

The Canary Islands: a Spanish and International “lab” for Drowning Prevention

Las Islas Canarias, laboratorio de estrategias para la prevención de los ahogamientos

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Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) ranks drowning as the third leading cause of non-traumatic death worldwide and a first-order global public health problem.¹ The Canary Islands, the only Spanish and European destination with 365 days of high tourist season, break records month after month in tourist arrivals (17 million projected by the end of 2025), placing the region at the top of national statistics. However, the islands also record the highest number of drowning deaths in Spain. More than 1.5 million people die from drowning globally every year, around 500 in Spain and 72 in the Canary Islands in 2024.

Aware of this scenario, in 2015 we launched what was initially the platform Canarias, 1,500 Km de costa, which later became a non-profit association.²

For decades, society has accepted as natural the annual campaigns on road traffic accident prevention, fire prevention, or measures against rising temperatures (heat waves). However, until then, no mass prevention campaign had been developed for accidents in aquatic environments. The objective was therefore to generate a culture of water safety.

Canarias, 1,500 Km of coast

The first public action carried out that year was the launch of a summer audiovisual campaign entitled Canarias, 1,500 Km de costa, with the recording of short spots recreating the most common risk situations faced by individuals interacting in aquatic spaces under different circumstances. With the support of the Presidency of the Government of the Canary Islands, for the first time in Spain and in the EU, recommendations were broadcast to prevent and reduce incidents on beaches, swimming pools, water parks, and reservoirs through the regional television and public radio.

That summer, some 11 million viewers and listeners were reached by the campaign,

according to broadcast certificates provided by both media outlets.³

Alongside the Government of the Canary Islands, other institutions gradually joined the initiative, including the Cabildo of Gran Canaria (since then the main sponsor of the association, together with the Elder Museum of Science and Technology), the city councils of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and San Bartolomé de Tirajana, the airline Binter, the Canary Islands Hospitality and Tourism Business Federation, and various hotel chains.

At the same time, in that same year, the platform began to compile monthly statistical reports of incidents registered daily in the Canary Islands.⁴ These reports include the number of fatalities by drowning, victims of critical, severe, moderate, and mild drownings, rescues, sex, nationality, and age of victims, time of day, island of incident, and the type of activity and aquatic environment at the time of the event.

The audiovisual campaign

The campaign took a fully positive approach. Tourists and residents were encouraged to enjoy beaches, swimming pools, and reservoirs with moderation and common sense. The message of complying with preventive measures and respecting lifeguard recommendations was reinforced throughout the production. Another objective was to reaffirm the Canary Islands as a safe destination.

The campaign included a 22-minute documentary and nine micro-clips, each two minutes long, recorded in six languages (Spanish, English, German, Swedish, Italian, and French). These recreated the nine most common risk situations for bathers and conveyed basic recommendations for activities such as diving, swimming with reduced mobility, safety advice for reservoirs and ponds, and behaviour during high-risk water sports (jet skis, windsurfing, kitesurfing, etc).

Additional advice included respecting flag signals on beaches, pool safety for chil-

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dren and older adults, preventing “hydrocution,” risks of taking selfies near cliffs and coasts, recommendations for anglers, and the “false hero” phenomenon—people who dive into the sea to rescue bathers in distress, which may end in double tragedy. These videos continue to be broadcast on regional television, radio, and major social media platforms.⁵



Other actions

Not satisfied with this initiative, we identified the need to spread a culture of aquatic prevention and safety to a society largely “illiterate” in this area.

Talks were offered to students, initially targeting children aged 7 to 15 during the 2016–2017 school year at the Elder Museum of Science and Technology and in numerous schools across the Canary Islands. Later, the programme was expanded to all educational levels, from primary education to both public universities of the Canary Islands.³

By the end of the 2024–2025 academic year, we estimate that 23,000 people across 9 countries will have received knowledge and basic advice on how to act responsibly and sensibly when accessing aquatic environments.

The Canary Islands Parliament: first to address aquatic accidents

In June 2017, the Parliament of the Canary Islands became the first regional chamber in Spain to address the growing yet neglected phenomenon of drownings on the islands’ coasts. During a hearing in the Security Commission, deputies were presented with statistical data and shown the campaign’s micro-clips.

In 2016, 414 drowning deaths were recorded in Spain, 72 of them in the Canary Islands, giving the region the national record for drowning deaths that year. Lawmakers also learned that, while 38 people died in road accidents in the Canary Islands in 2015, drownings nearly doubled that figure.

