ПЛИВАЧКИ САВЕЗ СРБИЈЕ
Serbian Swimming Federation

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Open Water Safety Guidelines

SWIMSAFE - Safe Return of Swimmers to Nature

Structured educational framework for open water swimming risks, self-rescue techniques and environmental responsibility

SWIM SAFE

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Document status and safety note

This guide is prepared as the final version of SWIMSAFE Deliverable D1.5. It translates the project objective into an educational, practical and regionally adaptable framework for swimming federations, clubs, coaches, instructors, schools, municipalities and community organisations.

Important: this document is an educational framework, not a substitute for national legislation, lifeguard certification, medical advice, official event rules, or site-specific emergency planning. Any in-water activity, especially with children or groups, must be delivered only by appropriately qualified staff, with local permissions, safety cover, first-aid readiness, participant consent, and a written emergency action plan.

1. Purpose and scope of the guide

The purposeofthe SWIMSAFE OpenWater SafetyGuidelines is to provide a shared educational framework for safer, moreconfident and more responsible participation in open water swimming across Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia,supporting harmonised implementationacross the three partner countries.

The guideaddresses three connected areas: openwater swimming risks, self-rescue and personal survival techniques,and environmental responsibility. It isdesigned for integration into training sessions, club education, capacity-building workshops, community awarenessactivities, and digital learning resources.

Target users	Expected use	Main outcome
Coaches and instructors	Planning and delivering safe introductory sessions, briefings and drills.	Improved ability to prepare swimmers for natural water environments.
Young swimmers and recreational swimmers	Learning how open water differs from pools and how to respond if difficulty occurs.	Better awareness, safer decision-making and confidence within limits.
Swimming clubs and federations	Embedding open water safety education into regular club and federation programmes.	A shared, adaptable framework that supports long-term sustainability.
Municipalities, schools and community organisations	Supporting awareness campaigns, community activities and responsible use of natural waters.	Broader public understanding of water safety and environmental care.

2. Educational principles and safety responsibilities

Open water safety education must be built around prevention first. Self-rescue skills are essential, but they do not replace good planning, safe supervision, realistic assessment of conditions, and the ability to cancel or modify an activity when conditions are unsuitable.

- **Prevention before rescue:** The safest activity is the one where risks are identified and controlled before anyone enters the water.
- **Progressive learning:** Participants move from classroom learning to controlled practical activities and only then to supervised open water practice.
- **Local adaptation:** Rivers, lakes, reservoirs and coastal waters require different safety decisions; each site must be assessed individually.
- **Never alone:** Open water swimming should be organised with a buddy system, supervision and an agreed emergency procedure.
- **Respect personal limits:** Swimmers should stop, exit or not enter whenever they feel cold, tired, unwell, anxious, disoriented or unsafe.
- **Environment as part of safety:** Water quality, pollution, weather, wildlife and habitat protection are not separate topics; they directly affect swimmer safety and sustainability.

Recommended roles for organisedsessions

Role	Core responsibility	Minimum expectation
Session lead / coach	Plans the learning session, confirms participant readiness, gives safety briefing and controls entry/exit.	Qualified for the activity level and familiar with the site-specific plan.
Safety officer	Assesses conditions, monitors weather and hazards, controls the stop/go decision.	Has authority to pause, modify or cancel activity.
Water safety / lifeguard cover	Provides rescue capability appropriate to the venue and group profile.	Certified or formally appointed according to national/venue rules.
First aid / medical support	Provides immediate first aid and activates emergency services when needed.	Trained first aider with equipment and clear access route.
Communications person	Keeps phone/radio access, emergency numbers, participant list and incident log.	Knows exact location and nearest emergency access point.

3. Open water risk profile

Open water is different from the pool because conditions change. The risk profile can shift within minutes due to weather, wind, current, temperature, boat traffic, visibility, group fatigue, water quality or sudden crowding. The following risk areas should be addressed in every training session and site assessment.

