



Surf Life Saving NSW runs a water safety program for cultural and linguistically diverse groups.

Struggling in the surf: Australian beaches pose dangers to newcomers

By Jessica Mudditt, CNN

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(CNN) On a humid afternoon at a public swimming pool in northern Sydney, 18-year-old Tenzin Tsokney slides gingerly into the shallow end.

It's the first time he's set foot in water since he almost drowned when he fell into a pool four years ago, shortly after arriving in Australia as a Tibetan refugee who had been exiled in India.

"I've put off learning to swim ever since, even though my friends tease me," Tsokney told CNN.

He's not alone.

Newcomers like Tsokney represent up to 40% of drowning fatalities, which is higher than the estimated 28% of the population who are born overseas, according to data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

It's a matter of concern for Australia, which wants to halve the number of water deaths by 2020. However, despite a campaign launched in 2016 by the Australian Water Safety Council, the number of deaths has risen year-on-year since 2015, with 291 fatalities recorded last year.



Around 40 members of Australia's Tibetan community took part in a water safety class run by Water Skills for Life at a swimming pool in the northern Sydney suburb of Dee Why in February.

'We're mountain people'

Tsokney was one of around 40 Tibetans taking part in lessons organized by not-for-profit organisation Water Skills for Life on a recent afternoon in the Sydney suburb of Dee Why, which is home to Australia's largest Tibetan population.

Tsokney said he mustered up the courage to learn because his friend, a fellow Tibetan called Tenzin Khenste Kyishi, is an instructor with the organisation.

"We're mountain people -- we don't know the ocean," said 18-year-old Kyishi, who himself learned to swim with Water Skills for Life five years ago.

That's in stark contrast to Australia, where most people live by the coast and sunny weekends are often spent swimming, surfing or sailing.



Tenzin Tsokney is coached by Tenzin Khenste Kyishi at a swimming pool in the northern Sydney suburb of Dee Why in February.

According to the president of the Tibetan Community of Australia (NSW) Tenzin Dhondup, as many as 90% of Tibetans who arrive in Australia are refugees and the vast majority of the estimated population of 900 cannot speak English, which is why having Tibetan instructors such as Kyishi is vital.

Water Skills for Life has distributed surf safety pamphlets in the Tibetan language and it also provides swimming classes for disadvantaged groups, including women living in local shelters.

The group's president Tanya Carmont said she's keen to offer classes to other migrant communities in the area, such as Filipinos and Samoans, but said sourcing volunteers and swimming facilities can be tough.

Watch for rips, not sharks

Learning to swim isn't enough on its own to keep people safe at the beach. A bigger danger is invisible to the untrained eye: rip currents.

Rips are like "rivers of the sea that flow offshore at pretty fast speeds," said associate professor Robert Brander, a beach safety expert at the University of New South Wales who is also known as "Dr Rip."

"They're dangerous because you don't really notice yourself drifting offshore and all of a sudden you're a long way out. Those who aren't confident swimmers will then panic and drown."

According to research carried out by the University of New South Wales in 2013, the average number of deaths caused annually by rips was 21, and this figure has remained virtually unchanged over the past decade, despite a series of awareness campaigns.

"That's more than the average number of fatalities caused by bush fires, floods, cyclones and sharks combined," said Brander.

"Whenever there is a shark fatality it's national news, and there's been a lot of money put into the shark problem over the last few years," he added.

"Whereas the amount of fatalities due to rips dwarfs that of sharks, and yet the dedicated funding isn't there."

Part of the problem is a widespread lack of awareness about how to spot the danger. Studies by the University of New South Wales have found that more than 50% of all beachgoers in Australia cannot identify a rip -- something Water Skills for Life wants to address with its classes.

"We talk a lot about rips and wave formations so that children and adults get an understanding of what they are looking at when they arrive at a beach," said Carmont.



