United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

Protecting and preserving underwater archaeological sites

Research Report

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"Out of this world"

Forum: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

Issue: Protecting and preserving underwater archaeological sites

Position: President

Introduction

Throughout history, human settlements have often been developed near water, underscoring the critical role of seas, rivers, and lakes in facilitating transport, trade, and cultural exchange. These aquatic environments have remnants of human activity, now recognized by UNESCO as underwater cultural heritage. This heritage encompasses shipwrecks, sunken cities, and prehistoric sites, which offer insights into past societies and the impacts of climate change. Despite the opportunities these sites hold for research, education, and tourism, they face significant threats from looting, coastal development, and environmental changes. Effective preservation strategies, including physical protection, legal frameworks, and public awareness initiatives, are essential to safeguard these resources.

Underwater cultural heritage not only constitutes a crucial link to understanding historical human activities but also plays a role in shaping cultural identity and promoting sustainable cultural tourism. Facilitating public access to these submerged sites, through the establishment of dive trails and underwater museums, enhances community engagement and educational opportunities. Thereby it will foster a deeper appreciation for this dimension of our shared history. Nevertheless, the vulnerability of this heritage does need coordinated global efforts to protect it from threats such as vandalism and environmental degradation. By prioritizing the conservation and appreciation of these underwater cultural heritage, it can be ensured that future generations can continue to gain knowledge and inspiration from history.[1]

During the upcoming debate on this issue, big steps in the protection and preservation of underwater cultural heritage can be made. As the president of this committee, I would like to encourage all of you, the delegates, to think about how this issue can be handled. Do not be afraid to take the floor and share your ideas with the committee. Only when you participate actively in the debate, fruitful plans be made. Know that the chairs are always there to help you. To prepare you the best for the conference, it is highly recommended to read this research report and to do your own research. Look into your country's perspective on this issue and their underwater cultural heritage. I am looking forward to the moment we are there together, the sixth of December, to create an educational and unforgettable weekend.

[1] (Öniz, Khalil, & Vivar, 2024)

Definition of Key Terms

Underwater cultural heritage:

"According to UNESCO, underwater cultural heritage is defined as all traces of human existence of a cultural, historical, or archaeological nature that have been partially or totally immersed for at least 100 years."[2]

Pillage:

"Pillage is the theft of historical artefacts from a heritage site in violation of the law and without authorization."[3]

Commercial exploitation:

"Commercial exploitation is the legal recovery of artefacts from a heritage site with the aim of putting them up for sale."[4]

General Overview

Threats to underwater archaeological sites

One of the biggest threats to underwater archaeological sites is climate change. Climate changes cause stronger erosion, destruction because changes in conservation patterns, new animals, and bacterial spread that causes faster degradation of wooden wrecks. But on the other hand can underwater archaeological sites tell us more about climate changes over the years. There is also a lot of pillage taking place. Because of pillage, underwater archaeological sites are getting destroyed. This pillage is done by sport divers for souvenirs but also by specialized enterprises. Operations for commercial exploitation are often violating scientific standards, and this phenomenon is a threat. Another threat are trawling activities. These activities are damaging the sea floor a lot, and thereby some underwater archaeological sites. Two other big threats are economic activities and industrial work.[5] As you can see, there are a lot of threats for the underwater archaeological sites. These sites do need to be protected for these threats in new solutions.

The role of education

Education does have a lot of influence on the protection and preservation of underwater archaeological sites. "Education and capacity-building in underwater cultural heritage are the principal means for the protection and preservation of that heritage. Knowing about underwater cultural heritage and its special nature and characteristics, leads to a better appreciation of its significance and value, which is often reflected in the procedures and measures adopted towards its preservation. Commonly, there are two types of education in respect to underwater cultural heritage, these are academic and non-academic education. Academic education is offered by universities, and it takes the form of individual courses or full academic programs that focus on aspects of maritime and underwater archaeology. More than 15 universities worldwide offer full graduate programs in maritime and underwater archaeology. Furthermore, several universities offer courses on underwater cultural heritage or related topics within their curricula. On the other hand, non-academic education includes training courses, seminars, public talks, documentaries, online MOOCs, and more. This type of education is often offered by museums, heritage authorities, diving federations, NGOs, and international organisations such as UNESCO. In fact, there are more than 100 institutions of different kinds, in over 35 countries that offer different levels of training and education in underwater cultural heritage."[6]

Prospects

The preservation of underwater archaeological sites depends on enhanced cooperation among nations,

[2] (Öniz, Khalil, & Vivar, 2024)
[3] (UNESCO, 2023)
[4] (UNESCO, 2023)
[5] (UNESCO, 2023)
[6] (Öniz, Khalil, & Vivar, 2024)

technological advancement, and public awareness. Programs that emphasize sustainable exploration, conservation funding, and increased penalties for illegal activities are essential. Additionally, as technology improves, the ability to document and virtually recreate these sites offers a promising avenue for public access while ensuring physical preservation.

Major Parties Involved

ICOMOS-ICUCH

"The International Committee on the Underwater Cultural Heritage (ICUCH) was founded in 1991 by ICOMOS Australia to promote international cooperation in the protection and management of underwater cultural heritage and to advise the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) on issues related to underwater cultural heritage around the world."[7]

CMAS

"As a non-profit organization, our services cater to scuba divers, athletes, and the global underwater science community. We operate directly in the underwater environment and witness firsthand the consequences of our actions, making us acutely aware of the need for greater sustainability and environmental protection.

[7] (ICOMOS-ICUCH, n.d.)

Timeline of Events

December 10, 1982 "The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea lays down a comprehensive regime of law and order in the world's oceans and seas establishing rules governing all uses of the oceans and their resources. It enshrines the notion that all problems of ocean space are closely interrelated and need to be addressed as a whole."[8]

November 2, 2001 "Recognizing that underwater cultural heritage is largely undervalued, the 2001 Convention provides a common legally binding framework for States Parties on how to better identify, research and protect their underwater heritage while ensuring its preservation and sustainability. Adopted on 2 November 2001 at the 31st General Conference of UNESCO, the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage urges States to take all appropriate measures to protect underwater heritage."[9]

June 14, 2023 UNESCO and CMAS have signed an agreement in which stated that they will work together to protect and conserve underwater cultural heritage.[10]

Sources

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[8] (UN, 2024)
[9] (UNESCO, 2024)
[10] (CMAS, 2024)