- **Water movement:** Currents, river flow, rip currents, wind-driven chop, waves, boat wash and sudden changes in direction.
- **Temperature and cold shock:** Cold water can affect breathing, movement and decision-making. Acclimatisation and exit plans are essential.
- **Depth, visibility and underwater hazards:** Uneven bottom, sudden drops, rocks, mud, vegetation, debris, fishing lines, submerged branches and low visibility.
- **Weather:** Wind, storms, lightning, heat, sun exposure, rapid changes in mountain or coastal weather.
- **Water quality:** Pollution, sewage or agricultural runoff, algal blooms, heavy rain effects, contamination after floods or storm events.
- **Human factors:** Overconfidence, peer pressure, panic, fatigue, poor hydration, lack of experience, separation from the group.
- **Other users:** Boats, kayaks, paddleboards, anglers, jet skis and crowded recreational areas.
- **Environmental impact:** Damage to vegetation, wildlife disturbance, litter, sunscreen/oil residues and poor waste management.

Simple risk rating matrix

Use this matrix during planning. A session should not proceed until high risks are reduced through controls, relocation, postponement or cancellation.

Risk level	Examples	Required action	Decision
Low	Calm designated area, known depth, good visibility, trained group, appropriate supervision.	Proceed with normal controls and continuous monitoring.	Go
Medium	Cold water, moderate current/wind, mixed ability group, minor visibility issues.	Reduce group size, shorten activity, add safety cover, limit distance, use extra briefings.	Go with controls
High	Strong current, lightning risk, poor water quality, no safety cover, participant illness, unknown hazards.	Do not enter until risk is reduced. Change venue or postpone.	No-go

4. Before entering the water: preparation and site assessment

Safe open water education begins before anyone changes into swimwear. Coaches should combine a site assessment, participant check, equipment check and briefing. The aim is to create a predictable learning environment inside an unpredictable natural environment.

4.1 Site assessment checklist

- Confirm the activity area, entry point, exit point and emergency exit point.
- Check official site status, water quality information and any local warnings or closures.
- Assess current, wind, waves, water level, visibility, temperature and forecast changes.
- Identify underwater hazards, slippery banks, rocks, vegetation, debris, fishing equipment and boat routes.
- Confirm rescue access, emergency vehicle access and exact location description/GPS point.
- Check mobile phone/radio coverage and backup communication.
- Set clear activity boundaries using landmarks, buoys or visible markers.
- Decide the stop/go status and document the decision before the session starts.

4.2 Participant readiness

- Participants should be able to swim comfortably in a controlled environment before open water practice.
- Anyone who feels unwell, cold, exhausted, anxious or uncertain should not enter or should exit immediately.
- Children and young people require consent, safeguarding arrangements and supervision appropriate to age, ability and local rules.

When Not to Swim

- Storms
- Strong Currents
- Poor Visibility

- Very Cold Water
- Unsafe Entry
- Swimming Alone

Wait for safer conditions or choose another location.

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- Participants should know that open water is not a place to prove toughness. Exiting early is a correct safety decision.
- No participant should swim after alcohol or substances that affect judgement, balance, breathing, awareness or reaction time.

4.3 Equipment checklist

Recommended items	Recommended items	Purpose
Personal visibility	Bright swim cap, visible tow float where appropriate.	Helps supervisors and other water users see the swimmer.
Thermal protection	Wetsuit or thermal layers according to temperature, ability and local rules.	Reduces cold stress and supports safer exposure management.
Safety cover	Throw line/rescue aid, first-aid kit, emergency blanket, whistle, communication device.	Supports safe assistance and emergency response.
Session management	Participant list, medical/consent notes, briefing plan, map, incident form.	Ensures accountability and quick action if conditions change.
Environmental care	Waste bags, reusable water bottles, gear-cleaning plan, clean-up gloves when used.	Reduces impact on the natural site.

4.4 Safety briefing template

Every session should start with a short briefing. The briefing must be simple enough for every participant to repeat back.

- Today's area: where we swim, where we do not swim, where we enter and where we exit.
- Today's conditions: temperature, current/wind/waves, visibility, weather and any hazards.
- Buddy system: who checks whom and what to do if separated.
- Signals: stop, come back, I need help, session cancelled.
- Emergency rule: if in difficulty, float, breathe, signal and wait for support; do not panic-swim.
- Exit rule: anyone can exit at any time without needing to explain or justify it.
- Environmental rule: leave no waste, avoid disturbing wildlife, respect local users and protected areas.

5. Self-rescue and personal survival framework

Self-rescue is the ability to protect breathing, stay afloat, conserve energy, signal for help and make a calm decision about exit. It should be practiced first in controlled conditions and then only in supervised, low-risk open water. The goal is not to teach risky independence, but to prepare swimmers to respond calmly if something unexpected happens.

