

Preventing drowning by improving beach safety signage

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Credit: University of Adelaide

A new study by a University of Adelaide researcher has recommended improvements to beach safety signage, which could prevent drownings in the future.

Dr. Masaki Shibata, from the Japanese Department in the School of Social Sciences, examined how current [safety](#) signage on beaches is interpreted by both Australian citizens and overseas-born beachgoers.

"According to the National Coastal Safety Report 2022, 939 coastal drowning fatalities were recorded from 2012–2022, almost half of which were overseas-born beachgoers. However, the 939 fatalities were only of people whose birth continent was known, so the total number of drownings is higher," he said.

Dr. Shibata recommends that signs need to be improved by including:

- Messages in the languages of the people

who are at most risk of coastal drowning

- Photos, not just symbols, of dangers such as jellyfish to improve messaging for non-English speakers
- Clear explanation of what the hazard is such as poison or sting
- Clearer color coding: many safety signs are yellow whereas red indicates greatest dangers to many communities

Dr. Shibata gathered information from 160 interviews of beachgoers about how they interpreted safety signage at Bondi Beach.

"Approximately 50% of overseas-born beachgoers and 40% of Australians rarely or never read [beach](#) safety signage at [beaches](#) they're not familiar with," said Dr. Shibata.

"Approximately half of the overseas-born beachgoers had no understanding of some beach safety terms such as high surf, shore dump, or bluebottle. Not reading the signs, or not understanding them, could have deadly consequences."

The [research](#), which was published in the journal *Safety Science*, suggests that many people are also unclear as to what iconic Australian beach flags mean.

"While they represent 'always swim between the flags,' more than 30% of the overseas visitors and residents believe that beach flags mean that only people 'perceived to be good swimmers' were allowed to be between the flags," Dr. Shibata said.

"Another common [flag](#) instruction—'No flags = no swim'—is also confusing, with half of all respondents interpreting this as they may not swim, but they may play, walk, and stand in the water."

He presented his research to the National Water Safety Summit held by Royal Life Saving and Surf

Life Saving Australia, and he will also present at the global Safety 2022 conference in November.

"I hope my suggestions will be taken into consideration in the much-needed revision of beach safety [signage](#)."

Dr. Shibata, a competitive ocean swimmer and former lifesaver, is currently investigating and developing effective ways of delivering beach safety knowledge to [international students](#) enrolled in Australian universities.

More information: Masaki Shibata, Exploring international beachgoers' perceptions of safety signage on Australian beaches, *Safety Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ssci.2022.105966](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2022.105966)

Provided by University of Adelaide

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