

THE SOCIAL IMPACT of COMMUNITY POOLS in THE PILBARA

Royal Life Saving Society WA

ROYAL LIFE SAVING SOCIETY WESTERN AUSTRALIA

RLSSWA is the largest provider of water safety education in Western Australia, and they depend on community pools to deliver this education.

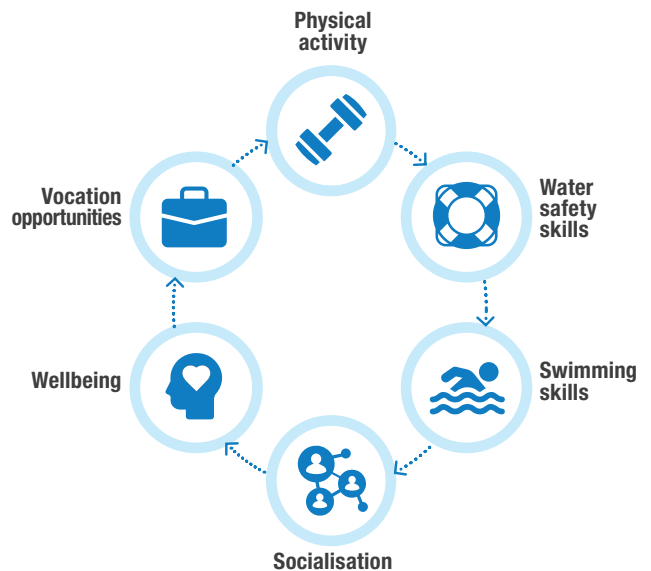


COMMUNITY POOLS IN THE PILBARA

On the surface, community pools might seem like simply places to swim. However, shared pools, particularly those in regional and remote areas, offer significant value for community life. Described as social hubs, community pools present an opportunity for people to meet, learn, and share and connect with culture and Country. They also promote health and wellbeing, as well as create and promote vocational skills and prospects.



RLSSWA PROGRAM AIMS



Education is number one important, especially for my people. If you're not going to go to school... that's why there's always been a big push, get them to school, get your mob to school. [No School, No Pool] is a great idea. They love the pool, especially in a lot of the communities like Yandeyarra and other communities. No school, no pool. They love learning. Learning how to swim is a good one. [Aboriginal community leader]

SWIMMING IN THE PILBARA

Offers both recreational opportunities and challenges due to the region's remote location. While natural waterholes and pools are popular for cooling off, the risk of drowning remains a concern.

Drowning rates in regional WA are 2.5 times higher than in the Perth metropolitan area (10.4 compared to 4.2 per 100,000; Royal Lifesaving Western Australia, 2022).

Regional drowning rates increased by 13% from 2020/21 to 2021/22, whilst metro drownings decreased by 18% in the Perth area.

In WA, Aboriginal Australians experienced a higher incidence of drowning in outer regional, remote, and very remote locations (68% of the time), whilst non-Aboriginal Australians were more likely to drown in cities or inner-regional locations (Royal Lifesaving Australia, 2020).

In the Pilbara, Aboriginal people were more than twice as likely to drown than non-Aboriginal people, at a rate of 16.5 compared to 7.9 per 100,000 (Royal Lifesaving Western Australia, 2022).



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SWIMMING IN THE PILBARA

CSI UWA conducted a social impact evaluation of the Pilbara community pools in Port Hedland, Newman, Yandeyarra, and Jigalong.



Outputs: Programs and activities

Over a 10-month period, there were...



So we need a kind of written instruction in Aboriginal language, but also in Whitefella language and to put them together to integrate, but to ensure that we have the cultural elders available when somebody goes to communities and sees a source of water that needs to be looked at: Is it going to be safe? Can we bring our young people here and teach them the safety measures through the Aboriginal way and the Whitefella way?
[Aboriginal elder]

Oh, if the pool wasn't there, they'd be devastated. It's absolute relief.
[Health practitioner]



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Social Impacts



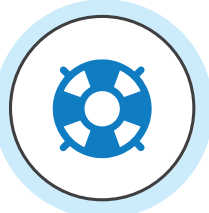
Health and wellbeing

- The pools promote wellbeing through physical activity while having fun and connecting with others.
- Positive physical health outcomes directly related to pool use, e.g., ear, skin and eye health.
- *“More often than not there's glowing feedback on the pool and you notice a massive difference when the pool's not open. We've had anecdotal feedback in some of our pools that for the three or four months the pool's closed there are a lot more presentations at the local clinic”.* [Pool manager]



