Marie-Louise McDermott, PhD candidate,
Edith Cowan University
Investigating actor-networks linked to South African & Australian ocean pools

Introduction
The public seabaths that I categorise as 'ocean pools' are sited on rocky surfcoasts, so that waves can and do wash over the seaward walls of the pool. Whether simple rings of rocks or Olympic-size pools carved out of wide rock platforms and equipped with marked lanes, ocean pools are more robust than the swimming enclosures used to protect seabathers from sharks or marine stingers in more sheltered waters. To date, these ocean pools have received much less academic attention, than many other aspects of coastal recreation and bathing or swimming cultures.

While in South Africa in 2010, I was able to visit and photograph over fifty such pools, as ocean pools are not uncommon on rocky shores of the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Ocean pools also abound on a stretch of Australia's Pacific coast (where I have visited and photographed over a hundred ocean pools located within the state of New South Wales over the last ten years), but remain much less commonplace on other Australian surf coasts.

The coasts of South Africa and Australia share a number of characteristics besides rocks and surf. Their ocean pools are located at comparable latitudes (Cape Town can be paired with Sydney, East London with Newcastle and Durban with Yamba) on surfcoasts, where both the sharks inhabiting coastal waters and rips pose threats to the safety of seabathers. In both South Africa and Australia, seaside tourism developed in the colonial period and was influenced by the development of British seaside resorts (Walton, 1983, 2000) and by nineteenth-century British ideas about seaside holidays, seabathing and modern watersports. Surf lifesaving clubs, surf cultures, shark-meshing programs, shark–spotting programs and CoastCare programs all became established on Australia and South African coasts in the twentieth century. Finally, in both South Africa and Australia, droughts continue to provide a strong incentive for coastal populations to conserve water.

Despite these similarities, South Africa's ocean pools (Tankard, 2009) have to date attracted less academic attention than their Australian counterparts (Booth, 2001; Cushing, 1997; Huntsman, 2001; McDermott, 2005, 2009; Phillips, 2008 p119-125). Writing from a British perspective, Fred Gray (2006 p163-164) regarded ocean pools and other seabathing enclosures as features distinguishing Australian seasides from their British counterparts, but made no mention of the ocean pools along South Africa's coast. From a South African or Australian perspective, the rarity of ocean pools in the United Kingdom would appear to relate to coasts dominated by tides rather than surf, the absence of any dangerous forms of marine life posing a significant level of threat to the safety of seabathers, the popularity in English seaside resorts up to the 1920s of the practice of seabathing from bathing machines and a preference for other forms of public pools in the UK's coastal communities.

1

Actor-networks

Actor-network theory (ANT) developed and elaborated by Latour (Latour, 1996, 2005) and his colleagues (Law & Hassard, 1999) offers a way to analyse the presence of ocean pools, that gives appropriate recognition to the roles played by human beings, other living things and non-living things. ANT regards an ocean pool or any other material thing as a stabilised project, comprising a network of actors. Actors may themselves be stabilised actor-networks, since in ANT terms, a person or thing becomes an actor in an actor-network by persuading at least one other actor to take on a particular role.

Sharks, rips and learn-to swim programs can thus all be regarded as important actors in the actor-networks that produce and sustain ocean pools. Through their visible presence, sharks persuade bathers to seek seabathing sites that minimise the risk of shark attack. The experience of being caught in a rip or witnessing the power of rips can likewise persuade surfbathers to seek seabathing sites that minimise the risk of caught in a rip. A learn-to-swim program can persuade a person to engage in lap swimming or competitive swimming at a public pool.

One of the most important insights offered by ANT is that actor-networks are inherently unstable. The persistent presence of ocean pools (in some cases since the early nineteenth century) on South African and Australian coasts testifies to the durability, strength and extent of the actor-networks linked to those ocean pools. If each ocean pool is regarded as an actor-network, then changes in that pool's network over time can be reviewed and comparisons made with the actor-networks linked to other ocean pools.

