



Margaret River Surf Life Saving Operations.

Introduction

With the expansion of Margaret River surroundings over the next decade the demand for lifesaving services will increase. There are several large housing developments underway in the area based around the Witchcliffe, Karridale and Cowaramup townsites. This should see a rapid expansion of the use of beaches in the lower Cape to Cape region including Augusta, Hamelin Bay, Conto's, Redgate, Kilcarnup and Grace Town. There is also a large hotel and chalet development in the planning phase based in the Gnarabup area which will significantly increase tourism numbers in the Gnarabup Region.

Western Australia Surf Life Saving has purchased a building in the town centre that will become a centre for training camps and a subbranch for Surf Life Saving clubs in the Southwest. This will increase the visibility of Surf Life Saving in the area.

The Cape-to-Cape region is one of the highest wave energy coast's in the world with swells normally in the 2-4m region increasing up to 9-11m in large storms. The coast is very remote with limited mobile telephone coverage in many areas. Infrastructure along the coast consists of only a few very small hamlets. The majority of development along the cape-to-cape region is based away from the coast. This wilderness aspect of the coastal strip is one of the regions tourism draws with tourists looking for a wild and natural experience not affected by visible development.

Margaret River Surf Life Saving club was started in 2003 and a Nipper Program was run from 2007 to 2009. An emergency response service has been maintained by the surf club since 2007 consisting of two jet ski's. The club nipper program was re-established in 2017 and is now expanding with nipper numbers around 80 and senior numbers around 20. The club now has two equipment trailers, one jet ski and one IRB. A storage shed is located at Gnarabup which is 7m*7m and insufficient for current requirements.

The club is now looking to expand its operations in line with the local demand for life saving services as tourism and local population increase numbers of people using the coastal areas. At present there are several locations that are being reviewed where lifesaving services will be required which are Redgate Beach, Boodjinup Beach, Gnarabup Beach, Rifle Butts-Narda, River Mouth and GraceTown.

Current Beaches

Redgate Beach

Redgate beach is a long-unprotected beach which is very popular. With the increasing demand coming from local property developments on Redgate road and Witchcliffe town this area will come under increasing focus. It is a dangerous beach with a fixed rip on the northern side of the beach. There are many rescues carried out by local surfers and was the site of one of the most harrowing rescues in recent history with loss of a Jet Ski and one of the patients. The coastline offers little protection to launch equipment in large seas and is not suitable for a Nipper program. A lifeguard presence will need to be established here in the future as a priority.



Boodjinup Beach

Boodjinup is a long-unprotected stretch of beach south of Gnarabup Bay. It has several small banks with waves close to the beach and several travelling rips. It is accessible by a 400m walk from the car park at Gas Bay. Rescues are usually completed by local surfers. It is not a busy beach due to its relative isolation.

Gnarabup Beach

Gnarabup Beach is one of the only sheltered spots on the cape-to-cape region and is becoming very popular. It has a fringing reef with a sheltered inside area that protects the bay from large swells. It is coming under increasing pressure as three swimming groups numbering around 30-80+ swimmers a day swim along the bay. There is also a boat ramp located in the Gnarabup bay corner servicing the local fishing population and jet ski drivers that area accessing the large swells. The current Nipper program is based in the bay as it offers protection from the consistently large swells and is near the main population centres in the area. The Gnarabup corner is also the location of one of the most popular cafés in the region which places a large demand for car parking. In the near future there is a large hotel and chalet development in planning at present which could add large numbers of tourists that will be unaware of the potential dangers of the local ocean beaches. The current boat shed is located nearby the beach area with other emergency services. The shed is currently inadequate for the current demands of the Surf Life Saving Club.

Rifle Butts

Rifle Butts is a large, grassed area with a nearby Beach Area. The beach area has several keyhole entries but is not suitable for water activities. The cross-shore water currents in the area can be strong. Nearby Narda Dog Beach is a small, protected beach which has a small reef protecting the beach. This area has access to the larger Gnarabup Bay. This is a possible location for running nipper activities. Permission would be required to use the access track to the beach to allow for Surf Life Saving operations. There is a car park near rifle butts and a flat area which would be suitable for the erection of a surf club building.

River Mouth

The river mouth is an unprotected beach where the Margaret River enters the Ocean. In the summer, the river does not flow so has a large pool of water that suffers from contamination. During the winter, the river breaks through the bank releasing cold water into the surf break. There is a fixed rip on the southern side of the beach and has a plunging break along the length of the beach. It is often affected with a lot of weed. The Nipper program was run on the beach from 2007-2008 however the numbers dropped significantly due to the cold and wild conditions and was transferred to Gnarabup Beach in 2009. The beach has been patrolled with professional lifeguards over the last 30 years. There is a small storage area where lifeguard boards are stored. Plans have been put forward for the development of a clubrooms in 2006-2008 with no success due to resident opposition.

