Play it cool in river – don’t drink and swim

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THERE’S nothing more “Australian” than a few beers down by the river over the holiday period.

We live in a hot part of the world and it’s easy to see how a few cool beverages and a dip in the Murray River can be appealing.

But new research showing more than 40 per cent of the 770 people who drowned in Australia’s inland waterways in the past 10 years had been drinking, and would have failed a random breath test on the roads, should alarm us all.

With the new year and Australia Day just around the corner, it’s a timely reminder to play it smart by the water because while the Murray is magical, it’s also a mighty beast.

As long-time rescue volunteer Peter Wright points out, the main reason people die or struggle in the water is because they panic, something that’s more likely to occur if they have been drinking.

Mr Wright ought to know, having plucked almost 50 bodies out of the river over the past 37 years – many of which had been drinking.

Royal Life Saving Society of Australia chief executive Justin Scarr’s call to consider random breath testing for swimmers may not prove to be all that practical but it should at least make us think twice about jumping in the river after a few drinks.

We’ve already had one near miss on the Border this summer with a drunk, unconscious woman pulled to safety at Noreuil Park after becoming entangled in a tree and the tragic drowning of a swimmer in the Murrumbidgee River at Wagga this week offers another jolting reminder of the dangers that lurk beneath.

Alcohol is not believed to have been a factor in the tragedy at Wagga but it should help ram the message home to us all – we must respect our rivers.

On this island continent, many would believe our beaches, with their rips, tides and man-eating sharks, are drowning ground zero.

But more drownings occur in rivers than beaches.

Respect that a high river is a dangerous river, don’t drink alcohol or take drugs before swimming, wear life-jackets if
you're boating, never swim alone and learn how to save someone.

The cost of a drowning can be measured in far more than a single life lost.

The family and friends of the latest victim, particularly his widow who watched him perish, will be emotionally scarred for life.