Helping People Stay Safer

Water Safety Signage and Public Rescue Equipment for Inland Waters

Drowning Prevention Auckland

Drowning Prevention Aotearoa

Contents

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Water Safety Signage

Rivers, lakes, and swimming spots are great places for the community to enjoy. These inland water areas are valuable natural spaces, and many land managers proudly encourage people to visit and make the most of them.

But safety is important. It's the job of land managers to reduce risks, and one way to do that is by putting up clear signs that warn people about hazards. Visitors might not know about local dangers like fast currents, sudden drop-offs, or slippery banks—and signs help fill that knowledge gap.

Water safety signs are an important tool to help prevent drownings and injuries at inland waters across New Zealand. Drowning Prevention Aotearoa recommends that all councils use the Australian/New Zealand Standard 2416:2010 for water safety signs (Standards New Zealand, 2010a; 2010b; 2010c). This standard is looked after by Standards New Zealand, the government body that sets national rules. Coroners have often reminded councils to follow this standard because it helps make signs consistent, easy to understand, and effective—no matter where they are used.

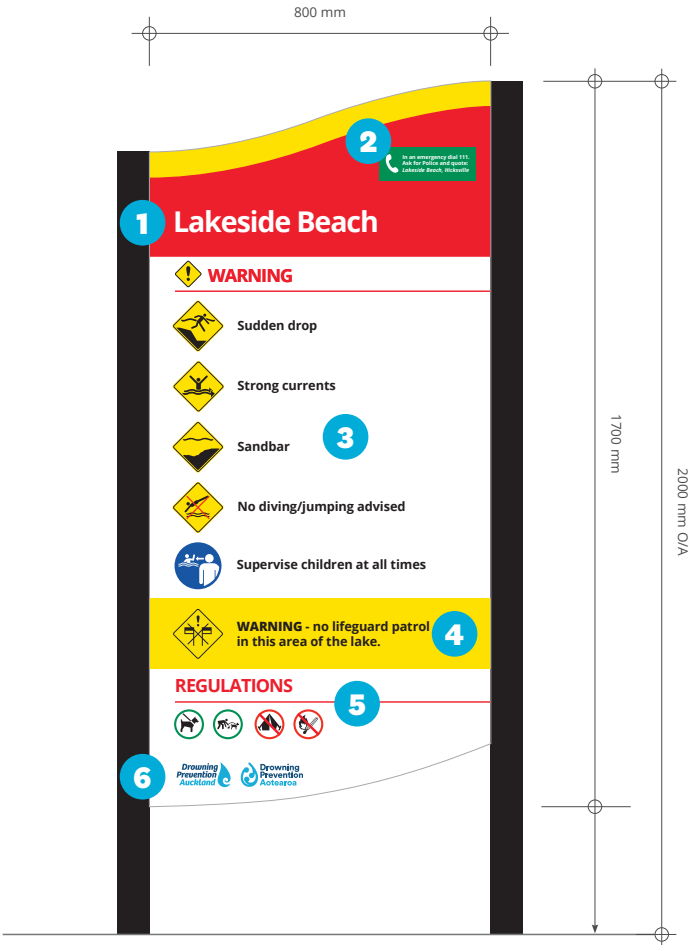
Good signs help people understand the risks and make safer choices around water. But before installing signs, it's important to undertake a risk assessment to understand what the dangers are at each location. The risk assessment will help make sure we only use the signs we really need, so things don't get too cluttered. And while signs are a helpful guide, everyone still must take personal responsibility for their safety when they're near the water.

Signage Design

Following the signage standards makes sure all water safety signs look the same and give clear, consistent messages across the country. The signs should include the following important information:

1. Location name
2. Emergency contact information
3. Safety hazards and safety prohibitions
4. Lifesaving service information
5. Regulations/Bylaws
6. Logos

Figure 1: *Water Safety Signage example*



Hazard Symbols

The standards include a set of commonly used symbols to keep things consistent and easy to recognise no matter where you are. They're designed so that even people who don't speak English can understand them.