Investigating actor- networks at South African and Australian ocean pools

The actor networks associated with the ocean pools developed in the Cape Colony were similar to those associated with the ocean pools developed in colonial New South Wales (NSW). Among the important actor in those actor-networks were sharks, rips, rocks and notions of respectability that required bathers to be segregated by gender, and that public bathing places be explicitly or implicitly segregated by race. The value placed in the colonizing population's need for safe seabathing even justified the transformation of sites long used as fish traps into seabaths. At a time, when rocky shores were considered quite as attractive as sandy beaches, any coastal settlement aspiring to attract respectable holidaymakers, knew it had to provide and publicise 'safe means of sea bathing'. In Cape Town (*Beaches: a diversity of coastal treasures*, 2009) and East London (Tankard, 2009), ocean pools provided safe and appealing bathing places, as did their counterparts at Newcastle, Sydney's eastern beaches and the south coast of colonial NSW.

In both the Cape Colony and late-colonial NSW, some of the ocean pools also became places where members of the colonising population learned to swim and engaged in competitive watersports. While pools used only by seabathers could have an irregular form, the desire to engage in modern forms of watersports led to a preference for pools where a rectangular course of a defined length could be

created. This did not necessarily involve creation of new rectangular pools. Since the late-nineteenth century, a turning board at Sydney's Bronte Baths has served to define a racing course within an oval pool. Ocean pools frequented by male swimmers and men's swimming clubs soon gained improved facilities for competitive swimming and diving.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the similarities between the pools in the Cape Colony and those in colonial NSW far outweighed their differences. One significant difference was that in NSW, where the indigenous population was only a small fraction of the total population, gender segregation was a far higher priority at ocean pools, than any form of segregation on the basis of race.

While NSW and the other Australian colonies moved peacefully to Federation in 1901, both the Cape Colony and the Colony of Natal were embroiled in years of war. Australia's population at and since Federation has remained concentrated along its coast, particularly along the so called 'boomerang coast' from Brisbane to Adelaide. When the union of South Africa was achieved in 1910, South Africa's inland population had become more significant than its coast dwelling population. Differences between the beach and swimming cultures of South Africa and the federated nation of Australia and in the significance of those cultures to national identity understandably grew larger.

Newly federated Australia was coming to think of itself as a 'nation of swimmers' that had developed the swimming stroke known as the Australian crawl, created effective and popular learn-to swim programs for schoolchildren and produced world champions swimmers. Olympic competitions proved attractive and rewarding to Australian amateur swimmers. Australia acquired its first gold medal in a men's swimming event in 1900 and gold and silver medals in a women's swimming even at the 1912 Stockholm Olympics, the first Olympic games to host swimming events for women. Australia would continue to be represented at each Olympic games and would come to regard swimming as its most successful Olympic sport.

Though amateur swimming records recognised worldwide had been set in NSW ocean pools and other NSW seabaths, the famous North Sydney Olympic Pool had to be filled with fresh water in order to host the swimming events of the 1938 Empire Games (Phillips, 2008 p131). This reflected a ruling by the world's peak amateur swimming body (FINA) that any swimming records set in venues other than fresh water pools would not be officially recognized. That ruling did not, however, diminish the demand for or use of ocean pools as venues for school or club swimming or learn-to-swim programs. Clubhouses for amateur swimming clubs were a commonplace feature of ocean pools along the NSW coast. As swimming was a skill that Australian children were expected to acquire, all learn-to swim programs and venues were prized.

Ocean pools of Olympic size or offering a racing course of Olympic dimensions became more commonplace along the NSW coast after the Australian swimming successes at the 1956 Olympics staged in Melbourne. As late as the 1960s, there

were very few indoor or heated pools in Australia (Phillips, 2008 p133) and ocean pools and seabaths in more sheltered waters continued to be regarded as desirable and affordable public pools, valued beach safety measures and suitable training grounds for champion swimmers.

