

## **Advisory Council on Underwater Archaeology Underwater Archaeology Ethics Press Kit**

### **Background**

- Archaeology is the study of past human activities and cultures through the material left behind.
- Archaeologists aren't so much interested in artifacts themselves, but rather what those objects, and the relationship between those objects, can tell us about the people who made and used them.
- "It's not what you find, it's what you find out!" – quote from Dr David Hurst Thomas, Curator in the Department of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History.
- Legitimate, professional archaeologists do not engage in the buying, selling, or valuing of artifacts. Recovery of artifacts for commercial exploitation is considered extremely unethical and detrimental to the science and to humanity as a whole.
- The Register of Professional Archaeologists (RPA), the professional organization certifying legitimate archaeologists, states in its Code of Ethics that an archaeologist shall not knowingly be involved in the recovery or excavation of artifacts for commercial exploitation, or knowingly be employed by or knowingly contract with an individual or entity who recovers or excavates archaeological artifacts for commercial exploitation. Any archaeologist who violates this code may be subject to a Grievance, including loss of his/her RPA certification.
- Internationally, protection of the underwater cultural heritage, or UCH, is a focus of state and national governments. The 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage and Annex entered into force in January of 2009 upon ratification by the required 20 countries. As of January 2011, the number of countries that have ratified stands at 36 nations. The Convention stresses the need for preservation, management, scientific investigation, and public education for the UCH.
- In accordance with the 2001 Convention, 'underwater cultural heritage' includes all traces of human existence having a historical or archaeological character that are partially or totally underwater. This includes prehistoric sites, shipwrecks, aircraft, artifacts, human remains, shipyards, jetties, wharves, docks, submerged buildings and towns, together with their archaeological and natural context. UCH sites can be in rivers, lakes, springs, bays, and the sea.
- The Council of American Maritime Museums (CAMM) and the International Congress of Maritime Museums (ICMM) have longstanding policies against acquiring objects that have been illegally, unethically, or unscientifically acquired or removed from their source. Most major museums support the position of CAMM and ICMM regarding underwater archaeology standards. According to the CAMM bylaws, CAMM member institutions shall not knowingly acquire or exhibit artifacts that have been stolen, illegally exported from their country of origin, illegally salvaged, or removed from commercially exploited archaeological or historic sites in recent times.
- The sport diving community increasingly recognizes the need to preserve shipwrecks for future generations of divers to explore and enjoy. The Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) Project AWARE promotes the Respect Our Wrecks campaign to educate divers about the need to conserve the underwater cultural and natural heritage.

### **Ethics in Underwater Archaeology**

- Treasure hunters sometimes try to give their endeavors a veneer of respectability by stating they are "using archaeological methods" or are "employing an archaeologist to oversee the project."

Although their press release may use the correct archaeological “buzz words,” if artifacts are being recovered for sale or will end up dispersed into private collections as payment for investing, it is not archaeology, no matter the tools or technology used or the credentials of the “archaeologist” employed.