Figure 2: *Hazard Symbol examples*

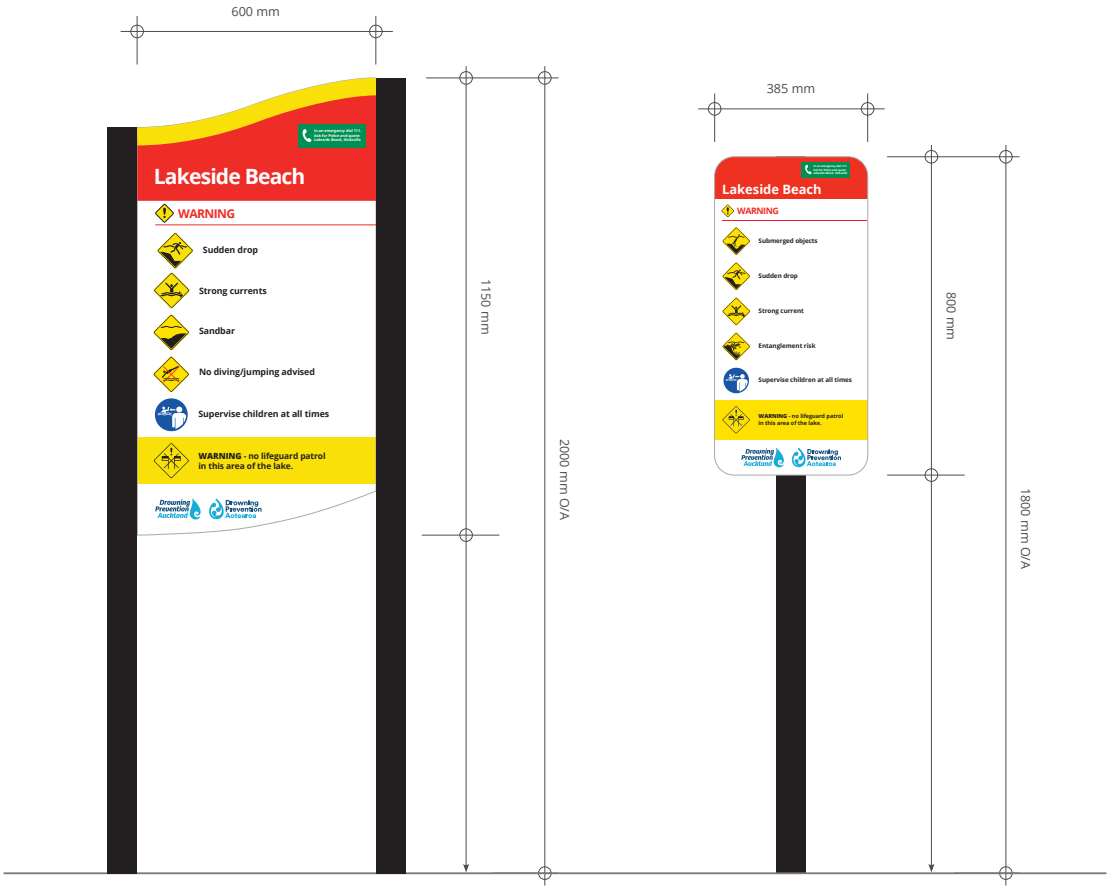
Strong currents **Submerged objects** **Sudden drop off** **Deep water**

Signage Types

Access Signs

Water safety access signs are grouped into two types: primary and secondary. Primary access signs are placed at main entrances to the area. Secondary access signs are used at smaller entry points like footpaths or dune tracks. These secondary access signs can also be placed along walkways or beachfronts to remind people about safety as they move through the area.

Figure 3: *Primary Access Sign (left), Secondary Access Sign (right)*



Hazard and Restriction Signs

Hazard signs are used to warn people about specific dangers that could be very harmful. There aren't strict rules about their exact size or shape.

Figure 4: *Hazard Sign (left), Restriction Sign (right)*

Public Rescue Equipment (PRE)

In most drowning incidents, it's not a lifeguard or professional who helps first—it's a friend, family member, or someone nearby.