One year after this parliamentary intervention, a decree was approved to regulate safety measures on beaches and maritime bathing areas. Entering into force in 2018, the decree established rules for human safety and emergency coordination in these spaces. Its main objective was to improve user safety on beaches and reduce accident risk.

Published in the *Boletín Oficial de Canarias*, the decree detailed municipal obligations regarding surveillance,

signage, and equipment for bathing areas.⁶ It also included measures to improve coordination among different authorities in emergencies, ensuring that Canary Island beaches would be adequately resourced to handle risks and protect bathers and users.⁷

Intervention in the European Parliament

In November 2018, we presented the “First Approximate Report on the Phenomenon of Drownings in the European Union 2015–2018” before the European Parliament in Brussels. The report revealed that approximately 5,000 people drowned annually in the EU. This three-year study was also presented to senior representatives of the European Commission. The report emphasised that drowning is the third leading cause of unnatural death in Europe.⁸

The findings showed an almost universal and progressive increase in drownings between 2015 and 2018, with certain regions experiencing particularly high numbers of fatalities.

In addition to mortality figures, the dossier highlighted the importance of treating drowning as a public health issue and breaking the silence surrounding it. It underscored the need to implement preventive and safety measures, introduce swimming lessons across EU countries, encourage life jacket use, and regulate alcohol consumption while swimming or using watercraft.

In summary, the report provided an overview of drowning in the EU and stressed the urgency of action to reduce this preventable cause of death.

Historic decision in the Spanish Congress of Deputies

On September 29th, 2021, the Spanish Congress of Deputies approved a motion to reduce drownings and accidents in aquatic environments. This motion, unprecedented in world parliaments, sought to implement measures to prevent such accidents and improve safety in swimming pools, beaches, and other aquatic environments.⁹

Proposed measures included:

- Improved pool safety: installation of security systems such as alarms and fences, as well as hiring qualified lifeguards.
- Education and awareness: implementing information and awareness campaigns on aquatic risks targeting different age groups and sectors.
- Regulation of aquatic activities: establishing clear rules for recreational and sporting water activities to ensure participant safety.
- Improved emergency response: strengthening rescue and emergency response systems in aquatic areas, including training specialised personnel and enhancing response protocols.
- Collaboration among authorities: promoting coordination among national, regional, and local administrations to pool resources and efforts in preventing aquatic accidents.

This motion, approved with amendments, reflected the Spanish Congress's commitment to aquatic safety by combining prevention, education, regulation, and emergency response measures.

United Nations Actions

Recently, on 28 April of this year, the United Nations General Assembly called on all countries to implement measures to prevent drowning, which has caused more than 2.5 million deaths in the past decade. The resolution urged countries to take action.

The Assembly stressed that drowning is preventable through low-cost interventions and urged nations to include water safety, swimming, and first aid lessons as part of school curricula. It also encouraged countries to enact water safety legislation.

"Desahogo," the first documentary in the world dedicated to drowning

Drowning is known as the "silent death" because victims are unable to cry out for help. However, it should no longer remain a silenced death, as it is among the leading causes of accidental mortality.

On June 16th 2021, Sebastián Quintana and the association *Canarias, 1,500 kilómetros de costa* presented *Desahogo* at the Elder Museum of Science, the first documentary in the world dedicated to the prevention of this type of death.¹⁰ To date, the film has been screened in three countries (Spain, Argentina, and Uruguay). In October 2024, it premiered in Ushuaia, Argentina, the last inhabited city before reaching the South Pole, on the doorstep of Antarctica.

The audiovisual work, lasting 120 minutes (divided into 2 episodes), includes the real stories of 10 victims and relatives recounting their personal and family experiences of these tragedies. It also features the views of experts from different countries who provide professional perspectives on how to act and describes the journey of this collective from Gran Canaria in raising awareness among institutions about the importance of preventive measures.

Desahogo includes moving testimonies of those who lived through real-life experiences, without sensationalism. The director defines it as a "bio-report-docu", a combination of biography, reportage, and documentary.

The film highlights accounts from families, friends, survivors, and rescuers of drowning incidents. Interspersed with these cases, 20 experts offer guidelines, analyses, and advice on how to prevent drowning. It also includes contributions from an Argentine psychologist specialised in these events, who presented the concept of the "immortality syndrome," according to which people, especially young people, believe accidents happen only to others, far from reality.