The SWIMSAFE self-rescue sequence: FLOAT - BREATHE - SIGNAL - DECIDE

Step	Action	Why it matters	Coaching points
1. Float	Roll onto the back or adopt a stable floating position.	Keeps the airway clear and reduces panic energy loss.	Keep face above water; relax shoulders; allow buoyancy aids to support the body.
2. Breathe	Focus on slowing breathing before trying to move.	Cold, panic or shock can make breathing fast and uncontrolled.	Count breaths; avoid sudden sprinting; wait until breathing is manageable.
3. Signal	Raise an arm if safe, call for help, use whistle or tow float visibility.	Helps supervisors locate the swimmer quickly.	Practice signals before entering; do not waste energy shouting continuously.
4. Decide	Choose the safest next action: wait, move gently to exit, follow current strategy, or accept assistance.	A calm decision prevents fighting the water or swimming toward hazards.	Move only when breathing is controlled and route is clear.

Self-rescue scenarios

Situation	Recommended response	What to avoid
Sudden cold water entry or cold shock	Do not rush to swim. Float or hold a support, control breathing, signal, then move only when able.	Do not sprint immediately or fight breathing panic.
Fatigue or panic	Roll onto back, float, breathe slowly, signal, then make a short controlled movement to safety if possible.	Do not continue the planned route just to finish the session.
Current pulling away from exit	Conserve energy, signal, use buoyancy, and move diagonally/with control toward the safest reachable exit when possible.	Do not swim directly against strong current.
Coastal rip current	Float, signal, avoid fighting the current; when able, move parallel to shore or follow lifeguard instructions.	Do not attempt to overpower the current.
Entangled in weeds or debris	Stop kicking hard, float, use slow movements, back away or signal for help.	Do not thrash, dive or create further entanglement.
Separation from group	Stop, float/tread water, signal and return only by the agreed route.	Do not chase the group into deeper or faster water.
Cramps or discomfort	Float, breathe, signal; gently adjust position if safe and exit with support.	Do not ignore pain or continue training intensity.

Coaches should teach self-rescue as a calm sequence rather than a performance test. Participants should understand that asking for help early is a sign of good judgement.

6. Emergency response and safe assistance to others

Open water emergency response must protect the person in difficulty and the rescuer. Untrained people can become additional victims if they enter the water without equipment or supervision. The preferred approach is to call for help, keep visual contact, use safe non-contact assistance where possible, and allow trained responders to perform water rescue.

Safe assistance principle: CALL - SHOUT - REACH - THROW - GUIDE

- **Call:** Alert the session lead, lifeguard/safety officer and emergency services if needed.Give exact location.
- **Shout:** Give simple instructions: float, breathe, stay calm, hold the float, move to the marker.
- **Reach:** Use a pole, branch, paddle or clothing from a stable position if the person is close enough.
- **Throw:** Throw a rescue aid, tow float, throw line or buoyancy device if trained and available.
- **Guide:** Guide the person toward the planned exit or toward trained safety cover.

Only trained and equipped personnel should enter the water to perform a rescue. Rescue and resuscitation training should be delivered through recognised first-aid, lifeguard or water safety certification routes.

Emergency action plan: minimum content

- Exact venue name, GPS point, access roads and nearest landmark.
- Emergency contacts: local emergency number, venue operator, lifeguard/rescue service, first-aid lead and project/session lead.
- Roles: who calls, who supervises group, who meets emergency services, who records incident details.
- Equipment location: first-aid kit, rescue aids, emergency blankets, defibrillator if available, communication device.
- Evacuation route and nearest medical facility according to local arrangements.
- Incident reporting and post-incident support process.

7. Training framework and learning modules

The educational framework is structured into seven modules that can be delivered as a one-day introductory course,a two-to-three-day capacity-building workshop, or shorter club-level sessions. Each module should includeknowledge, practical application, reflection and evaluation.

Module	Learningoutcomes	Suggestedmethod	Minimumpracticalelement	Evidence of learning
1. Open water mindset	Explain how open water differs from pools and why	Interactive presentation and group discussion.	Compare pool vs open water hazard cards.	Participant can name key differences.