When someone gets into trouble in the water, it's often everyday people who step in to help — and this happens more often than you might think. In fact, 14% of New Zealand adults say they've tried to rescue someone from the water (Omnipoll, 2024). These are brave actions, but entering the water without a flotation device can turn a rescue into a tragedy.

This is something we can change.

Public Rescue Equipment (PRE) gives bystanders a safer way to help. When installed at high-risk spots like lakes and rivers, tools like life rings and rescue buoys provide flotation support that can save lives—helping both the person in danger and the person trying to help.

This is a call to action for councils, hapū, and community leaders: take a close look at your local waterways, invest in PRE, and be part of a national effort to prevent drownings.

Knowing what to do—and having the right gear—can save a life.

If someone in your community got into trouble in the water tomorrow, would there be help nearby? Would anyone know what to do?

Ask yourself:

1. How many people in your community can spot the signs of someone drowning and feel confident enough to step in?
2. Who would know how to help safely if someone was drowning—either from land or by entering the water with a flotation device?
3. Where is the rescue gear—like life rings, rescue buoys, or throw ropes—and do people know how to use it?

These aren't just good questions—they're a call to action.

No one wants to feel helpless in a water emergency. By installing public rescue equipment, you're helping communities get the tools and knowledge they need to step up and save lives.

What is Drowning?

Drowning happens when someone's nose and mouth go under the water, making it hard or impossible to breathe. If they don't get help quickly, they can stop breathing, lose consciousness, and die. Drowning is defined as "the process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid" and can result in death, morbidity, and no morbidity (van Beeck et al., 2005).

To save their life, someone must act fast— provide flotation or get them out of the water safely, check if they are breathing, and start CPR if they are not.

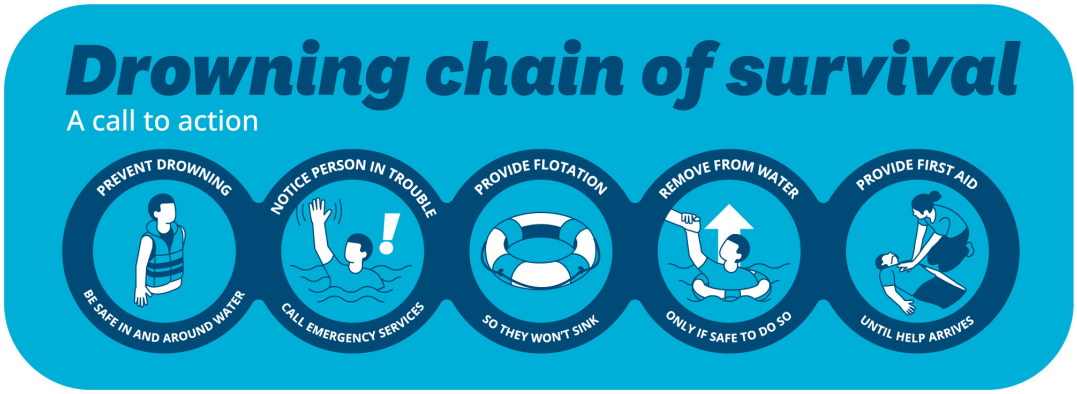
Quick action in those first moments can make all the difference and help the person survive and recover.

The Drowning Chain of Survival

There are important steps that can help save a life in a drowning emergency.

The Drowning Chain of Survival is a simple guide that explains the steps to help prevent drowning and save someone's life. It includes five key actions to follow (Szpilman et al., 2014).

Figure 5: *Drowning Chain of Survival.*
Note. "Creating a Drowning Chain of Survival," by D. Szpilman, J. Webber, L. Quan, J. J. L. M. Bierens, J. C. Mott, C. Tournoux-Facon, & J. R. Sempsrott, 2014, Resuscitation, 85(9), p. 1151. Copyright 2014 by Elsevier. Adapted with permission.



PRE is essential during aquatic emergencies as it provides flotation to keep a person afloat until further help arrives.

This can help keep the person in trouble above water and make it safer for the person helping too.

