as part of their marine studies course.



The importance of trip planning, checking the weather before heading out, carrying safety equipment, and avoiding overloading have been targeted in an integrated communication and education campaign. The campaign features boating safety messages in English and Torres Creole and is being aired on local media including *Torres News* and *Imparja*. These important messages have also been supported by the distribution of a Boating Safety Handbook printed in Torres Creole and a sticker which provides guidance for boaters on the amount of fuel required for trips.

Access to safety equipment was another concern raised during consultation with local communities. In response to community concerns and in conjunction with the planned phase out of the 121.5 MHz Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRBs), Maritime Safety Queensland and the Australian Maritime Safety Authority developed an initiative to improve access to 406 MHz EPIRBs in the region. The initiative assists eligible Torres Strait residents to purchase 406 MHz EPIRBs at a reduced price. As at 31 December 2007, one hundred and sixty-five 121.5 MHz EPIRBs were surrendered in exchange for the purchase of a 406 MHz EPIRB. The new EPIRB technology makes search and rescue activities more efficient through improved accuracy and reducing false alerts. One of the EPIRBs distributed as part of this program has already been activated in a successful search and rescue event near Mabuiaig.

EPIRB change over

Make sure you have changed over to a 406 EPIRB by February 2009 and register it.

STOP - TRIM SURVIVE

Australian Maritime Safety Authority

Queensland Government Maritime Safety Queensland

Come home safely to your family

No fatal boating incidents were recorded in the Torres Strait in 2007 however the number of search and rescue operations in the region remained high. The reporting of marine incidents in the region is generally considered poor for incidents not involving a fatality.

The implementation of the Torres Strait Marine Safety Program throughout 2008 will continue to deliver maritime safety outcomes for the communities of the Torres Strait.

