Rock fishing safety

Discussion paper

Background

Rock fishing is a great way to catch a fish and enjoy the outdoors.

But, it can also be dangerous. Since July 2000, 20 people have died in Victoria while rock fishing.

The Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) and its partner agencies have an extensive education program in place to inform fishers about the dangers of rock fishing and to encourage fishers to take a range of safety precautions to reduce risks of falling in.

However, rock fishing drownings and near misses continue to occur in Victoria, suggesting the current education campaign is having limited success.

It is now more important than ever to consider new ways to ensure everyone can continue to enjoy rock fishing safely.

What changes are being considered?

The importance of wearing a lifejacket when rock fishing is now irrefutable and the VFA is investigating a two-year trial of new laws to mandate the use of lifejackets when rock fishing at high-risk locations in Victoria, to help prevent further rock fishing deaths.

The two-year trial would be supported by a revamped education program to encourage safe rock fishing, inform rock fishers about appropriate safety measures and to ensure all fishers are aware of the new laws.

The VFA would like to know your views

The VFA is keen to understand your views on the proposed trial. The VFA would also like your views on the proposed education program and its various components.

Further detail on the proposed two-year trial laws and the revamped education program are provided below.

How can I make a submission?

Comments on the proposed laws can be emailed to: haveyoursay@vfa.vic.gov.au.

Comments must be received by no later than 5:00 pm on 19 November 2021. Please note submissions may be published on the VFA website, unless a submission clearly indicates it is confidential.

Next steps

The VFA will consider all submissions before a final recommendation is put to the Minister for Fishing and Boating for her consideration. Should the Minister agree to proceed with the proposed trial (or a modified version of these), the VFA will work with VRFish and FutureFish to develop the laws and a revamped education program, with the aim of the new arrangements coming into place in December 2021.

The proposed laws

Two-year trial of mandatory lifejackets when rock fishing at high risk locations throughout Victoria.

Under the two-year trial being considered by the VFA, laws requiring the use of lifejackets when rock fishing at certain high-risk locations across Victoria would be created.

High-risk locations would include sites where a rock fishing death has occurred or sites where a fisher has been washed off the rocks (i.e. sites where a non-fatal incident has occurred, involving a rock fisher unintentionally ending up in the water, but has managed to get out).

High-risk rock fishing platforms would be defined spatially (i.e. be mapped) and any person who enters the defined area who possesses or uses recreational fishing equipment, would be required to wear a lifejacket of a specified standard.

The high-risk sites that may be listed in the first instance, will include:

* Punchbowl Rocks near San Remo (due to fatalities);
* Cape Schanck lighthouse rocks (due to fatality);
* the rocks at the southern end of Potters Hill Road at San Remo (due to fatality);
* the rock platform near the blowholes carpark at Cape Bridgewater (due to fatality);
* Dragon’s Head at Rye back beach (due to fatality);
* BushRangers Bay rocks, east of Cape Schanck (due to fisher/s being washed off rocks);
* Sorrento Back Beach rocks (due to fisher/s being washed off rocks);
* Artillery Rocks, west of Lorne (due to fisher/s being washed off rocks);
* the rock platform opposite Sheoak Falls, south of Lorne (due to fatality).

Additional sites may be added to the locations where life jackets are to be mandatory over time, however, this would be done in consultation with recreational fishing groups.

Hand held spears, spear guns and dive equipment will be excluded from the definition of recreational fishing equipment for the purposes of the proposed laws to ensure spearfishers and divers entering the water from rocks are not inadvertently required to wear a lifejacket when diving.

Where mandatory lifejackets are required, fishers would be required to wear a Type 1 (Level 100+) lifejacket (AS4758 approved). Type 1 lifejackets provide the wearer with the greatest chance of survival in conditions that may be experienced on rock fishing platforms, where tides, current, swell and weather conditions can create very dangerous circumstances.

