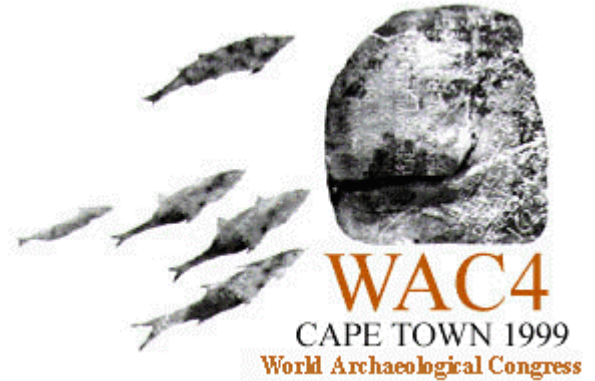


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BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA. THE DEVELOPMENT AND FUTURE OF MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA.

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INTRODUCTION

In this presentation, attention will be devoted to the development of maritime archaeology in one specific region : the Republic of South Africa. The main questions which will be addressed are : how did this specialisation emerge in that country; what aspects played a role in this development; and, at the same token, what factors had a negative influence in the proper establishment of the field? An attempt will be made to sketch this development on a broad basis and for that reason it is imperative to include a brief overview of the historical development and the geographical setting of the area under study, a discussion of the various research subjects which make up the South African potential for maritime archaeological research, factors which threaten this potential, as well as ways in which the potential can be protected against destruction and loss.

The development of maritime archaeology in South Africa is relatively recent. Although shipwreck salvage activities have been reported since the seventeenth century, the earliest references acknowledging the need for introducing measures to protect the underwater cultural heritage date back to the late 1960s. Although occasionally references will be given to earlier events, the period under review will be focussing on the last ten years, as concerted efforts to study the maritime archaeological heritage on a scientific basis were only set in motion in 1988.

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GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Present-day South Africa, which has an approximate surface area of 1 223 000 square kilometres, is bounded by Namibia in the northwest, Botswana and Zimbabwe in the north and Mocambique in the northeast. The Atlantic Ocean borders its western and southwestern shores, whereas the Indian Ocean flows along the eastern and southern coastal areas. The coastline is approximately 2954 kilometres long, excluding the coasts of the Marion and Prince Edward Islands which have a combined circumference of approximately 85 kilometres. These islands, which represent the only overseas territories of the republic, are situated in the southwestern part of the Indian Ocean at 46°53'S and 37°51'E.¹

The coastline of South Africa is demarcated by the Orange River mouth in the west, which is the border with Namibia, and Ponta do Ouro in the east, on the border with Mocambique. Cape Agulhas, which indicates the geographical division between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, represents the southernmost tip of the coast and is situated at 34°50'S and 20°E. In general, the coastline is quite rugged and consists of rocks and cliffs, interspersed with sandy beaches, while some coral reefs can be distinguished on the northeastern coast between Durban and Ponta do Ouro. Few ports and harbours exist in the area. The coastal region is surrounded by relatively deep waters and this factor, together with the long fetch and the strong prevailing winds, quite often cause violent and unpredictable conditions at sea. Because of this combination of natural factors, the region is often classified as a high-energy coastline.²

Human presence in the southern African region spans a time period of millions of years. Since the emergence of hominids, people have occupied the area continuously. Traces of earliest hominids, Australopithecus, have been found and are thought to date to around three million years. These were ultimately followed by the first anatomically modern people, whose traces date back to approximately 110 000 BP. By 2000 BP, the nature of subsistence changed from hunter-gatherer activities to pastoralism, followed approximately 200 years later by plant agriculture. Due to the immediate dependence on natural resources, most of the hunter-gatherer and pastoralist communities did not settle permanently but can be characterised by a high degree of mobility.³

Mobility, caused by the search for new hunting grounds and pastures, resulted in contacts of different kinds with other groups. During the late fifteenth century, the nature of contact became more complex with the emergence of Europeans on the

¹ B.E.J.S.Werz (1997). *Diving up the human past. Perspectives of Maritime Archaeology, with specific reference to developments in South Africa until 1996*. Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Groningen : 83, 89.

² *Ibid.* : 89; the Hydrographer South African Navy (1975). *South African sailing directions. Vol.I General information*. Directorate of Hydrography, Kenwyn : 14.

