

## MARITIME RESCUE INSTITUTE COASTAL NOTES – 5 MARCH 2008

Can you imagine the impact on marine safety if every rescue facility around the coastline of Scotland were suddenly to disappear? No lifeboats, SAR helicopters, lighthouses, radar, GPS, coastguards, navigation lights and buoys, telephony, not even lifejackets. It wouldn't be long before the death toll started to rise with devastating results for families and the economy. Yet, this is exactly the situation faced by the fishermen on Lake Victoria, the largest lake in Africa and on all the other Rift Valley lakes.

Lake Victoria is almost exactly the same size as Scotland, supports hundreds of thousands of fishermen, yet, until very recently, lacked the entire rescue and navigation facilities that we take for granted. Fishing is an industry worth more than US\$200 million in annual export earnings to Uganda, and supports an estimated 700,000 people across the country. All this activity happens in small communities, scattered along the lakeside and the islands; fishermen have a very fatalistic attitude to drowning and most cannot swim, nor own a lifejacket.

Fishing is mainly carried out in large wooden canoes, some with a small outboard, most powered by paddles. They will often fish anything up to 30 miles offshore; the weather is changeable and, despite being an inland lake, the seas can get rough very quickly. An estimated 5,000 fishermen drown every year on Lake Victoria alone. Once over the horizon, they have no way of calling for help.

Six years ago, the National Lake Rescue Institute (NLRI) was founded. The first rescue station was established outside Kampala, the Ugandan capital, soon followed by a second at Kaiso on Lake Albert. Kaiso personifies the stereotypical African village: little thatched huts, beaten earth floors, cooking outside on charcoal fires, lots of children with huge smiles, no fresh water supply and no sanitation. It's really no different to most other fishing communities in the area.

One of their first projects was to encourage and train fishermen to use a lifejacket; they designed an affordable jacket, which is made by local women on treadle operated Singer sewing machines. It proved an uphill struggle to persuade these fatalistic fishermen to even try out a lifejacket at first – they have a great fear of water and couldn't believe that this contraption would make them float. However, confidence grew, and lifejackets began to be worn. There was still a great deal of skepticism until a boat carrying 23 people capsized with only 5 survivors; one managed to swim ashore, one had on his lifejacket and three others clung to a lifejacket until they were picked up. Now lifejackets are a fully accepted part of their equipment.

Their rescue craft are small rigid inflatables that are simple to maintain; crews have been trained in boat handling and engine maintenance as well as rescue techniques. The pride they feel in their role is palpable and augers well for the future. Recently the International Maritime Rescue Federation (IMRF) visited NLRI and decided to support their work as a template for setting up other rescue services throughout the Rift Valley lakes.

For more information on Lake Rescue visit their website [www.lake-rescue.org](http://www.lake-rescue.org).

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