To work well at rivers, lakes, and other inland water sites, PRE must be:

- Right for the location, considering things like water flow, steep banks, and how easy it is to reach.
- Easy to see and simple to use, so people can act quickly in an emergency.
- Checked and looked after regularly, with a clear plan for fixing or replacing equipment when needed.

To prevent drowning over the long term, two big things are also important:

1. Prevention and Risk Reduction – Many drownings can be stopped before they happen by teaching water safety, watching children closely, building water competencies including swimming skills, and making sure rescue gear is nearby.
2. Community Readiness and Ongoing Support – Keep your community ready by educating people in rescue techniques and CPR, looking after rescue gear, and building a strong safety culture where everyone looks out for each other.

Public Rescue Equipment (PRE) helps save lives in water emergencies.

Types of Public Rescue Equipment

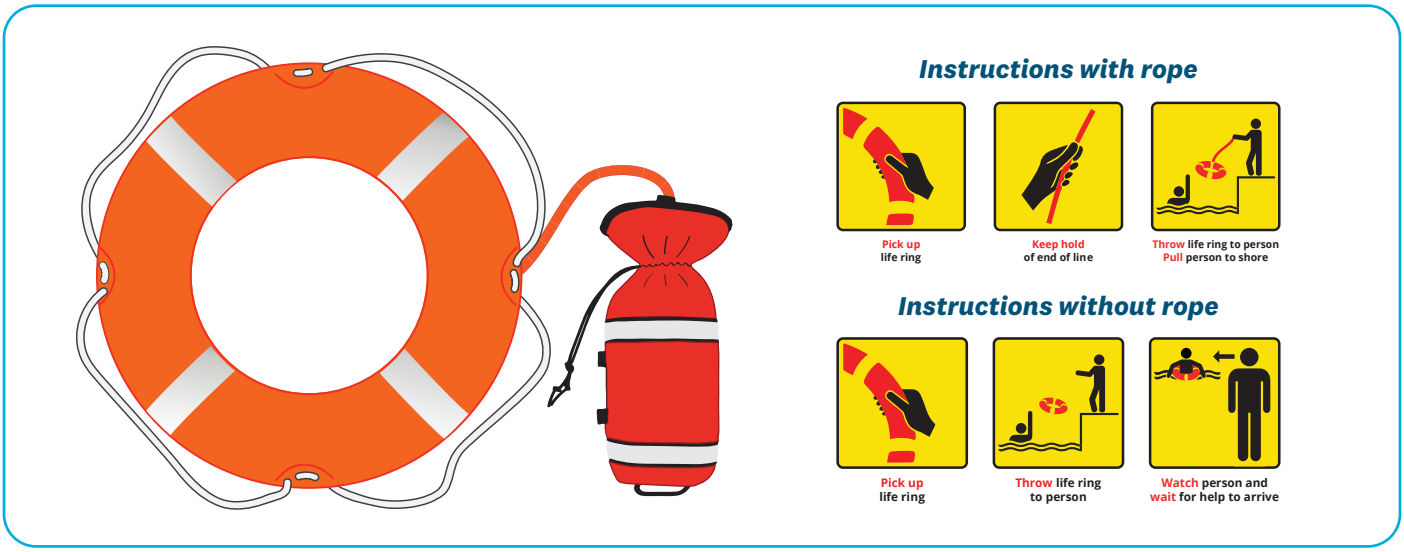
It's important to choose the right rescue equipment for each location. It should suit the local conditions, be easy for anyone to use in an emergency, and follow the New Zealand Standard 5823:2005 "Specification for buoyancy aids and marine safety harnesses and lines" (Standards New Zealand, 2005). It should also follow the guidance in the "Public Rescue Equipment Guide for the New Zealand Coast," developed by Surf Life Saving New Zealand and Drowning Prevention Aotearoa (Surf Life Saving New Zealand, 2024).

Life Ring

A floating rescue ring that's easy to see and throw to someone in the water.

It's often placed at harbours, wharves, and rocky coastlines. A throw bag should be attached if the area has safe spots to pull someone from the water; if not, it's better to leave it off.