³ Werz (1997) : 85-86.

scene. During their quest for the sea route to the East, the Portuguese landed on the southern African coast. The first historical reference relating to contacts between indigenous people and European mariners dates back to 1488, when Bartholomeu Dias sighted land close to the Gourits River mouth after having circumnavigated the Cape of Good Hope.⁴

After this first encounter, more sporadic contacts followed. During the following two centuries, maritime traffic around the tip of Africa increased as a result of growing international commerce and efforts to colonize overseas territories. In 1647, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) vessel *Haerlem* foundered in Table Bay. Some of the crew were forced to remain on its shores for a period of several months. After being rescued, they reported back to the directors of the Company and this culminated in the founding of the first permanent European settlement in South Africa in 1652. The VOC ruled until the end of the eighteenth century. During this period, shipping traffic in the area increased. In 1806, the Cape became a British colony, a period which lasted more than a century and during which maritime activities intensified drastically. As a result of this, the number of shipping disasters increased, with the second half of the nineteenth century and specifically the period 1880-1889 showing the highest accident rate.⁵ During the twentieth century, the number of maritime accidents decreased, mainly as a result of improved technology. To this day, however, wreckings do occur as the examples of the *Aster* (1997), on the Wild Coast, and a Taiwanese vessel as well as the ship which tried to save her, the *Sea Challenger* (1998), on the coast of Robben Island illustrate.

THE POTENTIAL FOR MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY AND THREATS IMPOSED ON THE RESOURCE

Because the sea level fluctuated through a vertical range of approximately 200 metres during the last two million years, due to glacial control, it may be assumed that evidence of prehistoric cultures is also distributed on the presently submerged continental shelf.⁶ Proof of this was found in Table Bay in 1995, when two Acheulean handaxes dating to between 300 000 and 1,4 million years old were found at depths of in between 5 and 7 metres, underneath debris from two VOC shipwrecks.

⁴ *Ibid.* : 86; R.Raven-Hart (1967). *Before van Riebeeck. Callers at South Africa from 1488 to 1652.* C.Struik Ltd., Cape Town : 1.

⁵ Werz (1997) : 86-88, 109, 362, 366.

⁶ *Ibid.* : 85.

Although one of the axes showed some abrasion signs, which might have been caused by water transport, the other artefact was found *in situ* and represents one of the most pristine examples found in South Africa to date.⁷ Other sites dating to prehistorical times, which to date have only been found on shore, include fish traps, shell middens and other deposits indicating seasonal occupation.⁸

With the emergence of Europeans, the diversity and number of maritime sites increased. Part of these were originally aimed at subsistence and include whaling and sealing stations, as well as earlier shipwreck survivor camps. Most sites, however, contain elements which at one stage fulfilled a role in navigation. Examples of these range from fire beacons and lighthouses, jetties and harbourworks, debris fields of old anchorages and, of course, shipwrecks. The major part of the South African maritime archaeological heritage consists of such artificial-dynamic sites. Although the number of wrecks is less than in some other countries, their diversity and specifically their diverse origin is of direct international relevance. A very conservative estimate, based on scanty historical information, puts the number of shipwrecks at approximately 1506, but it may be assumed that this figure is in fact much higher. What is more important, however, is that vessels from at least 27 different nationalities are represented in South African waters, originating from the continents of Europe, America, Asia, Australia and Africa. Table Bay alone is the repository of at least 358 wrecks originating from 20 countries, including Britain, the Netherlands and Portugal, but also America, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Austria, Canada, Greece, Korea, Russia, Taiwan and Uruguay.⁹

The diverse maritime archaeological resource which is situated on South African shores and in its coastal waters is threatened by a variety of factors. These include natural factors, such as chemical and biological deterioration as well as abrasion, scouring out and dispersal as a result of tidal movements, currents and shifting seabed deposits. An example of the latter is the Dutch East India vessel *Oosterland*, which foundered in Table Bay in 1697. The wreck of this ship was discovered by coincidence in 1988, when deposits which had previously covered the area shifted as a long-term result of harbour constructions undertaken during the period 1966 to 1977.¹⁰

⁷ *Ibid.* : 152; Professor J.Parkington and Mr R.Yates, University of Cape Town, *pers.comm.*

⁸ *Ibid.* : 103, 105-106.

