

Cultural Heritage on the Seabed



Underwater cultural heritage is fascinating due to the mystery of its location under water and the historical context. It is often the reminder of a human tragedy – the ending of a journey and a loss of human lives. The discovery of a wreck or ruin allows stepping back into the past and reliving the last moments of the ship and its crew.

Once out of the water and exhibited on land, objects from submerged archaeological sites are deprived of their context and lose part of their significance. Therefore, several recent initiatives have undertaken to offer visitors in situ experiences. They include dive trails, submersible tours for non-divers and the construction of underwater museums.

Museums and Exhibitions on Land

Many important museums on land exhibit objects recovered from underwater ruins or shipwrecks, or even exhibit whole wrecks. Sweden's Vasa shipwreck attracts 750,000 visitors annually. The Bodrum Museum of Underwater Archaeology has become one of the most popular tourism sites in Turkey. Over 4 million people have visited Great Britain's Mary Rose Wreck, and the Batavia Wreck, in Australia, receives over 150,000 visitors each year.

Virtual Site Presentation

Many underwater cultural heritage sites have become accessible to divers, however not all of them. Some remains are located in great depths, are subject to the influence of strong currents or lie in almost absolute darkness. This is favorable for their long-term conservation, it hinders however public enjoyment. Several projects are therefore ongoing to present these sites to the public by generating 3-D renderings to enable virtual exploration. Data collection through autonomous or remotely operated unmanned vehicles equipped with specialized sonar and photogrammetric gadgets may therefore soon provide a wider public with the sight of submerged archaeological sites. Initiative projects include the Venus project and the Bahia Brazil project.

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Economic Impact

The attraction of the historic significance, beauty and authenticity of underwater sites can have a considerable economic importance for many regions. Not only are the Roskilde, Mary Rose, Bodrum,

Vasa or Hedeby museums among the most visited tourist attractions of the respective countries. The diving industry also profits largely from the visits of tourists to submerged sites. The underwater museum project in Alexandria, Egypt, is for instance also intended to revive in an integrated approach the whole urban centre of the city.

Important factors for the attraction and sustainability of sites include:

the state of preservation the authenticity and historic importance the presentation to the public (for instance through dive trails, maps or signposts) accessibility and security and responsible site management to ensure the long-term sustainability of the site.

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