

The Underwater Cultural Heritage

A Multiple Use Resource

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Submitted by

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Honorable committee members,

For the past twenty three years I have been both an archaeologist and conservator on shipwreck projects worldwide (please see attached vita). I come before you today to ask that as you deliberate your recommendations on the future of ocean policy you keep in mind one of our most unique resources, the Underwater Cultural Heritage (UCH).

Both here in Florida and in the Caribbean region the underwater cultural heritage is one of the richest historical resources in the hemisphere. These historic sites represent Europe's first entry into the New World bringing with them for good or ill all of western civilization, as well as the ongoing development of the modern Americas. These dynamic, ever changing historical events are well reflected in the shipwrecks that dot the coasts and rest in deeper water.

You may already have heard in your earlier meetings from concerned voices. I have no doubt that most of these voices were those of archaeologists who are members of professional societies as well as those advising non-governmental organizations. They will undoubtedly represent a very specific view that is firmly wrapped in a very specific ethical argument. These individuals will undoubtedly represent that every shipwreck should belong to the "people" and that they, by virtue of their institutional positions and education, are the proper custodians of the resource (one organization calls itself the Advisory Council on Underwater Archaeology). While all this may sound good it has little basis in reality.

Here in Florida as in other States, all the "people" e.g. state agencies, groups of private individuals and corporations have interests in the UCH. There has been a long slow and often painful growth among the various interested parties. Private enterprise – which has been mostly involved in the salvage of historic shipwrecks – has grown to recognize and incorporate archaeological techniques and concerns into their projects. Conversely within state and federal agencies there has been a growing awareness and acceptance of the substantive contributions that the private sector can make toward the scientific rescue, conservation and display of these historic treasures, not to mention the dissemination of the knowledge gleaned.

The State of Florida is the holder of one of the greatest collections of Spanish Colonial artifacts in the world. The overwhelming majority of these recovered artifacts and their associated information is the result of over four decades of work by the private sector. Groups such as the Mel Fisher organization (with the famous wreck of the **Nuestra Senora de Atocha, 1622** or Bert Webber and his work on the **Nuestra Senora de Concepcion 1648**, in the Dominican Republic have contributed greatly to our knowledge of this historic period. They and many others have for a majority of that time been involved in

the ethical and legal recovery of the UCH here in Florida and the Caribbean. They have also founded non-profit organizations and museums which (aside from the state and local governments) are recipients of collections from their efforts. Shipwrecks now used as tourist attractions by the state and the federal government (Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary), originally located by private individuals and corporations all at no expense to the taxpayer, now help attract tourists that provide a steady stream of revenue. The Florida model continues to work and to produce recovered artifacts and information. It is also a training ground for young archaeologists and a proving ground for the concept of a private-public partnership in the administration of this vast resource.

Profit motive is certainly a factor in all of this work – who does not dream of finding the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? But I urge you to look beyond this one aspect. The majority of shipwrecks both in the United State and in the Caribbean are in various states of progressive decay. Of course, there have been and will continue to be exceptions to this rule. Recently the CSN Hunely was recovered mostly intact and constitutes one of these exceptions. However, the Ironclad Monitor is an example of the norm, found in 1978. This very important historic vessel was designated the first National Marine Sanctuary. Two decades later the amount of deterioration that had taken place on the wreck was so alarming that the United States Navy along with NOAA and a host of volunteers has been rescuing (salvage) important sections of the vessel. Whatever gets left on the bottom will eventually deteriorate into nothing. In fact the Department of Defense (DOD) has allocated funds in the amount of 6.5 million dollars for the year 2002 for the ongoing salvage of this very important ship. How many shipwrecks out there will never receive any kind of funding for investigation or recovery and thus will suffer the ultimate fate of progressive decay?

If not with the help of the private sector who then will rescue the imperiled artifacts from these shipwrecks? I agree that all shipwrecks have good historic stories to tell, and some should be the exclusive province of archaeologists. But should just one group (the institutional archaeologists) gain total control over the entire resource? Do they have all of the requisite knowledge **and** resources to manage all of the various iterations that shipwrecks take throughout the region? It is commonly espoused by this group that once shipwrecks are deposited on the sea floor they are stable (a concept known as in-situ preservation). I am sure that some of your commission, especially those that are in the oil industry, can refute the theory of the stability of the ocean environment, especially when it comes to man-made objects. The overwhelming majority of shipwrecks that I have worked on and studied over twenty three years in the field are most often in the state of deterioration like that of the Monitor as opposed to the Hunley. The idea of in-situ preservation is misleading, a myth of convenience for the institutional archaeologists and the groups to which they belong, perhaps to support their rational that they and they alone should be the stewards of the UCH.

