WWS 2007 – International Signs and Beach Safety Flags "Is it possible to achieve an International Beach Safety Flag system?"

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INTRODUCTION

Signs and flags are important on beaches to inform users about local information, lifeguard services and potential safety risks. Signs and flags are not only important to people unfamiliar with the beach but also to regular beach users in relation to current and changing conditions.

Signage has played an important role in risk and safety management at aquatic locations around the world. It is therefore in everyone's interest to derive one common standard for water safety signage and beach safety flags so that there is no misunderstanding when people visit a beach anywhere within the world. A common standard will assist in warning the public on where and where not to swim.

This paper reviews the current status of safety signage and beach safety flags and asks the question whether it is possible to achieve a common standard throughout the world.

BACKGROUND

Signage is important for three reasons: [1]

1. It informs sers of dangers, safety issues and other relevant information.
2. It offers some protection to the land manager and venue operator from litigation because of the duty of care owed by the land manager to warn users of dangers, prohibitions and other safety information.
3. It provides an economical alternative to that of employing a person to stand at every access track into the reserve to inform people of the dangers.

The International Lifesaving Federation (ILS) adopted a range of beach safety flags in 2002.[2] This followed a detailed analysis of member organisation standards and recommendations from the ILS Rescue and Education Committee.

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is currently developing their own standard [3] (ISO/DIS 20712-2) which differs both in the number of flags proposed and the colour and meaning of certain flags.

Other ILS member organisations also have a number of variations in relation to beach safety flags. Currently all organisations believe that their standard is the preferred method. Detailed discussions are continuing at all levels to attempt to resolve this issue.

The major challenge remains the personal preference and long standing tradition in various countries with all countries reluctant to change their current system as it will require time, effort and money to both replace existing signage and flags, and to re-educate the public as to the meaning of certain symbols and flags.

DISCUSSION
Beach Safety Flags

The ILS beach safety flag standard has 8 recommended flags while the ISO draft standard has 6. The differences are highlighted in the attached table (Table 1)

Comparison of ILS standard beach safety flags with the draft ISO beach safety flag standard.

	ILS flag	Meaning	ISO flag (draft)	Meaning
1	**Red/Yellow** – (halved) red over yellow	Recommended swimming area with lifeguard supervision	**Red/Yellow** – (red half at the top)	Lifeguard patrolled swimming zone
2	**Yellow**	Medium hazard	**Yellow**	General warning flag
3	**Red**	High hazard	**Red**	Do not enter the water
4	**Purple**	Marine pests present	**Not included**	None
5	**Black/White** (quartered)	Watercraft area	**Black/White** (quartered)	Surfboard and other watercraft boundary
6	**Not included**	None	**Red/White** (quartered)	Emergency Evacuation
7	**Yellow** flag with central **Black** ball	Watercraft use prohibited (e.g. no surfboards)	**Not included**	None
8	**Orange** – cone shaped windsock	Offshore winds present, inflatables should not be used	**Orange** – truncated cone	No inflatable to be used on the water
9	**Red over Red**	Water closed to public use	**Not included**	None

Table 1 – Comparison between ILS and draft ISO Beach Safety Flags.

Colour
As can be seen from the table, 5 flags are common with respect to colour – the red and yellow, the red, the yellow, the black and white quartered, and the orange windsock. ILS has 3 flags that are not included in the draft ISO standard – the purple, the yellow with black central ball, and the red over red. ISO has one flag that is not included in the ILS standard – the red and white.

From a colour point of view, it is possible to make the ISO standard a sub set of the ILS standard providing that ILS adopts a Red and White, Emergency Evacuation flag. The ILS Rescue Committee has foreshadowed an addition to the current ILS standard to resolve this issue, subject to the final deliberations of the ISO Committee (ISO/TC 145/SC 2) reviewing the standard. It is therefore possible to have one set of flag colours, with the ISO standard flags (6 in total) being a sub set of the ILS flags.

Meaning
Unfortunately, some of the meanings attributed to the various flag colours are different.

The main differences are in the general warning flags, i.e. the Yellow flag and the Red flag. The Yellow and Red flags have been included as part of a general escalating warning system similar to he traffic light system. However, both ILS and ISO have acknowledged that we should not fly a Green flag signifying safe beach conditions as we cannot guarantee that any beach is safe under all conditions. We are therefore left with a Yellow flag and a Red flag as part of this general warning system.