⁹ *Ibid.* : 101-112, 155-160.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* : 114, 246; B.E.J.S.Werz (1992). The excavation of the *Oosterland* in Table Bay: the first systematic exercise in maritime archaeology in southern Africa. *South African Journal of Science* **88** : 85-89; *idem* (1993). Maritime Archaeological Project Table Bay:

Other threats relate to development, whereby old roadsteads, harbour works and shipwrecks are covered by new buildings. This has been the case with the Cape Town Foreshore, which is partly constructed on reclaimed land.¹¹ Other threats which are prevalent in South African waters are caused by the off-shore diamond mining industry, whereby the seabed is stripped down to bed-rock, and the inevitable treasure hunting activities which have been going on for decades everywhere along the coast. It is highly likely that especially the last-mentioned activities had the greatest impact on submerged archaeological sites.¹²

ASPECTS OF CULTURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Cultural resource management (CRM) involves a host of different aspects and activities which aim at protecting available resources and to manage them in the interest of society. CRM incorporates archaeological finds as well as other products of human workmanship, thought, expression and achievement and covers a wide range of activities ranging from legislation, monitoring and protection, to education and information. Hereafter, developments related to maritime archaeology in South Africa will be briefly discussed under these headings.¹³

In South Africa, the realization of the need to introduce large scale programmes to study and provide guidance and expert advice relating to the management of cultural resources is a relatively new development. Although since a number of years positive steps have been taken to protect and restore historical buildings, war graves, colonial battle grounds, rock art and terrestrial archaeological sites, maritime archaeological sites have been virtually ignored.¹⁴ The main reason for this seems to be based in the historical development of the country and its inhabitants. Due to adverse geographical factors, indigenous peoples hardly developed a maritime culture. The land provided for their subsistence and coastal fishing and navigation did not develop to a noticeable level. Also during the colonial era right up to the present, the focus has been much less orientated towards the sea, which might explain why by far the majority of shipwrecks in local waters originate from other nations. In addition, South Africa has never been very dependent on international trade and commerce, due to vast mineral resources and its extensive land surface, which has always been able to cater for agriculture, cattle breeding and settlement of its inhabitants.

aspects of the first field season. *South African Archaeological Society Goodwin Series 7* : 33-39.

¹¹ Werz (1997) : 117-118; R.A.Lightley (1976). An 18th century Dutch East Indiaman, found at Cape Town, 1971. *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology and Underwater Exploration* 5 : 305-316.

¹² Werz (1997) : 118-124.

¹³ *Ibid.* : 112-113.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* : 113.

As a result of this, there is hardly a maritime culture in the country and the focus is still very much orientated towards the interior; a perspective which has been enhanced by the rather one-sided history curriculum which has been taught for generations. Present-day South African people, government departments and academic institutions thus show very little interest in or empathy with the sea and related aspects, or only in as far as these can be of direct benefit to them. It is startling to see how many people only begin to realize how important the sea has been to their history when one coins a phrase, much used by a well-known clergyman *cum* politician, which partly refers to the country's development. Few realize that the so-called "rainbow nation" of South Africa only came into being because of navigation. Without the foreign ships which visited these shores, no whites, no Indians or other Asians and indeed no coloureds would live here. Christians, Moslems, Jews, Hindus and people of other faiths would be absent and with them the rich and diverse cultural influences which they brought with.

Legislation

The South African legislation includes several acts which are relevant to the protection of archaeological sites, both on land and under water. Although most of these were not formulated with this specific purpose in mind, they contain some clauses and conditions which regulate aspects of management and control. In addition to this, further regulations and conditions have been formulated by the government department which is involved in the management of sites with an archaeological or cultural importance, the National Monuments Council or NMC. Although certain protective measures have thus been introduced, it has become clear that there are still many shortcomings which have a negative impact on proper and adequate monitoring and protection of the underwater heritage.¹⁵

One problem relates to the status given to sites which are found in different environments. As a result of this, archaeological material found on land can only be excavated on the strength of a permit which is being issued to suitably qualified archaeologists. Submerged sites, however, can be tackled by virtually anyone who obtains a salvage permit, without any proof of competence in the field of archaeology. Legislation which is currently being processed, however, seems to partly redress this inconsistency. Another problem is the difficulty in instituting court procedures to bring offenders to book. Two stumbling blocks can be identified and these relate to the difficulty in obtaining sufficient evidence which can stand up in a court of law and the extremely cautious approach which has characterised the NMC's attitude in a