By 2000, when Sydney hosted the Olympic games, competitive diving and waterpolo events had abandoned Australia's ocean pools in favour of pools offering more controlled environments. Australian ocean pools remained important learn-to-swim venue and venues for schools and club swimming and continued to be regarded as beauty spots and visitor attractions. Though Australian ocean pools no longer host diving boards and diving towers, some ocean pools still have diving blocks.

In South Africa, even recent ambitious plans to transform swimming (Desai & Veriava, 2010) from being primarily a skill, recreation and sport for a white minority to a more inclusive practice and sport acknowledged the size and difficulty of this task. The overwhelming majority of South Africans have never learned to swim and the rates of death by drowning remain far higher in South Africa than in Australia. South Africa waited longer than Australia longer to enter Olympic swimming competition, waited longer for its first Olympic swimming medals, was excluded from Olympic competition for decades during the Apartheid era and has yet to host an Olympic games. Marked lanes, diving blocks and clubhouses for amateur swimming clubs are not common features of ocean pools along South Africa's coast. Though the magnificent swimming complex at Cape Town's Seapoint Pavilion includes diving facilities, all of its pools are filtered seawater pools, rather than ocean pools.

Another factor that heightened differences between the actor–networks associated with ocean pools in South Africa and Australia, was the rapid spread of a volunteer surf lifesaving movement in Australia after 1907 (Jaggard, 2006). That movement was itself a rather rapid response to the notable increase in number of deaths by drowning, once the only constraint on men, women and children bathing together in public view at Australia's post-Federation public beaches in daylight hours was a requirement that any person over eight years of age wear a bathing costume.

Australia's ocean pools contributed to and benefited from the development of surf lifesaving. Ocean pools on Sydney's eastern beaches served venues for Australia's earliest life saving classes, based on lifesaving methods developed in Britain (Brawley, 2006). When those methods proved to have limited applicability to rescuing people at risk of drowning off the surf beaches of NSW, new techniques more applicable to surf rescue were devised.

The development of surf lifesaving clubs and beaches patrolled by volunteer surf lifesavers on weekends and public holidays, the demand for ocean pools along the NSW coast grew, rather than diminishing. In NSW, though not elsewhere in Australia, surf lifesaving clubs became heavily involved in the early twentieth century development of ocean pools to provide safe year-round bathing environments. It was however the government funding available for Unemployment relief works and

other public work programs during the Great Depression that enabled development and upgrading of considerable numbers of NSW ocean pools in the 1930s.

Ocean pools and swimming club facilities at those pools catered for men, women and children throughout the decades when Australia's mainstream surf lifesaving clubs only admitted men as full members (Booth, 2006). As well as hosting school and amateur swimming club programs, NSW ocean pools also hosted men's swimming competitions staged by surf lifesaving clubs, provided appropriate training venues for men and boys seeking to become surf lifesavers and for surf lifesavers honing their swimming skills. When surf lifesaving clubs admitted juvenile members (Booth, 2006 p99), NSW ocean pools served as training venues for those juvenile surf lifesavers known as nippers.

In the late-twentieth century, winter swimming clubs at the ocean pools along the NSW coast were often developed under the auspices of surf lifesaving clubs as a form of off-season activity for their members. Ready access to the premises of a surf life saving club, gave such winter swimming clubs little incentive to create their own clubhouses. Thus while many winter swimming clubs are based at NSW ocean pools, few winter swimming clubs have clubhouses at ocean pools.

Surf life saving clubs were, however, less significant as actors in the actor-networks associated with South Africa's ocean pools. While Australian surf lifesavers gave demonstration in South Africa in the 1930s, the surf lifesaving movement was slower to develop in South Africa (Ford & Jaggard, 2006). It is, however, hardly coincidental that the only three ocean pools with marked lanes that I visited in South Africa were all located near surf life saving clubs, that prominently advertised their nipper programs.