Social connection

- The pools are “community hubs” and places of social exchange, with a range of activities and events to bring locals together.
- The pools facilitate the development of new relationships and support networks.
- *“A lot of the kids are into swimming. You put a pool in a community, that's where they'll be. You'd rather them being at the pool than bored somewhere else in the community. It's something to do. Any kid, in any community. Especially when there are harsh conditions, like the heat”.* [Aboriginal community leader]
- They have become safe and inclusive spaces.



Safety and education

- Relative to population, programmes were reaching a significant number of children and babies and this directly contributes to the prevention of drowning in WA.
- The “No School No Pool” policy increases school attendance. It is generally well received by locals and is being applied in a place-based way that is sensitive to local wishes.



Social cohesion

- Police utilise the pool space and relationships to facilitate outreach to young people.
- Programs and activities draw in the wider community.



Employment

- The Talent Pool engagement strategy is not only novel, but highly effective at creating engagement and employment opportunities for young people in the region.
- All Talent Pool KPIs were exceeded for 2024 across participation, community events, pools work experience, and three-month employment retention.
- Talent Pool's engagement strategy with young people is effective in large part because it is dynamic, creative, and fun; participants are remunerated; and they have the chance to develop skills for further employment opportunities.
- The benefit of developing local skills and qualifications in the Pilbara cannot be overstated, as the cost to attract staff external to the region is often prohibitively high.

Some kids that are struggling, they come from a bad home environment, but they can come to this place and make it their own. They have opportunities that they wouldn't elsewhere. And then they tend to be role models for the rest of the community. We all know each other in this town, we all know where we come from, how our home lives are. They see these kids struggling, they come to Talent Pool for work and slowly make their way. It really builds the way for the younger generation. [Former Talent Pool member]



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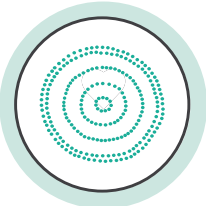
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Recommendations



Building relationships between water and Aboriginal culture

There are opportunities for RLSSWA to increase the outcomes of improved cultural knowledge sharing, better connection to country, and greater self-determination. Existing networks suggest that RLSSWA is uniquely positioned to be an innovative leader in partnership with Aboriginal people and cultural knowledge systems. Deepening cultural engagement would mean learning how to be safe and responsible in the traditional environment and traditional ways of the region, and equally, creating structures which facilitate the transmission of this knowledge in ways that local people want.



Increasing adult engagement

In remote communities at present, 6–11 years olds are most active users of the pools and adults tend to miss out on the health and wellbeing benefits offered by the pools. Employment days for Aboriginal people in remote communities could be further increased. Increasing adult engagement via relationship building in communities is a key recommendation.



Maintain creative involvement with young people

The Talent Pool program in the Pilbara has been very successful in creating engagement with young people and generating employment pathways. It is recommended that RLSSWA continue their investment in creative ideas, particularly in embracing the concept that building relations through novel activities will feed back into the core business of RLSSWA, and ultimately benefit the wider community that RLSSWA serves and operates in.



Addressing resourcing constraints

More support and resourcing is needed to improve the quality of service delivery. In particular, there is a need for more training opportunities. The Talent Pool program may be able to ensure the sustainability of the pool programs, provided there is appropriate resourcing to enable this program to meaningfully reach communities.



Increasing awareness of RLSSWA

Investing some resources into an expansion of brand awareness in the Pilbara would increase knowledge of programs and bolster outcomes. While many people benefit from the pools and RLSSWA's programs, not all stakeholders are necessarily aware of the relationship between RLSSWA and the delivery of the programs.



Resourcing ageing infrastructure

The social benefits of pools cannot be achieved without well-functioning infrastructure. The effects of ageing infrastructure are already being felt in the Pilbara, for example, pool leaks which require constant replenishing. Such problems are only likely to increase in severity with time. Local and state and federal governments may be well positioned to play a role in the Pilbara, for without strong investment in infrastructure maintenance, the BHP-funded RLSSWA programs will eventually become untenable.