¹⁵ *Ibid.* : 125-131; B.E.J.S.Werz (1990). A preliminary step to protect South Africa's undersea heritage. *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology and Underwater Exploration* **19** : 335-337; *idem* (1993). South African shipwrecks and salvage: the need for improved management. *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology and Underwater Exploration* **22** : 237-244.

number of instances.¹⁶ Recently, however, the NMC seems to have changed its attitude slightly and is now actively involved in legal procedures which involve the possible illegal salvage, export and selling of gold coins, reputedly originating from the wreck of the English East Indiaman *Doddington* which sank near Bird Island, Algoa Bay, in 1755.¹⁷

Monitoring and protection

Monitoring and protection of the maritime archaeological resource can only be done within the legal framework which exists. Some problems related to this issue have been briefly indicated above and these have had their impact on the practical application of the law. In addition, the lack of a proper infrastructure, insufficient funding and the presence of only very few people who are in a position to assess the damage done to the maritime archaeological resource, have had a further negative impact.

In South Africa, no group exists which takes an active role in monitoring and policing maritime archaeological sites. Incidental reports of such activities have been received occasionally, but in most cases the damage had already been done and no further investigations were instituted. A system of honorary shipwreck inspectors has also failed as no adequate feedback and support was provided by the NMC, whereas at least one of these volunteers had a direct commercial interest in the exploitation of wrecks. The only involvement at present is by the Sea Patrol Coordinating Committee, which involves government departments such as the NMC, the South African Navy, the South African Police and the Department of Sea Fisheries. To date, however, SEAPACC has not been undertaking any noticeable effort to monitor archaeological sites.

Education and information

Before 1988, very little was done in South Africa with regard to public information and nothing in the way of formal teaching in the field of maritime archaeology. A few academics and museum personnel showed an interest in the field and were to a limited extent involved in related research. As a result, a limited number of articles were produced, although some of them contained nothing more than general comments based on a literature study.¹⁸ Also some non-academics, who played an active

¹⁶ Werz (1997) : 130-131, 134-135; *idem* (1993) : 240-242; *idem* (1994). Maritime archaeology, shipwreck salvage and the role of museums: some comments. *Southern African Museums Association Bulletin* **20** : 8-10.

¹⁷ Mr J.Gribble, National Monuments Council, *pers.comm.*

¹⁸ For example : G.Bell-Cross (1980). Research policy on shipwrecks. *Southern African Museums Association Bulletin* **14** : 1-2; H.J.Deacon (1988). Practise and policy

role in salvaging historical wrecks, reported on their work but again to a very limited extent.¹⁹ An unfortunate development was that both groups regularly clashed, whereby some academics condemned the motivations of and procedures followed by divers, while these rebuked the critics for not being able to provide adequate advise and not being able to observe conditions for themselves. Misunderstanding, suspicion and animosity thus prevailed for a long time and has characterised the relations between the various parties involved.²⁰

The first effort to develop maritime archaeology as a scientific specialisation in South Africa on a more permanent basis was undertaken by the University of Cape Town (UCT). In September 1988, a lectureship was established in the field, which was maintained until 1996 when, due to a lack of interest and financial support, the position was made redundant. During this eight year period, however, many projects were set in motion, even though financial restrictions prevented proper development in some instances. With a total research budget of 13,865 US dollar provided by UCT, an average of approximately 1,700 dollar *per annum*, several research projects were successfully set in motion.²¹ In addition, thirteen students from various departments at UCT

in maritime archaeology. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* **43** : 123-125; T.Maggs (1984). The great galleon São João: remains from a mid-sixteenth century wreck on the Natal south coast. *Annals of the Natal Museum* **26** : 173-186; A.B.Smith (1988). When is marine salvage 'archaeology'? *South African Archaeological Bulletin* **43** : 122-123; B.R.Stuckenberg (1986). Recent studies of historic Portuguese shipwrecks in South Africa. *Academia de Marinha* : 5-16

¹⁹ For example : D. & G.Allen (1978). *Clive's lost treasure*. Robin Garton, London; *idem* (1978). *The guns of Sacramento*. Robin Garton, London; A.Kayle (1990). *Salvage of the Birkenhead*. Southern Book Publishers, Johannesburg

²⁰ Werz (1997) : 122.