In both South Africa and Australia, measures to safeguard seabathers from shark attack now include the provision of ocean pools, beaches patrolled by lifeguards or volunteer surf lifesavers, shark spotters onshore or airborne in helicopters or other aircraft and the sharkmeshing of popular surf beaches. Not only can ocean pool co-exist with other measures to counter the risk of shark attacks, but ocean pools still have certain advantages over other measures to counter the risk of shark attacks. Ocean pools are more permanent than patrolled beaches, shark meshing or any of the forms of shark spotting and can be significantly less labour intensive and have lower operating costs. Unlike shark meshing, ocean pools do not kill or injure sharks or other forms of marine life. Unlike patrolled beaches and shark spotters, ocean pools protect seabathers outside daylight hours.

Special benefits and affordances of ocean pools
Ocean pools also deliver benefits unmatched by other measures to counter the risk of shark attacks or by other types of public pools. In Ingold's (2000) terms, ocean pools are 'taskscapes' able to cultivate sensitivity to the moods of the sea and familiarity with the rocky shore and its life forms. Bathers, swimmers, sunbakers, and other people in and around ocean pools need to keep an eye on the waves in the interests of their own safety. Post and chain fences on their seaward walls of ocean

pools offer protection again the risk of being washed out to sea, but also afford a challenging form of waveplay appealing to young and old. Both the ocean pool and it surrounds must be shared with various forms of marine life and with people engaged in activities such as fishing (Whibley, 2003).

Compared to unpatrolled surf beaches, ocean pools are safe places, but as an environment for lap swimming or competitive swimming, they offer particular challenges. Swimmers may be able travel much faster with the surf and tide than in the reverse direction. Heavy seas can wash swimmers out of the pool or against each other or wash spectators and officials into the pool. Factors beyond the control of swimmers may therefore determine the outcome of a swimming race at an ocean pool. Those pools are thus better suited to convivial forms of competition, rather than to forms of completion where precise and consistent times are important. At ocean pools, swimming is never just about following a black line down a pool.

Ocean pools are also places of strong aesthetic appeal, integrating landscape, poolscape, beachscape and seascape. As they offer both immersive and social pleasures as well as the pleasures of gazing from the pool out at the surrounding sea, sky and shore, ocean pools are often perceived as restorative and convivial places of considerable beauty. As places designed to work with nature, they have smaller ecological footprints than public pools dependent on townwater, chemical and electricity for their sustained operation.

Concerns regarding public order and public safety at ocean pools
The surrounds and the signs at present-day ocean pools in South Africa and Australia do, however, suggest the persuasive powers of concerns about public safety and public order on the council responsible for managing ocean pools. At Australian ocean pools, concerns for public order are sufficient to justify signs prohibiting the presence of dogs or the consumption of alcohol. In South Africa, local authorities consider it necessary or appropriate to prohibit a wider range of activities.

While South African local authorities appear to assume that visitors to ocean pools will be able to identify and manage the risks associated with the natural hazards encountered at ocean pools, this is now less often the case in Australia. The sizeable payouts made in response to compensation claims for injuries sustained in and around ocean pools and the pressures to introduce measures that justify a reduced premium for public liability insurance increasingly prevent many Australian councils from making such assumptions. Visitors to Australian ocean pools, therefore encounter signs warning of the presence of waves, rocks, tides and slippery rocks. While unfenced and unsupervised ocean pools remain common in both countries, there are no Australian equivalents of the ocean pool at South Africa's Victoria Bay, where a fishing pier rises from the pool or the Clovelly ocean pool located next to an unfenced rail line along False Bay.

The lack of supervision at most ocean pools does, however, suggest that South African and Australians continue to regarded those unsupervised ocean pools as satisfactorily safe and orderly places. Though the presence of those signs addressing

public safety and public order matters shows that some actor has persuaded a local authority that it is worthwhile to erect those signs, the persuasiveness of the signs themselves is open to question. The lack of signs regarding the environmental and cultural history, aesthetic values, educational significance, health values or the ecological sustainability of ocean pools is perhaps even more of a concern, given the increasing barriers to development of new ocean pools or the continuing use of existing ocean pools.