1. YELLOW FLAG – The ISO definition is that of a "General Warning" when this flag is flown while the ILS definition is "Medium Hazard". I do not see this as an issue as under both interpretations it is reasonable to expect the bathing public to understand that some caution is needed when swimming.
2. RED FLAG – This is where the major difference lies. Under ISO, a Red flag means "Do not enter the water" while ILS states that a Red flag means "High Hazard", i.e. It may be possible to swim but be warned, conditions are hazardous and you need strong swimming ability. In the ILS flag system, they have an additional flag, a double Red flag, or Red over Red, which signifies "Water closed for public use". In a number of jurisdictions, the lifeguards have the authority to prevent people from entering the water by closing the beach to public access whereas many volunteer lifeguards do not have that authority. Under ISO interpretation where a Red flag signifies "Do not enter the water", the Red and Yellow recommended swimming zone flags should (must?) be taken down. In the ILS scenario, the Red and Yellow "recommended swimming area" flags could remain in place and only taken down when the Red over Red flag is flown. In any event, most people will recognize that a Red flag would mean 'stop' or 'don't go'. We should all continue to promote safe swimming and only to swim where lifeguards have a designated patrolled area set p. If the Red and Yellow flags are not flying, then the general public should not swim. Again, I feel that the general interpretation and intent is similar. However, in today's litigious society, minor differences could be contested. The ISO draft standard has been widely circulated for comment and it is unlikely that any wording changes will occur. It remains then a debate at ILS Rescue Committee and ILS Lifesaving Commission whether to change the wording and meaning of the Red flag and whether or not the Red over Red still has a place. I believe that the Red over Red can remain and flown when the local lifeguards have the authority to close the beach to public use, and the Red flag is flown when conditions are hazardous.

What will stop a common set of beach safety flags from being introduced?
1. EGO – ILS already has a policy in place following input from the major lifesaving federations from around the world – the 'in field' experts - why should they change? The Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) [3] in the United Kingdom and Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) [1] have also published their own Best Practice Guides and will want to promote their expertise in this area. Fortunately, both of these guides are similar to the draft ISO standard so it remains whether the ILS and ISO draft standard can be more closely aligned.
2. COST – Many local Governments (particularly in USA), have just spend considerable money changing to the ILS endorsed standard following a number of high profile court cases arising as a result of lack of, or inconsistent, beach safety flags – who will pay for the "new" flags and advertising campaigns? France also has a different system of flags which they have been using with good effect for some time and are reluctant to change.
3. LANGUAGE – There will continue to be some slight terminology and interpretative meaning issues between countries due to language differences. However, the general meaning should be able to be conveyed.
4. CULTURE – A number of Asian countries (and in particular Korea), do not endorse the Black and White flag for culture reasons as it signifies death while a number of other countries totally reject Red and Yellow as a designated swimming area as they believe the colours are contradictory.

Water Safety Signage
One of the ILS Rescue Committee objectives for the current term of the committee is:
"ILS representatives have solicited input from all Member Federations and have taken effective, affirmative actions to appropriately influence work of the International Standards Organisation with respect to the development of a best practice standard signage template consistent with the views of ILS"

ISO has commenced the process of developing a standard signage template and specifications for signage for aquatic areas. Five members of the ILS Rescue Committee are members of the ISO Water Safety Signs and Beach Safety Flags working group and have been able to influence both the number and style of the signage. Information from the recent ILS Member Organisation survey provided details of signage currently used within Member Organisations.

Draft ISO standards for both "Guidance for the use of water safety signs and beach safety flags" (ISO/DIS 20712-3) and "Specifications for water safety signs and beach safety flags" (ISO/DIS 20712-1) have been issued for feedback. It is expected that once these are formally adopted by ISO, ILS will refer to these standards as best practice. The ILS Rescue Committee will continue to provide input into the ISO process. It is not expected that ISO will finalise their recommended standard until late 2008.

CONCLUSION
It is possible to have a common International water safety signs and beach safety flag system. However, a number of compromises will need to be made in relation to beach safety flags as articulated in this paper. ILS is working with ISO to establish a common water safety signage system. While this may not cover all member organisation signage requirements, it will go a long way to establishing a world wide standard.

TAKE HOME MESSAGES
1. To understand the difference between the ILS recommended standard for beach safety flags and the draft standard proposed by ISO.
2. To review options in relation to establishing a common international standard.
3. To note a proposed way forward that will enable all organisations to move towards a common beach safety flag system.
4. To note that ILS is working with ISO to establish a common beach safety signage system.

References.
(1) Life Saving Victoria, "National Aquatic and Recreational Signage Style Manual", Third Edition, 2006
(2) International Lifesaving Federation, "Beach Safety and Information Flags", 2004
(3) International Organization for Standardization, ISO/TC 145/SC 2, Draft ISO/DIS 20712-1, 20712-2, 20712-3, 2007
(4) Royal National Lifeboat Institution, "A guide to beach safety signs, flags and symbols", RNLI 2005