- Although treasure hunting and commercial salvage may be technically legal under maritime law of salvage or some statutory authorization, this does not mean that it is ethical from an archaeological perspective. The idea that the underwater cultural heritage can be recovered and sold for the commercial profit of a few people is contrary to the concept of historic preservation. For example, would grave robbing in the southwest US to recover Native American pottery be considered ethical? If the grave were discovered underwater would removal of the pottery then be ethical?
- Just because a site is located in an underwater environment does not somehow exempt it from these ethical considerations.
- Cultural heritage, both terrestrial and underwater, is of interest and importance to everyone and is a part of our common past. Everyone has a right to know and appreciate this past. The looting of shipwrecks and unauthorized removal of artifacts results in the irretrievable loss of information to the detriment of everyone. The reckless unscientific search for shipwrecks containing valuable items can result in the destruction of many historic sites that do not contain treasure while damaging natural resources and habitat in the marine environment.
- Ships that are broken up and scattered across river bottoms and the seabed are archaeologically important also, not just the more intact, well-preserved examples. Archaeologists are trained to recognize wreckage dispersal or distribution patterns as part of the research process. These patterns include cultural (past salvage or modern activities which add materials to the site) and natural (waves, currents, erosion) transformation processes. Removing items from these sites, which may look like merely random scatters of artifacts, is like losing a piece of the puzzle.
- In many cases, underwater sites may be appropriate venues for public interpretation, and shipwreck parks and maritime heritage trails are a growing segment of the heritage tourism industry. Underwater heritage tourism leaders and archaeologists should carefully consider the potential long-term impacts and fiscal obligations of the local community when establishing new trails, parks, and preserves.
- Philosophical and cultural differences of opinion between government officials, preservation specialists, archaeologists, historians, and the public may result in conflicting “ethical viewpoints” about the historic value of certain underwater cultural heritage sites similar to those that surround other archaeological sites, historic icons, or monuments.
- UCH sites can be negatively impacted by a wide range of human activities including treasure hunting, recreational artifact collecting, fishing, mining and drilling, urban waterfront developments, and private construction of docks and wharves on rivers and estuaries. Lack of compliance with or ability, through funding or staffing, to enforce state and federal preservation laws in these situations can result in large-scale destruction of submerged sites.
- Artifacts removed from the underwater environment require long-term care to prevent degradation of the object. Scientific excavations plan carefully in advance of artifact recovery for the conservation of water-logged artifacts, which can be an extremely expensive and long process.

### **Underwater archaeologists:**

- Seek to engage and educate the local community about the value of submerged sites and of their research for the area.
- Choose a specific mapping, excavation, or artifact recovery strategy suited to answering certain historical or archaeological research questions about the submerged site where they intend to work. To do this they need expertise or familiarity in these particular geographic, cultural or temporal areas of study. In many cases, sites are only partially excavated with the expectation that archaeologists in the future will have better tools and techniques.
- Acquire permits, consult with colleagues, and form partnerships with the stewards and stakeholders of an underwater site – state, federal, public, or private – to conduct projects according to the appropriate legal and community framework.
- Plan their projects with sufficient funding to cover anticipated costs of artifact conservation and analysis, long-term curation, and appropriate exhibition of the collection. Possible financial gain to be made by selling the artifacts at auction is **never** a consideration.
- Collaborate with other scientists and disciplines, such as marine biologists, corrosion engineers, oceanographers, and geophysicists, to better understand the archaeological site, formation processes, and the surrounding environment.
- Share their discoveries in the professional and public domain through publications, speaking engagements, popular articles, press releases and interviews, and museum exhibits.

### **For further information:**

- Advisory Council on Underwater Archaeology: [www.acuaonline.org](http://www.acuaonline.org)
- Society for Historical Archaeology: [www.sha.org](http://www.sha.org)
- Register of Professional Archaeologists: [www.rpanet.org](http://www.rpanet.org)
- 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage: [www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/themes/underwater-cultural-heritage/the-2001-convention/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/themes/underwater-cultural-heritage/the-2001-convention/)
- ICOMOS Charter on the Protection and Management of Underwater Cultural Heritage: [www.international.icomos.org/under\\_e.htm](http://www.international.icomos.org/under_e.htm)
- Council of American Maritime Museums: [www.councilofamericanmaritimemuseums.org/](http://www.councilofamericanmaritimemuseums.org/)
- International Congress of Maritime Museums: [www.icmmonline.org/pages/home.htm](http://www.icmmonline.org/pages/home.htm)
- Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology: <http://aima.iinet.net.au/>
- PADI Project AWARE Respect Our Wrecks program: [www.projectaware.org/assets/library/103\\_103responsiblewreckdiving.pdf](http://www.projectaware.org/assets/library/103_103responsiblewreckdiving.pdf)

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