

Thieves who take shirt from your back

By Angela Cuming
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Beach patrol ... police keep a protective eye on sunbathers at Cronulla beach.
Photo: *Lee Besford*

Theft at some Sydney beaches is so bad this summer that police officers have resorted to giving their own clothes to stranded beachgoers who have fallen prey to crooks.

Inspector Steve Corry of the Miranda local area command said thieves watched and waited for people to go for a swim, then swooped and grabbed their bags.

"People go for a swim and when they come back everything - their bag, wallet, mobile phone - is gone; even their clothes," he said.

"They are then left on the sand in only their cossie. If there is a change of weather they can get quite cold."

The problem was now so significant that victims had recently starting turning up to Cronulla police station looking for help, often dressed only in a bikini or board shorts, Inspector Corry said.

"They sometimes turn up in reception shivering."

Faced with growing numbers of scantily dressed people, officers started to give them their own clothes to wear.

That kind-hearted gesture quickly turned into an official Miranda local area command initiative.

A collection of clothes has been put together to keep in the station for those who are left stranded.

"We also let them make a phone call to relatives," Inspector Corry said. "[But] we haven't had to give them a bus fare home yet."

Undercover police dressed in shorts and T-shirts now patrol the beaches on the lookout for thieves.

Police bike and foot patrols have also been increased to try to prevent further theft.

"Lifeguards are also on alert to keep an eye out," Inspector Corry said.

"We are warning people to take care of their property at the beach. Don't take valuables to the beach and try to have someone stay with your property while you go for a swim."

Sutherland Shire Council has taken drastic steps to fight the crime wave on its beaches.

Lockers are to be installed at North Cronulla beach this week. They will allow beachgoers to store their valuables while they are swimming.

"Lifeguards on all our beaches give regular warnings to people reminding them not to leave their valuables unattended," a council spokesman said.

"If there has been a report from the police or the public of theft at one beach, the lifeguards will relay that information to the lifeguards at other beaches and a theft warning announcement is made."

When someone reported a theft to a lifeguard he or she was given a colour-coded disc, which told police where on the beach the theft happened, he said.

"When they go to the police station they give the officer the disc and the information is stored," he said.

"It helps police recognise which areas the thieves are hitting most."