Fragile and threatened actor-networks
One of the strengths of ANT is that it draws attention to the fragility of actor networks. Actors can persuade other actors to abandon one actor-network in favour of another. Recreational, school and club swimmers could thus be persuaded to abandon an ocean pool in favour of a more controlled swimming environment, whether a filtered sea water pool as at Cape Town's Seapoint Pavilion or at Thirroul in the NSW city of Wollongong, or in favour of the even more controlled environment of an indoor aquatic centre.

While the visible presence of large sharks in coastal waters and the perceived risk of shark attacks fostered demands for ocean pools in South Africa and Australia, even those actors could decline in their persuasive power in line with a decline in those shark populations or in fears of shark attack. Furthermore should sealevel rises associated with climate change threaten existing ocean pools, people and organisations currently enrolled in actor networks sustaining ocean pools may deem it easier and more economically rational to rely on other measures to counter the risk of shark attacks and on other types of public pools to provide safe bathing and swimming environments.

My shortlist of the key actors threatening the actor networks presently associated with ocean pools begins with failure to designate ocean pools as a particular type of recreational environment posing less hazards to human safety than an unpatrolled surf beach, but greater hazards than those at an indoor pool. This failure has two undesirable consequences. Firstly, failure to clarify and contextualise the safety benefits of the pool may encourage people with limited swimming or surf skills to swim in more dangerous unsupervised waters outside ocean pools. Secondly, it encourages misguided efforts to highlight the riskiness of ocean pools without contextualizing those risks in term of the benefits that ocean pools can deliver and the skills, knowledge and attitudes they can cultivate.

Another significant threat is the underpricing of townwater, so that even in area experiencing severe drought, the filling of indoor pools appears to cost no more than allowing the tides and waves to replenish the waters of an ocean pool. A further threatening actor is any method of managing storm water and sewage that makes it difficult for coastal waters and ocean pools to achieve water quality levels stipulated for public pools or seabathing areas.

Unless the benefits of ocean pools are acknowledged, it is difficult to counter either the arguments that other types of public pools or beach safety measures are more

economically rational or the belief that nature conservation should become the priority use of the rocky shores, while the less biodiverse sandy shores cater to human recreation. Systems of planning approval that either focus on commercial developments or focus on preserving the rocky shore environment discourage the development of new unfenced, unsupervised ocean pools, that could foster acquaintance with, and appreciation of, the rocky surfcoasts and their life form.

Generational change may also persuade government agencies, council or schools to alter their involvement with ocean pools. If the use of ocean pools is to be sustained, then younger people accustomed to the existence, development and use of other types of public pools, will need to be persuaded to use, sustain and develop ocean pools as a valid and desirable recreational space and beach safety measure. They are less likely to do so, unless ocean pools are valued and familiar elements of their own nation's beach cultures, pool cultures and body cultures. This is a more challenging task in South Africa, where beaches and pools were for racially segregated for so long.

Heritage listings and studies focused on preserving the structures associated with specific ocean pools do little to conserve or enhance the functionality and affordances of ocean pools as a class of places, or to combat other threats to ocean pools. The functionality and affordances of both new and old ocean pools merit recognition. Efforts to maximise the uses and usage of ocean pools and highlight the benefits of maintaining a diverse range of public pools offer better hope for sustaining these pools, than agitating for the heritage listing of ocean pools on a case-by-case a basis.

Conclusion
While ocean pools are not prominent features of other more studied beach and pool cultures, those pools are valued elements of both South Africa and Australian surfcoasts. Comparisons of the actor networks associated with these ocean pools show that no ocean pool or set of ocean pools can be regarded as a unique response to an exceptional environment or population.

Though the actor networks associated with ocean pools are not identical within or across South Africa and Australia, the visible presence of large sharks in coastal water and the perceived risk of shark attacks remains among the most persistent and persuasive actors involved in the networks linked to ocean pools. As swimming skills have long been more widespread in Australia's population, it is not surprising that competitive swimming, swimming clubs and surf lifesaving clubs feature more strongly in the networks associated with Australia's ocean pools. The many South Africans, who lack swimming skills and surf skills, do however, strengthen the importance of South Africa's ocean pools as safe bathing places.