Figure 6: *Life Ring and Throw Bag*



Rescue Buoy

An easy-to-hold float that can be passed or towed to someone in the water.

It works well at beach-like environments close to shore and can support one or more people during a rescue. It's useful when help needs to reach someone quickly in the water.

Figure 7: *Rescue Buoy*

Signage and Housing

PRE can be set up in different ways, depending on the location, but the safety message stays the same

The shape of the sign and how the equipment is stored can be changed to suit where it's being put.

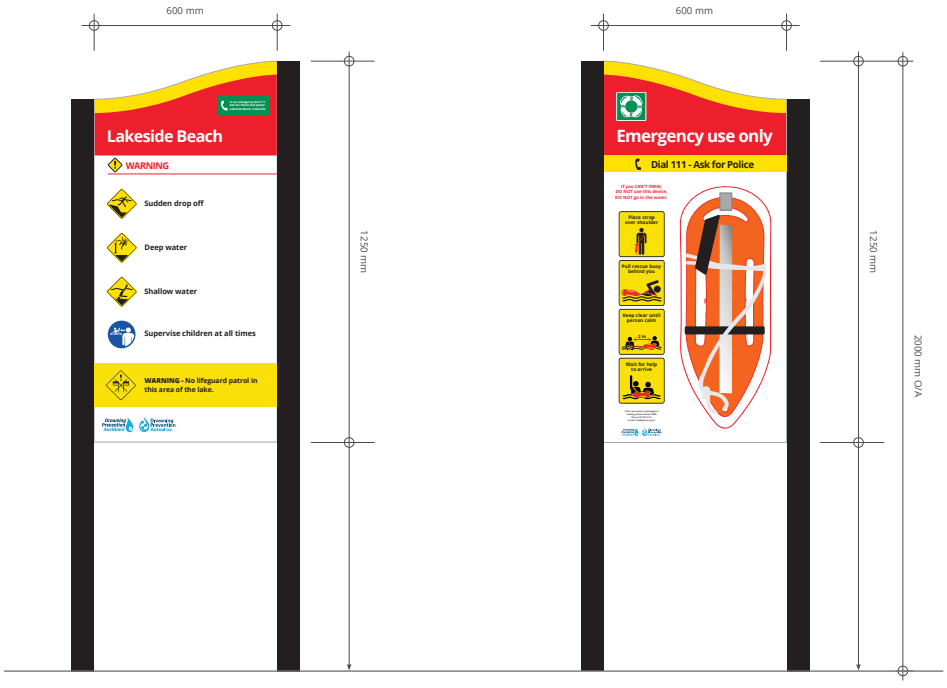
Figure 8: *Life Ring Signage and Housing*

Combining PRE with Water Safety Signage

It's helpful to put water safety signs next to Public Rescue Equipment (PRE).

The signs warn people about dangers in the area. Visitors might not know what to watch out for, so clear signs help them stay safe.

Figure 9: *Combined Signage: Water Safety Signage (left), PRE Signage (right)*



Need help with water safety signage and PRE?

Drowning Prevention Aotearoa are specialists in water safety.

Getting a professional risk assessment for an inland water site helps land managers make smarter safety decisions. DPA follows international standards to assess risks properly, using trusted and evidenced methods to understand the dangers and how to manage them. This means any safety advice is backed by expert knowledge. It helps reduce the chance of accidents and supports safer, enjoyable use of the area.

If you need help choosing water safety signs or rescue equipment, contact DPA. Our team can walk you through the process and recommend the right signs and rescue tools for your site. We'll visit the area, identify any hazards, and suggest the best places for signs and equipment. You'll receive a report with our recommendations and design files ready for your signwriter.

DPA works in association with Surf Life Saving New Zealand (SLSNZ). SLSNZ leads safety efforts at surf beaches, while DPA are the experts on inland waters including rivers, lakes, waterfalls, non-surf beaches, tidal estuaries and more. If your work involves surf beaches, DPA can connect you with the right team at SLSNZ.

The Consultancy Timeline

This is the process that occurs when an enquiry comes into the DPA Consultancy Team.

Figure 10: *The Consultancy Timeline*

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