Now the question is who else would be appropriate to administer the resource? If we are truly talking about the people and the interests of the “people” how about marine engineers, resource managers, various vocational and avocational archaeological groups, dive shop operators and commercial shipwreck salvagers? The problem is that institutional archaeologists et al, would have the world believe that every piece of a shipwreck is somehow sacrosanct! I personally sat next to a very highly placed archaeologist at a panel discussion in Washington DC, who insisted that every fragment of coal that was recovered from the Titanic was a valuable artifact and that without each fragment some immeasurably important piece of information would be lost! Commissioners, have you any idea how many tons of that coal are on the ocean floor around the decaying hulk of the Titanic? Over a thousand – and further, the same coal can be had by the ton today. The mines are still operative in Wales, United Kingdom. Similarly a shipwreck was found by a commercial fisherman in the Gulf of Mexico. Nearly half a million silver coins were recovered – known as portrait or bust dollars they are the ancestors of our own coinage. Milled and as uniform as a silver dollar – which is what they were – they are unremarkable. It would be as if someone found a half million Eisenhower dollars. This type of redundant commercial cargo can be sold to a public hungry to touch the past and help defray the enormous costs of these recoveries. Yet the archaeologists would have us believe that each and every fragment must be kept with the collection or the collection loses meaning.

In this day of electronic databases where information regarding a collection of artifacts up to and including three dimensional reconstructions of a shipwreck site can be stored, we have reached a point of the virtual site and the virtual museum. I really do not agree with the argument that every piece of a site must be saved for posterity. In fact I do not believe that there are many museums that would want such a collection, the administration of which would become burdensome. Most museums would be more than happy with a complete cross section of the materials recovered from a shipwreck if they were to even want any in the first place. All in all, when you peek under the veil of their ethics and morals argument it really has the feel of a special interest group trying to control the entire resource in order to justify their own existence, and not, in the final analysis, in the interest of “the people”.

Why can't the resource be viewed as any other resource and have economists and others do cost benefit analysis on the shipwrecks in question? In a recent independent study titled ***“The Economics of the Historic Shipwreck Industry Revisited”*** focus was placed on standard economic cost-benefit analysis of the industries associated with shipwrecks. The preliminary conclusions of this study were enlightening:

1. *(Ethical) Commercial salvage is a legitimate use of historic shipwrecks that provides multiple benefits and values to society. (emphasis mine)*
2. *Salvage businesses should continue to diversify their goods and services to better deliver the benefits and values of historic shipwrecks to society, improve profitability, and increase the value of their corporate shares.*
3. *Salvage businesses are a component of the historic shipwreck industry as well as the larger ocean resources development industry.*
4. *The historic shipwreck industry can be defined broadly as all organizations involved in the delivery of current and future social-economic benefits from historic shipwrecks.*
5. *Businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government should work more closely to maximize or optimize the benefits and associated values of historic shipwrecks because of substantive inter-relationships among private and public sectors in the production of goods and services.*
6. *There appears to be a complete absence of rigorous, peer-reviewed economic assessments and analyses of the historic shipwreck industry that could help guide decision-making by businesspeople, public resource managers, and policy-makers.*
7. *The absence of this literature calls into question the scientific bases and equity of current policy-making actions by governments and international non-government organizations currently focusing on regulation of historic shipwreck salvage, and potentially, commercial activities associated with tourism.*
8. *Economic impact analyses and cost-benefit analyses should be conducted with the purpose of enhancing the economic efficiency of commercial salvage and other producers of historic shipwreck-related good and*

services, rather than the purpose of discrediting commercial uses of these sites.

9. *Rigorous cost-benefit analyses of regulatory schemes for shipwreck salvage and other commercial uses of these sites should be conducted as required by Presidential Executive Order 12866, to more equitably determine whether there is a compelling public need for such regulations.*

The Economics of the Historic Shipwreck Industry Revisited, Draft, Kenneth J. Vrana, 2001 CMURM (Center for Marine & Underwater Resource Management) Used with the authors permission.

In conclusion it is my opinion that to lead to the fullest use and administration of what in many cases is an extremely imperiled resource we must allow there to be multiple use of that resource. While you may hear many voices to the contrary, I felt it was my duty to at least make you aware that there are as many views on the proper use and conservation of this resource as there are interested parties. Increasingly the private – public model is not only the most cost effective but the most fair and ethical for all concerned parties.

Human beings are peculiar creatures – we are the only creatures that can contemplate our past and show the degree of reverence that we do for our own history. The UCH is a resource of enormous variety and complexity and should be administrated on a case by case basis. No one group has all the answers. To end any avenue of legitimate investigation, discovery and recovery would be a disservice to the resource.

Respectfully submitted,

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