Despite their many benefits and affordances, the sustained existence and continued development of ocean pools cannot be taken for granted in either South Africa or Australia. This paper has, however, demonstrated that it is possible to identify the key threatening actors and devise strategies that may limit their effectiveness.

To date knowledge of those networks has had difficulty travelling across national boundaries or even across the boundaries of the local authorities, that manage the ocean pools. Fostering recognition of the benefits and affordances of ocean pools and fostering linkages between their actor networks can help to sustain the ocean pools and enrich the beach, pool and body cultures of both nations.

References

Beaches: a diversity of coastal treasures. (2009). Cape Town: City of Cape Town. Retrieved from http://www.capetown.gov.za/EN/ENVIRONMENTALRESOURCEMANAGEMENT/ PUBLICATIONS/Pages/BrochuresBooklets.aspx#beachesbook

Booth, D. (2001). *Australian beach cultures: the history of sun, sand, and surf. Cass Series--Sport in the Global Society* (Vol. 28). London: Frank Cass.

Booth, D. (2006). Managing pleasure and discipline: Clubbies. In E. Jaggard (Ed.), *Between the Flags: One hundred summers of Australian surf lifesaving* (pp. 75-105). Sydney: UNSW Press.

Brawley, S. (2006). Surf bathing and surf lifesaving: origins and beginnings. In E. Jaggard (Ed.), *Between the Flags: One hundred summers of Australian surf lifesaving* (pp. 23-47). Sydney: UNSW Press.

Cushing, N. (1997). Ocean baths and arc lights: Newcastle City Council and control on the beach. In J. Long, J. Gothard, & H. Brash (Eds.), *Forging identities: Bodies, gender and feminist history* (pp. 88-110). Nedlands, W.A: University of Western Australia Press.

Desai, A., & Veriava, A. (2010). Creepy crawlies, portapools and the dam(n)s of swimming transformation. In A. Desai (Ed.), *The race to transform: Sport in post-apartheid South Africa* (pp. 15-55). Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Ford, C., & Jaggard, E. (2006). Spreading the word: surf lifesaving overseas. In E. Jaggard (Ed.), *Between the flags: One hundred summers of Australian surf lifesaving* (pp. 189-213). Sydney: UNSW Press.

Gray, F. (2006). *Designing the seaside: Architecture, society and nature*. London: Reaktion Books.

Huntsman, L. F. (2001). *Sand in our souls: the beach in Australian history*. Carlton South, Vic: Melbourne University Press.

Ingold, T. (2000). *The perception of the environment: essays in livelihood*. London: Routledge.

Jaggard, E. (Ed.). (2006). *Between the flags: One hundred summers of Australian surf lifesaving*. Sydney: UNSW Press.

Latour, B. (1996). *Aramis, or, the love of technology*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Law, J., & Hassard, J. (1999). *Actor Network Theory and after*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers/The Sociological Review.

McDermott, M.-L. (2005). Changing visions of baths and bathers: desegregating ocean baths in Wollongong, Kiama and Gerringong. *Sporting Traditions*, *22*(1), 1-20.

McDermott, M.-L. (2009). Leisure, tourism, swimming, sustainability and the ocean baths of New South Wales. *International Journal of the History of Sport*, *26*(14), 2069-2085. doi:10.1080/09523360903302880

Phillips, M. G. (2008). *Swimming Australia: One hundred years*. Sydney: UNSW Press.

Tankard, K. (2009). Nude bathing at Victorian East London. *The new labyrinth of East London Lore*. Retrieved from Knowledge4Africa , http://www.knowledge4africa.co.za.

Walton, J. K. (1983). *The English seaside resort. A social history 1750-1914*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.

Walton, J. K. (2000). *The British seaside: Holidays and resorts in the twentieth Century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Whibley, I. (2003). *The South African fisherman* (3rd ed.). Cape Town: Struik.