

Maritime SAR community exploring the future of maritime safety at WMRC 2023 in Rotterdam



The International Maritime Rescue Federation's (IMRF) World Maritime Rescue Congress (WMRC) was held in Rotterdam in the Netherlands in mid-June 2023

For the first time in four years, the global search and rescue (SAR) community converged in Rotterdam in the Netherlands in mid-June 2023 for the International Maritime Rescue Federation's (IMRF) World Maritime Rescue Congress (WMRC).



NSRI CEO Dr Cleve Robertson and executive director of Drowning Prevention Dr Jill Fortuin

The three-day event, which was co-organised between the IMRF and the Royal Netherlands Sea Rescue Institution (KNRM), was the fifth WMRC to take place following successful events in Sweden in 2007, China in 2011, Germany in 2015 and Canada in 2019. Crucially, the 2023 iteration followed the COVID-19 pandemic, giving many an opportunity to spend time with fellow SAR personnel from across the globe in-person once again.

This year's WMRC was a true reflection of maritime SAR's international nature and the IMRF's membership. More than 500 personnel attended from 137 SAR organisations, non-governmental organisations, commercial organisations and start-ups. Over 43 countries were represented at the event, including those from Africa, Asia, Europe, North America

and South America, including South Africa's National Sea Rescue Institute (NSRI).

WMRC 2023 kicked off on the first day with a live SAR demonstration organised by KNRM in the waters surrounding the SS Rotterdam that involved the Netherlands Coastguard, KNRM and the Port of Rotterdam, as well as vessels from Belgium, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The event also included a parade of vintage lifeboats from the KNRM and other European SAR organisations to demonstrate how lifeboats have developed over the past 100 years.

The second day of the congress began with a moment's silence to those lives lost at sea in Greece earlier that week. The congress was officially opened by Caroline Jupe, CEO of the IMRF, who noted that the global SAR community



has a duty to imagine the future, continue to strive to improve their services and identify some of the most important issues facing the industry today and in the future. Jacob Tas, CEO of the KNRM, welcomed all attendees on behalf of the host organisation and amongst others highlighted the fact that every two minutes someone drowns in the world, which needs our collective focus and attention before introducing Jaap Smit, King's Commissioner of South Holland, who spoke passionately about his own experiences with the KNRM and wished all those in attendance a fantastic congress.

Keynote speaker Henk Spanjer, chair of the International Association for Safety and Survival Training (IASST), then took to the stage for his address, which focused on the critical need to improve safety and training operations, including simulators, in maritime SAR. This was followed by a plenary panel on developments in global maritime SAR by the IMRF's board of trustees and chaired by Dean Lawrence from the Royal New Zealand Coastguard.

Following an action-packed first day of panel discussions and workshops, attendees were treated to a special river cruise through Rotterdam, which included a surprise 'Meet the Fleet' escort from the SAR vessels

involved in the previous day's SAR demonstration, bringing all attendees back to the SS Rotterdam safe and sound.

The third day of the congress included several informative and engaging panels discussing topics such as SAR incident planning, ESG strategy development and Mass Rescue Operation workshops.

NSRI CEO Dr Cleve Robertson and executive director of Drowning Prevention Dr Jill Fortuin attended on the Institute's behalf and both gave presentations at the event.

"I talked about our structured training programme and the mix of theoretical training, via eLearning, and practical skills training," says Dr Robertson, adding that there was plenty of interest from the other delegates in the NSRI's eLearning and content.

He also spoke about how the NSRI has transformed from a boat-based organisation to a more human-focused one, and outlined the Institute's sustainability challenge, which was broken down into categories such as diversity, mental health, environment and technology, among others.

"The NSRI is well ahead of other countries when it comes to addressing volunteer security and

care, thanks to robust life and injury insurance, as well as mental health services supplied by Life Healthcare," says Dr Robertson. "We're also ahead when it comes to our gender balance, with 30 percent female volunteers. However, we have loads of work to do in terms of ethnic representivity."

The need for the formulation of Mass Rescue Operation plans was also highlighted.

On the Drowning Prevention front, Dr Fortuin spoke of the positive influence extensive research has had on the NSRI's Drowning Prevention Initiatives. "The feedback was extremely positive," said Dr Fortuin. "We made valuable contacts within the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the IMRF, as well as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI). The NSRI is doing well and exceeding international expectations in SAR. This was an excellent opportunity to strengthen our collaborative networks."

The congress formally concluded at the end of this day with closing remarks from Caroline Jupe and Jacob Tas and a farewell reception at the incredible Rotterdam City Hall.

Following the conclusion of WMRC, IMRF members attended the organisation's Quadrennial General Meeting, which allowed

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▶ the IMRF to showcase its completed and upcoming work to its membership. The meeting also included the election of its board for the 2023-27 period, in which Jacob Tas was elected as chair and Cia Sjöstedt, CEO of the Swedish Sea Rescue Society (SSRS) elected as vice-chair.

WMRC is the world's most prominent maritime SAR event, bringing together people from all

backgrounds, experiences and cultures to better understand how maritime SAR efforts can be improved to save more lives at sea. WMRC 2023 was a testament to the fantastic work done by the global SAR community over the past four years and a preview of some of the amazing work the industry still has to come.

Some of the most interesting takeaways from the Congress

for Dr Robertson included future technologies that may be employed to enhance SAR efficiency, such as drones, simulations and thermal imaging infrared cameras, as well as new, cutting-edge rescue vessels and rescue equipment, noting that the NSRI is a global leader when it comes to the JetRIB. "The Congress also brought home the need to reduce carbon emissions, with various solutions proposed such as switching to a 'cleaner' form of diesel", said Dr Robertson.

In summary, "We are ahead of the curve and our innovation is being adopted internationally. Delegates were genuinely impressed by our Survival Swimming Centres, Pink Rescue Buoys and other programmes, as well as our fatal drowning data. Many researchers struggle to acquire this quality of data. I think our future is in high impact, low-cost and volume interventions to prevent drowning in the first place", added Dr Robertson.

"We look forward to the 2027 World Maritime Congress in Sweden, when the NSRI will be able to report back on the goals and improvements influenced by this seminal event." 🔥