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Swim between the flags

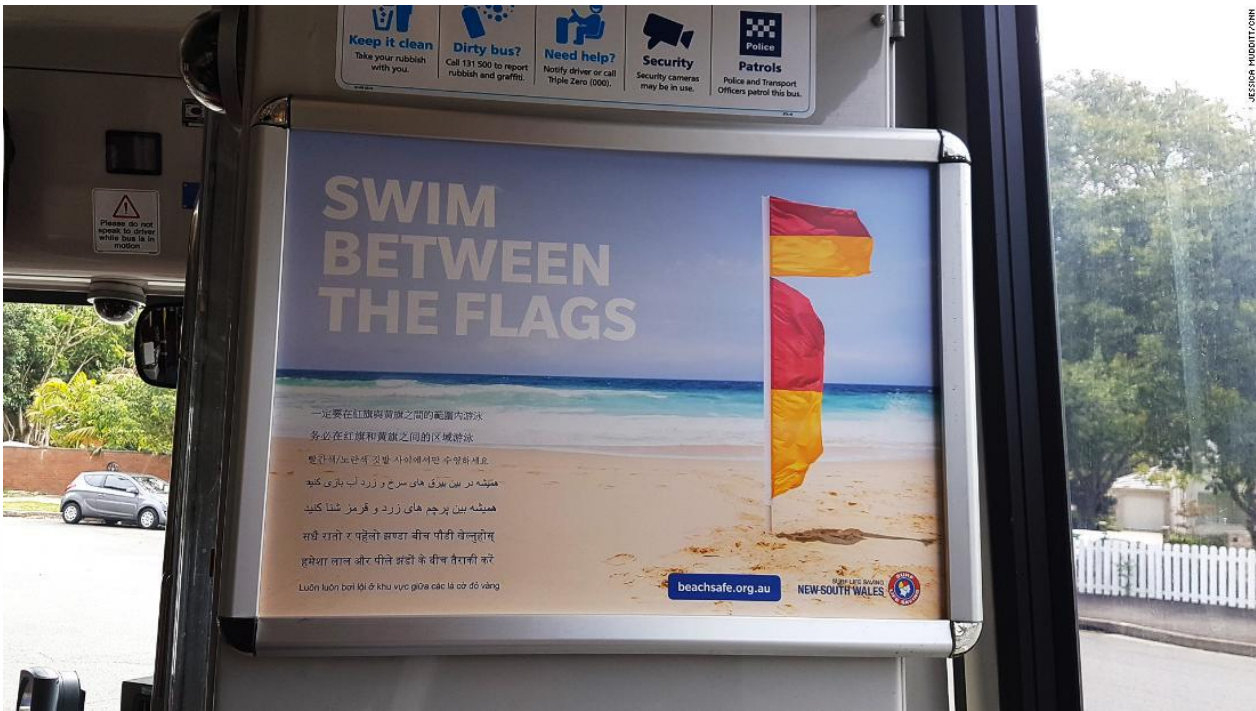
One of the key messages about surf safety in Australia is to swim between the red and yellow flags, which are patrolled swimming areas at Australia's most popular beaches.

Drownings in such areas are extremely rare, however only 4% of all beaches on Australia's vast coastline are patrolled.

Another problem is that some cultures associate the color red with danger and therefore avoid the flags, said Brander, who added that there is no direct equivalent for the term rip current in many languages.

In February, Surf Lifesaving Australia launched an awareness campaign on public transport about swimming between the flags. The message is displayed in the eight languages that have the highest number of nationals involved in coastal drownings. It also runs awareness campaigns about rip currents at Sydney Airport and at busy train terminals.

"We've made great strides -- none of this existed 10 years ago," said Joanne Massey, community education manager at Surf Life Saving NSW.



Australia has launched a multi-lingual surf safety campaign



A water safety program run by Surf Life Saving NSW.

However, Brander said that even if more multilingual warning signs were erected at beaches, studies have repeatedly shown that most people are disinclined to actually read such messaging. He feels that targeting a "captive audience" on international flights would be more effective.

While some airlines such as Virgin already broadcast in-flight surf safety messages, Brander believes that the responsibility should fall to the government to make such viewing compulsory on all inbound flights.

"It could be screened in different languages and it would be easy to create awareness in a non-threatening way," Brander said.

"But sometimes I wonder if what we're doing now is the best we can do, and that's a bit depressing."