The project took 2 years to complete, and was filmed in 5 countries (Canary Islands, Galicia, Colombia, Argentina, Belgium, and Paraguay). Plans to extend to other European and American countries had to be modified due to the pandemic.

The documentary also recounts steps taken with government administrations to raise awareness of the seriousness and magnitude of drownings.

It makes clear that drownings are preventable: 80% result from negligence or recklessness (eg, ignoring red flags), and 20% end in tragedy. Prevention, therefore, must reach schools, just as it has with road safety.¹⁰

Invisible drowning syndrome

A high percentage of minors who drown do so under an episode described as the "invisible drowning syndrome," in which children surrounded by people go unnoticed as they drown in areas that appear risk-free, at least to adults. The child makes spasmodic movements and splashes in the water, often mistaken for play, while in fact they are drowning.

Unfortunately, experience tells us that many children will continue to die. It is therefore essential to make an appeal to authorities and, above all, to the adults accompanying minors to pay special attention to them to prevent such tragedies.

We urge maximum vigilance from adults whenever young people are in the water, whether they are under their direct supervision or not, and that, if there is any doubt about whether a child may be in difficulty, they immediately check to ensure everything is all right.

We have coined this term because the lack of vigilance by adults responsible for children's care accounts for 90% of aquatic accidents involving minors. Nationwide, it is estimated that between 40 and 50 children drown every year, likely due to this absence of adult response and the confusion of warning signs.

And not only in Spain but across Europe, thousands of children are being introduced to aquatic environments with virtually no initiation, education, or prior awareness.¹¹

The Government of the Canary Islands recently launched a series of prevention courses for clubs and federations throughout the islands, aimed at minors and delivered by our association.¹² We believe this can be an important tool for prevention, since in the last 6 years, 11 children have drowned in the Canary Islands alone. So far this year, 18 minors have drowned in Spain, and in most cases this has been due to negligence, lack of knowledge, and insufficient vigilance by the adults responsible for their care.

The 10 "Commandments" of aquatic safety prevention

In addition to the Decalogue of Lifeguarding of the Spanish Society of Emergency Medicine (SEMES), produced in collaboration with the #SaludsinBulos Institute to dispel common myths surrounding drowning prevention, water rescue, first aid, and aquatic healthcare,^{13,14} our association developed the following public recommendations:

1. Do not swim when the red flag is raised

Most marine accidents occur because people ignore flag signals. A red flag is a stop signal, yet many continue swimming despite the danger.

2. Never swim against a rip current

Rip currents are among the greatest risks to swimmers, pulling them offshore. If caught, conserve energy, remain calm, and wave your arms to be seen instead of fighting the current.

3. Do not become the “false hero”

If you see someone drowning, call emergency services (112) and assess weather and sea conditions before attempting a rescue. Remove clothing and take a flotation device if you decide to enter the water. Otherwise, you risk becoming a second victim.

4. Beware of invisible drowning syndrome

This phenomenon, especially affecting children, is a leading cause of unnoticed drowning in Spain.

5. Wear a helmet and life jacket when fishing in rocky or cliff areas

Always check the forecast, sea, and wind conditions. Use a helmet, appropriate footwear, and, above all, a life jacket.¹⁵

6. Children

A float at sea can be a deadly toy. Infants are most vulnerable to drowning; even a small amount of water suf-

fices for tragedy.¹⁶ Floats are toys, not life-saving devices, and animal-shaped inflatables are especially hazardous as wind and waves can sweep children offshore. Adults should always get in the water with their children.

7. Selfies, the last “like”

Taking selfies on cliffs or coasts, especially in heavy seas, is increasingly common and extremely dangerous. And if this situation occurs in strong waves due to its spectacular nature, the chances of suffering an even more serious mishap are multiplied, given the urgency with which it is intended to be done to ensure the spectacular nature of the image.

8. Safe diving

Always dive with at least one partner, check your equipment, and know your physical limits. Professional supervision is recommended.

9. Hydrocution (“digestive shock”)

After a heavy meal or long sun exposure, enter the water gradually. Avoid sun exposure longer than 30 minutes without protection and always use sunscreen.

10. Risks of bathing in rivers, dams, lakes, and ponds

Ensure bathing is permitted and remember freshwater has lower buoyancy, wear a life jacket or flotation device.

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