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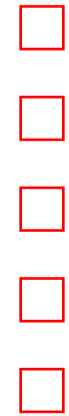
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LET IT POUR

# Waters of Death

By Stewart Taggart

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Australia has 11,000 beaches and 12,000 dangerous rip currents. Andy Short says he's seen them all.

Over the past 14 years, the director of Sydney University's Marine Sciences Centre has driven to, landed on or flown over Australia's 35,000 kilometres of coastline. Along the way, he's classified the safety risk of each beach on a scale of 1-10 using equations with eye-glazing variables like wave-fall velocity parameters, swash-zone kinematics and mean sand-grain sizes.

Now, the ambitious 56-year-old wants to take all his data and combine it with updated meteorological and weather-buoy observations to create precise, highly targeted four-day forecasts of danger spots along every one of Australia's beaches. The information would be made available to beach-goers over the Internet and, possibly, via mobile phones.

Each year, an estimated 100 people drown at Australian beaches, and there are 10,000 beach rescues. Worldwide, half a million people drown annually--albeit from all sorts of causes, including sinkings and floods. It's a number Short wants to cut, at least on the beach.

While the scientist acknowledges his work gets him a lot of quality beach time, he stresses that he's also visited some places that are less than holiday-perfect. "I've landed on some beaches where I could see fresh crocodile tracks that made me very, very nervous," he says. Short has also had to coax temperamental outboard motors back to life and deal with a lot of sunburn.

But his most trying encounters have been with barramundi fanatics keen to keep secret their favourite angling spots.

"Some of these fishermen were pretty hostile," Short says. "They couldn't believe I was just checking out the beaches."



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