Type 1 lifejackets are relatively cost effective (under $100 each), provide a high level of buoyancy and keep the wearer in a safe floating position at all times. AS4758 approved lifejackets are also made in high visibility colours with reflective patches which helps ensure the wearer can be seen in the water. A Type 1 lifejacket is also consistent with what is required in a powerboat up to and including 4.8 meters in length in coastal and enclosed waters in Victoria.

Persons not possessing or using recreational fishing equipment on a rock platform would be encouraged to wear a lifejacket, but would not be required by law to wear a lifejacket. Fishers would also be encouraged to wear a lifejacket on all other rock fishing platforms across the State (i.e. at all other sites other than the nine locations identified above), but again this would not be required by law.

Following the two-year trial, the effectiveness of the program would be assessed by the VFA in consultation with recreational fishing groups.

The proposed educational program

Key messages

Should the new laws be implemented, they would need to be supported by a revamped education program to encourage safe rock fishing, inform rock fishers about appropriate safety measures and ensure all fishers are aware of the new laws. The following key messages would be included in the education material:

*General*

* Always wear an AS4758 approved lifejacket.
* At mandated high-risk locations, you must wear a lifejacket and can be fined if you don’t.
* You must take precautions before you go, when you arrive and while you are fishing.
* Your safety is your responsibility.

*Before you go rock fishing:*

* Check the weather conditions.
* Check the high tide times as this is the most dangerous period.
* Work out a Plan B – determine an alternative fishing location or activity if the conditions are unsuitable.
* Tell someone who is not fishing with you where you plan to go and what your Plan B is.
* Never fish alone – organise a friend.

*When you arrive:*

* Observe the conditions first, fish later.
* Check to see if you have phone coverage.
* Be realistic and if the conditions are unsuitable, go to your Plan B.
* Plan an escape route in the event you are washed in.

*If you decide to fish:*

* Always wear an AS4758 approved lifejacket.
* Don't wear waders.
* Wear non-slip footwear and easy-to-swim-in clothing.
* Choose the safest possible location.
* Stay weather alert while fishing.
* Never turn your back on the ocean.

*If your partner gets washed in:*

* Don’t jump in to help them – in case of an emergency, call 000 or go get help.

*If you fall in:*

* Deploy your lifejacket and swim away from the rocks.

Education tools

These safety messages would be reinforced via several different means to maximise the chances of being seen and understood by the target audience and would be translated into several different languages. The VFA should closely work with other organisations/agencies to promote the messaging. The VFA should also collate and package all relevant information for ease of utilisation by partner agencies who may wish to share or promote the key messages.

The VFA proposes that the following education tools (but not be limited to) be used:

* *Safety videos* – a series of short safety messages would be filmed and posted on the VFA website and social media platforms, to explain the key messages and encourage safe rock fishing practices.
* *Social media posts* – the VFA would use a range of social media platforms to issue a series of posts focussing on each of the key messages detailed above. This would include the WeChat platform.
* *Signage* – the VFA in conjunction with local councils and Parks Victoria would develop and install signs at the main entrances to all rock fishing platforms where lifejacket use will become mandatory during the two-year trial. The signs would include the key messages in eight languages (English, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Cantonese, Karen, Arabic and Farsi).
* *Safety champion(s)* – the VFA should engage the assistance of a well-known and respected rock fisher identity to help disseminate and provide information on safe rock fishing practices.
* *Recreational fishing guide and a fact sheet* – the VFA would update the information in the recreational fishing guide and develop a safety fact sheet and distribute this fact sheet to recreational fishing groups. The fact sheet would be translated into multiple languages and incorporated onto the VFA website.
* *VFA web page* – the VFA web page on rock fishing safety would be updated and refreshed. The VFA would also work with partner agencies to ensure consistent messaging across agencies.
* *Angling club information nights and the Recreational Fishing Roundtable* – VFA representatives would attend angling club meetings and Recreational Fishing Roundtable meetings to provide information on safe rock fishing practices.