Module	Learning outcomes	Suggested method	Minimum practical element	Evidence of learning
	prevention is the first safety skill.			
2. Risk recognition	Identify risks linked to water movement, weather, temperature, visibility, depth, pollution and other users.	Photo/video analysis and site map review.	Complete a mock site assessment.	Completed risk checklist.
Explain how open water differs from pools and why	Prepare a swim plan, buddy system, equipment check and safety briefing.	Workshop and role play.	Deliver a two-minute safety briefing.	Coach feedback checklist.
Explain how open water differs from pools and why	Apply FLOAT - BREATHE - SIGNAL - DECIDE in controlled practice.	Demonstration and supervised practice.	Floating, breathing control and signalling drill.	Observed skill completion.
Explain how open water differs from pools and why	Describe how to help without becoming a second casualty.	Scenario-based learning.	Call-shout-reach-throw simulation from land.	Scenario response assessed.
Explain how open water differs from pools and why	Explain water quality, pollution prevention, habitat respect and leave-no-trace behaviour.	Local case study and mini clean-up plan.	Identify environmental risks at a site.	Action plan or checklist.
7. Regional adaptation	Adapt materials to Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia based on water type, language, regulations and emergency services.	Partner group work.	Create one country/site adaptation note.	Validated adaptation sheet.

Suggested 3-day capacity-building workshop structure

Day	Focus	Sessions	Outputs
Day 1	Understanding open water risk	Project introduction; pool-to-open-water transition; risk categories; site assessment methods.	Shared risk language and site checklist.
Day 2	Self-rescue and emergency planning	Controlled practical demonstrations; self-rescue sequence; safe assistance; emergency action planning.	Practical competence notes and emergency plan template.
Day 3	Environmental responsibility and regional adaptation	Water quality; responsible swimming; Serbia/Croatia/Slovenia adaptation; evaluation and dissemination planning.	Country adaptation plans and follow-up actions.

8. Environmental responsibility and water quality

Environmental responsibility is part of safety. Swimmers cannot be safe if water quality is poor, if habitats are damaged, or if weather and pollution patterns are ignored.The guide therefore links water safety education with sustainable use of natural swimming locations.

8.1 Water quality and health protection

- Use official bathing water information where available and do not rely only on appearance or smell.
- Avoid swimming after heavy rain, flooding, visible sewage discharge, unusual foam, dead fish, algal blooms, oil sheen or strong odours.
- Do not organise training in water that is officially closed, under warning, or not assessed for the planned activity.
- Reduce accidental ingestion of water and remind participants to wash hands before eating after sessions.
- Participants with open wounds, ear/eye infections, stomach illness or weakened health should seek medical advice before open water activity.

8.2 Leave-no-trace swimming

- Take all litter away, including tape, food packaging, bottles and training materials.
- Use existing paths and access points to reduce bank erosion and habitat damage.
- Avoid disturbing nesting birds, protected vegetation and sensitive shoreline areas.
- Clean and dry equipment between sites to reduce the spread of invasive species and contamination.
- Use reusable water bottles and minimise single-use materials during events.
- Plan clean-up actions safely: gloves, adult supervision, sharps protocol and proper disposal are required.

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8.3 Environmental learning activity

Ask participants to complete a 10-minute site observation before swimming: What signs of pollution or natural sensitivity are visible? Where are the access points? Are there bins, toilets or warning signs? Which local users share this space? How can the group leave the site better than it found it?

9. Regional adaptation: Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia

TheSWIMSAFE framework should be sharedacross partner countries, but implementation must be adapted to localwater types, languages, legislation, emergency procedures, rescue capacityand cultural habits around swimming. The following adaptation notes areintended as a starting point for partner validation.

Country	Typical adaptation focus	Implementation recommendations	Emergency and stakeholder notes
Serbia	River and lake environments, changing river currents, reservoirs, urban bathing areas, boat traffic and seasonal water levels.	Useriver-specific risk briefings; clearly mark entry/exit points; coordinate with municipalities, clubs and local rescue/first-aid providers; translate core tools into Serbian.	Venues should display local emergency contacts and confirm whether 112 routing is operational for the specific area, alongside national/local procedures.
Croatia	Coastal swimming, islands, rocky shorelines, wind, waves, boat traffic, visibility, as well as inland lakes and rivers.	Include coastal-specific sessions on flags, weather/wind, safe shore entry/exit, boat visibility and swimming within designated areas; translate core tools into Croatian.	112 is the uniform emergency number in Croatia; maritime search and rescue services may be activated through the 112 system or local maritime protocols.
Slovenia	Alpine lakes, colder water, rivers with stronger flow, rapid weather changes, protected natural areas and short coastal settings.	Emphasise cold-water exposure management, mountain-weather checks, environmental protection and controlled short-distance sessions; translate core tools into Slovenian.	112 is the single European emergency number used in Slovenia, while national emergency numbers may also apply according to the situation.

