

WINE NEWS

As tourism thrives along the Great Ocean Road, the Apollo Bay Surf Club struggles to keep up

ABC Ballarat By Dominic Cansdale and Steve Martin

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PHOTO: Apollo Bay Surf Life Saving Club's membership has tripled in the past decade. (Supplied: Apollo Bay Surf Life Saving Club)

As millions of tourists visit Victoria's south-west coast every year, a surf life saving club at the lynchpin of the Great Ocean Road is an unlikely victim of the region's success.

Around 5.1 million tourists travelled along the road in 2017, but more people means more swimmers and the Apollo Bay Surf Life Saving Club has described underinvestment in community safety as "woeful and shameful".

Club redevelopment coordinator David Gorrie said the club is taking twice as long to perform rescues as they should because their clubhouse is at capacity.

"We've really got to stack rescue boats and suspend one rescue boat from the ceiling so the response times to get out to someone in need of saving in the water takes longer," Mr Gorrie said.

"It should take sub-10 minutes, but it takes 10 to 20 minutes to unpack the gear."

Club turning away nippers

With a steadily growing number of tourists, many of whom are inexperienced swimmers, Mr Gorrie said "demand has gone through the roof".

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Key points:

- Apollo Bay surf club says lack of government funding is putting community safety at risk
- 5 million tourists travel along the Great Ocean Road annually, 53.7 per cent swim at beaches
- The club president says up to \$7 million is needed to redevelop the clubhouse

"We're halfway along the Great Ocean Road, we're the place where most tourists stop to have their lunch and an increasing number of those tourists are doing overnight stays as well," he said.

"This is perhaps one of the most important safety and community assets along the Great Ocean Road and as I said, it's well overdue for a redevelopment."

The membership has tripled to 640 members in the past decade but many potential volunteers are now being turned away because the club does not have the capacity for them.

"[It] is a savage indictment at a time when you've got people dying in the water, and people wanting to learn how to save those people."

"We've got a facility that's basically so bad, with showers and toilets blocked and rusting frames and steelwork, that most of those girls these days would prefer to get changed on the beach."

Data from the National Visitor Survey estimated that of the more than 5 million tourists travelling along the Great Ocean Road, 53.7 per cent swim at beaches.

Government funding must catch up, says club

Mr Gorrie said between \$6 and \$7 million is needed to redevelop the 35-year-old clubhouse "from scratch".

"We need a larger facility now to cater for the surf education side of things," he said.

So far the club has met with the local federal member Sarah Henderson and State MP Richard Riordan but are also looking for support from the Colac-Otway Shire Council.

"We're at the beginning of an awareness campaign," Mr Gorrie said.

"We'd like some sort of commitment to be forthcoming and then we'd be looking to develop in the next one or two years ideally."

Chief executive of the shire council, Peter Brown, said the surf club could seek funding through a joint council-State Government plan.

"Council, in partnership with Otway Coast Committee and Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, is about to commence the Apollo Bay Community Infrastructure Plan, and a key component of this work will be the development of the foreshore master plan," he said.

"This strategic planning work will be really important as it will help determine the scope for what is needed from a community service perspective."

Ms Sarah Henderson said she will advocate for the surf club to receive extra funding.

"I was very impressed with the aspirations of the Apollo Bay Surf Life Saving Club members and I am fully supportive of plans to rebuild their club," she said.

Topics: surf-life-saving, tourism, regional-development, accidents---other, charities-and-community-organisations, community-organisations, federal---state-issues, state-parliament, local-government, travel-health-and-safety, safety, apollo-bay-3233, ballarat-3350, warrnambool-3280, torquay-3228, anglesea-3230, lorne-3232

Contact Dominic Canadale



PHOTO: Apollo Bay Surf Life Saving Club President Darren Hill expects the redevelopment to cost more than \$6 million.

(Supplied: Apollo Bay Surf Life Saving Club)



PHOTO: The picturesque town of Apollo Bay on the Great Ocean Road is a key tourist stopover.

(ABC News: Cameron Best)