Gracetown

Gracetown is a protected bay with several surf breaks in the bay. The inside beach is popular and is very safe. There is a limited area for water activities due to a reef close to the shore. The local surf breaks are very crowded and not suitable for surf lifesaving activities. There is a boat ramp which is very well used, and several professional fishing boats operate from the area.



Future Requirements

Requirements going forward for the Margaret River Surf lifesaving club.

1. Storage Shed:

At present expansion of the Gnarabup storage shed is required urgently. There are currently two trailers, two IRBS, one Jet Ski and other lifesaving equipment which are housed at the shed and private residences. In the short term the shed needs to be extended towards the rear of the present block and possibly a second storey added for an interim meeting area.

2. Club House- Surf Club buildings are generally located near the ocean where the main lifesaving focus is concentrated. This arrangement enables a trained voluntary lifeguards to be in close proximity to the area of risk. With the activity of members around the club this increases the hours of surveillance provided with limited cost. Professional lifeguards do provide a service at peak periods of time however voluntary surf clubs generally provide a more complete service over a broader time. With the increasing demand for lifesaving services over the next decade this voluntary service will become more important. The previous plans to locate a club house at River mouth could be further investigated however carparking and visibility issues are a problem in this area. Redgate and Boodjinup beaches are both suitable locations for water surveillance, but both are both open to the elements and significant infrastructure would need to be installed to gain access to the ocean for rescue equipment. Launching of rescue craft in bigger conditions would be very problematic on both beaches. Locating a voluntary rescue service club directly on a beach as per the current model found around the world may not be suitable in the Cape-to-Cape region with the large surf conditions and isolated stretches of coast.

3. Nipper Operations – Development of the Nipper (6-13 years) program is the future lifeblood of the organisation. It provides the education required to develop lifesaving skill going forward. Over time this allows a large group of people in the community to develop significant water-based lifesaving skills. Due to the large surf conditions, there are very few locations that this can be conducted at. Gnarabup and the Rifle Butts area are the most suitable locations due to a combination of consistent smaller ocean conditions and protection from the wind. There is significant pressure on the Gnarabup beach car parking during the peak period of summer. At present the Nipper program closes down during the peak six weeks over the summer holidays which avoids most issues with overcrowding of the car park. Rifle Butts area may be suitable although permission to use the beach access would be required for transporting equipment closer to the beach.



Summary

The model used by the Margaret River Surf Lifesaving movement to develop a comprehensive lifesaving operation will potentially be non-typical to the standard life saving club setup. Smiths beach which is the only other club on the cape to cape coast is located away from the beach in a large shed provided by a local farmer. They use a combination of beaches to operate with much of their training operations conducted on Meelup Beach which is off the cape-to-cape coast and the main rescue focus is on Smiths Beach. Their meeting room is a part of the large shed.

Ideally the Margaret River Surf Club would be located overlooking Gnarabup Bay as a part of the new hotel development and surrounding areas. There will be significant car parking in the area to support a central meeting point like a surf club and it will concentrate lifesaving activity around a dangerous part of the coast that will come under pressure in the next decade. The planned hotel and chalets in the area will require a significant lifeguard presence due to the combination of tourists not familiar with the coastal conditions and the proximity of the coast to the hotel and tourism-based chalets.

The Rifle Butts area has a suitable area for the location of surf club and has access to the nearby Narda Dog beach. There is local car parking which is not under pressure at present. The local beach area is not well used due to the reef along the length of the beach. Access will be required to the track to the beach to transport equipment to Narda Dog Beach.

The present storage area will need to be extended in its current location and a fast response setup should be configured with a jet ski or IRB loaded on an ATV that can be launched at Gnarabup boat ramp. The ATV also can service Boodjinup Beach, Gnarabup or River mouth beaches as required. Access protocols and ramps would need to be configured to access all three locations.

Redgate Beach will need to be serviced in a voluntary lifeguard and professional lifeguard capacity in the near future and may require storage infrastructure and beach access to be created.

The Cape-to-Cape coast provides some unique challenges in the development of a voluntary lifesaving movement. Due to the common large swell conditions and isolated beaches this creates an environment where rescue situations are commonly being generated however the requirement to service these rescues is difficult and widespread along the coast. At present the club is developing a Nipper training program to service this requirement in the future however there are significant infrastructure requirements that will need to be met in the near future.



With a change in the local political parties and investment incentives for community projects there is a possibility of funding becoming available to develop a clubhouse building. The club needs to develop a strategy going forward of how lifesaving services can be delivered over the next decade with the increasing pressure on the local coastline and central to this is an operating area for training and development of local lifeguard volunteers.

Input into this decision is being sort and there will be a discussion after the AGM on a possible location for a clubrooms and operation of the current Nipper Program. From these discussions a strategy will be developed for the advancement of surf lifesaving in the area.