Country adaptation checklist

- Translate safety terms, warning signs and participant materials into the national language.
- Check national federation rules, venue rules and legal requirements for organised water activity.
- Validate emergency numbers, rescue services, medical access and reporting procedures locally.
- Use country-relevant examples: rivers/lakes for Serbia, coastal and island settings for Croatia, alpine lakes/rivers for Slovenia.
- Adapt examples for children, recreational swimmers, competitive swimmers and coaches separately.
- Confirm accessibility and inclusion measures for participants with different abilities and experience levels.

10. Inclusion, safeguarding and ethical implementation

SWIMSAFE should promote safe access to open water for diverse participants while recognising that equal participation requires additional planning. Inclusion cannot reduce safety standards; it means adapting delivery so that each participant can learn within a safe and respectful environment.

- Use age-appropriate language and visuals, especially with children and young swimmers.
- Ensure gender-balanced participation where possible and provide privacy-sensitive changing arrangements.
- Ask participants about access needs in advance and adapt communication, pace and practical tasks.
- Do not pressure participants to enter, stay in or complete open water tasks.
- Ensure all activities with minors follow child safeguarding procedures, informed consent, supervision rules and photo/video permission processes.
- Record only necessary personal data and handle it in line with GDPR and partner data protection rules.

11. Monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance

To support the SWIMSAFE final evaluation and long-term sustainability, partners should collect simple evidence showing thatthe guidelines wereused, adapted and understood by target groups.

What to monitor	Tool	When	Responsible
Reach	Attendance list with role, country and participant category.	Each session	Host partner

What to monitor	Tool	When	Responsible
Learning	Short pre/post questionnaire or reflection form.	Before and after training	Training lead
Practical competence	Observation checklist for briefing, risk recognition and self-rescue sequence.	During practical session	Coach/safety officer
Safety management	Completed site assessment and emergency action plan.	Before session	Session lead/safety officer
Environmental action	Clean-up/action log or site responsibility checklist.	During/following activity	Environmental lead
Adaptation	Country adaptation note validated by partner.	Before local rollout	National partner

12. Practical implementation tools and templates

The following templates can be copied into workshop materials, translated into national languages and adapted to each venue.

Template A: Pre-session safety checklist

Item	Yes/No	Notes
Site permission confirmed		
Weather forecast checked		
Water quality status checked		
Current/wind/waves/depth assessed		
Entry and exit points identified		
Emergency access route confirmed		
Participant list and consent ready		
Medical/access needs reviewed		
Safety roles assigned		
First-aid and rescue equipment ready		
Communication device tested		
Briefing completed		
Buddy system assigned		
Stop/go decision recorded		

Template B: Site assessment form

Field	Information
Venue/site name	
Date/time	
Assessor	
Water type	River / lake / reservoir / sea / other
Weather and forecast	
Water temperature estimate/measurement	
Current/waves/wind	
Visibility/depth/bottom condition	
Water quality/warnings	
Other users/boat traffic	
Entry/exit and emergency access	
Overall risk level	Low / Medium / High
Controls required	
Final decision	Go / Go with controls / No-go

Template C: Participant reflection / evaluation

Statement	Before	After	Comment
I can explain at least three differences between pool swimming and open water swimming.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
I can identify common open water risks before entering the water.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
I know the FLOAT - BREATHE - SIGNAL - DECIDE sequence.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
I know why I should not swim alone or outside the agreed area.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
I know how to help someone without putting myself in danger.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	
I understand how water quality and environmental behaviour affect safety.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	

Template D: Incident report minimum fields

- Date, time and location
- Name and role of person completing report
- People involved and witnesses
- Weather and water conditions
- Brief description of what happened
- Actions taken
- Emergency services contacted and time
- First aid/rescue support provided by trained personnel
- Outcome and follow-up needed
- Recommendations to prevent recurrence

Closing recommendation

The SWIMSAFE Guidelines should be treated as a living framework. After each national workshop, partners should update the country adaptation notes, collect feedback from coaches and participants, and refine examples so that the final version reflects real conditions in Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. The final guide should then be translated, disseminated through partner websites, and linked with digital learning resources and capacity-building activities.

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