

Lessons in lifeguarding: Southern California first-responders get glimpse into lifesaving an ocean away

By [Laylan Connelly](#) | lconnelly@scng.com | Orange County Register
January 31, 2018 at 6:26 pm



Porter Hogan, of Laguna Beach, and Jake Miller, a lifeguard from the South Bay, both wear white caps as they compete during competition against Australian guards. Photo courtesy Ryan Gates/California State Lifeguards

Imagine going to the beach and looking up where rip currents are, in real time, on your cellphone.

Or being able to know how many beach rescues have been done, up-to-the minute, along the entire California coastline.

A handful of Southern California lifeguards got a glimpse into how lifesaving is done on the other side of the world during an exchange program off the Australian coast, learning lessons they hope can be implemented off local waters.

“They do such next-level stuff,” said California State Parks educational officer Ryan Gates, who is based out of Crystal Cove State Beach. “You can see on a computer screen what is happening, when it is happening. There’s definitely value in it. It’s a matter of infrastructure, funding and a lot of groundwork before it happens (here). It’s not something we could do overnight, but it’s something we can look forward to and say, ‘This is the future.’”



Shannon Snell, a Huntington Beach state lifeguard, watches Kelsey Cummings, a South Bay lifeguard, during a competition in Australia during a recent lifeguard exchange. Photo courtesy Ryan Gates/California State Lifeguards

Gates was one of 16 lifeguards from Orange County, South Bay and Los Angeles beaches who participated in the exchange program with Victoria lifeguards in Australia, a program that happens every two years.

“We were treated like royalty, everyone knew the Californians were in town,” Gates said.

In 2020, local guards will return the favor and host a group from Down Under when they come to California.

It was a milestone year for the “Wieland Shield Lifesaving Exchange,” marking 50 years since the program launched. It is thought to be the longest continual beach lifeguard exchange.

“I was totally thrilled to be able to go and observe and learn and be a part of this longstanding tradition. ... It’s something I’ve known about but didn’t totally understand,” Gates said. “I want to pay it forward, so when they come here they are well taken care of like we were. It was very humbling to be asked to be part of the team.”

The local lifeguards spent two weeks earlier this month touring and learning about the lifesaving operations in Victoria, south of Sydney, and participated in competitions held through their stay. They returned Jan. 16.

Gates said learning about how young, at age 6 or 7, the “nippers,” or junior lifeguards, get into the beach lifesaving culture was eye-opening.

“It’s impressive for me to see such young kids that are so water oriented and into the lifesaving culture,” Gates said. “They are part of the club, like a country club on the beach but instead of golf and tennis, they do beach patrol. It’s this amazing family community that happens on the weekends.”

California guards were given the “nipper” curriculum and may incorporate it into the junior lifeguard program.

Beaches are patrolled by staff during the weekend, and volunteers made up of local surfers, former lifeguards and overall watermen and women watch the water on weekends.

Los Angeles County lifeguard Jay Butki, who works as a paramedic rescue boat captain on Catalina Island, was one of the travelers well versed in how guards operate in Australia. He worked as a lifeguard for five summer seasons there and has been on five exchange trips since 1998.

He said one of the big differences there is that lifeguards put up flags early in the morning, marking the safe areas where swimmers are allowed. Here, the practice is to staff lifeguards in towers, and patrol and respond when there’s danger.

“We’re kind of land of the free and home of the brave, we put our lifeguard towers wherever the people are,” Butki said. “We have to move the people to the safe areas. There, they determine the safe area in the beginning of the day.”

Response is also different. In California, guards use rescue boats and tubs to respond to water rescues, whereas in Australia, they use paddleboards and zodiac boats as their primary tools.

Public outreach is a priority, and they’ve developed virtual-reality goggles, paired with smartphone apps, to teach people what it’s like to be caught in a rip current and how to escape.

Gates said guards there have heat maps that show where rescues and medical aids are happening, and a digital dispatching system that connects all guards from the state so they can live report rescue statistics as they are happening. In Orange County, beaches are run by multiple agencies — made up of state, local and county guards — who keep separate data and use different reporting techniques.

One of the Los Angeles County guards, Azad Al-Barazi, a two-time Olympic swimmer who competed for Syria, met with refugees from that country about ocean safety.

Another guard, Hayden Hemmens from Newport Beach Marine Safety Department, traveled there three months early to train with the locals for ocean competitions. He was a stand out during many of the beach contests, even winning a surf-swim event.

Butki said he hopes to see some of the lessons learned applied at local beaches.

“It’s good to get out of the fishbowl we live and work in and see other ways of doing things,” Butki said. “Hopefully we can take back the good and learn and improve the operations where we work, getting a new perspective.”

Who got to go on the 25th biannual Wieland Shield lifeguard exchange:

Rena Jackson: Cal State Huntington Beach

Shannon Snell: Cal State Huntington Beach

Hayden Hemmens: Newport Beach Lifeguards

Ryan Gates: Cal State Parks, Crystal Cove

Porter Hogan: Laguna Beach Lifeguards

Coral Berry: LACoFD, LG Div, Junior Lifeguards

Kelsey Cummings: LACoFD, LG Div, South Bay

Jenna Solberg: LACoFD, LG Div, South Bay

Azad Al-Barazi: LACoFD, LG Div, Venice

Ryan Bullock: LACoFD, LG Div, South Bay

Tim Burdiak: LACoFD, LG Div, South Bay

Ryan Makuta: LACoFD, LG Div, Venice

Jake Miller: LACoFD, LG Div, South Bay

Manager: Jay Butki: LACoFD, LG Div, Rescue Boats

Coach: Joji Abasolo: LACoFD, LG Div, South Bay

Asst Coach/ Educational Officer: Jeff Hart: LACoFD, LG Div, South Bay

*More photos at <https://www.pe.com/2018/01/31/lessons-in-lifeguarding-southern-california-first-responders-get-glimpse-into-lifesaving-an-ocean-away/>