²¹ These projects included, but were not limited to : the excavation of the main well in the Cape Town Castle, the excavation of two shipwrecks on the beaches near Plettenberg Bay and Table View respectively, a survey of shipwrecks near Robben Island and the still ongoing underwater excavations of two Dutch East-India Company vessels in Table Bay.

undertook research projects for BA and Honours degrees in aspects of maritime archaeological research, six of whom majored in archaeology, and a further two obtained a Masters in Maritime Archaeology.

Furthermore, dozens of sport divers attended training courses which were initially developed by the author and which continue to date under the auspices of the UK based Nautical Archaeology Society. Other extra-mural activities comprised of nearly one hundred public lectures on the topic and nine exhibitions at various venues. Besides public lectures, courses and exhibitions, public information was further enhanced through the popular media. During the eight year period, more than 100 articles on the author's work appeared in various national and international newspapers and magazines, whereas at least 25 radio interviews were conducted and nine items on national television reported on aspects of his research.²²

Research

Research in the field was not limited to benefit UCT. During the period of appointment, the author advised museums, such as the South African Cultural History Museum, as well as other institutions, like the National Monuments Council, in an effort to improve cultural resource management. This resulted, amongst others, in the development of an infrastructure for the curation of shipwreck artefacts in the South African Maritime Museum, improved regulations for interference with historical wrecksites and the production of information pamphlets.²³

²² Werz (1997) : 139-140.

²³ Various unpublished reports have been produced on these matters. Relevant publications include : B.E.J.S.Werz (1990). A preliminary step to protect South Africa's undersea heritage. *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology and Underwater Exploration* **19** : 335-337; *idem* (1993). Maritiem argeologiese ondersoek in 'n Suid-Afrikaanse konteks: doelstelling, metode en praktyk. *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* **33** : 20-26; *idem* (1993). South African shipwrecks and salvage: the need for improved management. *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology and Underwater Exploration* **22** : 245-256; *idem* (1994). Maritime archaeology, shipwreck salvage and the role of museums: some comments. *Southern African Museums Association Bulletin* **20** : 8-10; B.E.J.S.Werz &

The heading 'research' also includes the various projects which were mentioned above. To date, aspects of this work have been reported in fifteen student theses, a variety of project reports, more than 20 scientific publications written or co-authored by the author and a book.²⁴

CONCLUSIONS

Maritime archaeology as a specialisation of the discipline of archaeology was formally introduced in South Africa in 1988 with the establishment of a lectureship in the field at the University of Cape Town. The main reasons for creating this position were a growing concern regarding the continuing disturbance and destruction of submerged archaeological sites through salvage, treasure hunting and development; a belated realisation of the importance of such sites; and unsatisfactory cultural resource management practices. Various attempts to partly rectify this situation were undertaken since 1988. These included the introduction of a formal academic teaching and research programme, public education programmes, scientific and popular publications, specialist advice to institutions such as the National Monuments Council and the South African Maritime Museum, as well as public relations. Unfortunately, restrictions imposed by the economical and political situation in South Africa during this period have prevented the proper establishment of the field to date. This negative development was further enhanced by an attitude of disinterest and a lack of concern.

Due to historical developments, which include commercially motivated expansionism by European nations since the late fifteenth century followed by colonialism from the seventeenth century onwards, as well as their geographic position and environmental circumstances, South African coastal waters and adjacent shores have become a major repository of maritime archaeological sites. These include : camp sites and stations used by prehistoric hunter-gatherers, shipwrecked mariners, whalers and sealers; lighthouses; jetties and harbour works; and shipwrecks. Of these sites, the latter form a most important category. A preliminary survey, based on incomplete historical data, indicated that a minimum of 1506 vessels foundered here during the period 1550 to 1984. These vessels, representing a minimum of seventeen different types ranging from vessels of exploration to oil-tankers and originating from at least 27 different nations, indicate the diversity and international importance of the South African underwater heritage. It must, however, be acknowledged that these figures represent

J.Deacon (s.a.). *Historical shipwrecks and the National Monuments Act*. National Monuments Council, Cape Town.

²⁴ B.E.J.S.Werz (1997). *Diving up the human past. Perspectives of Maritime Archaeology, with specific reference to developments in South Africa until 1996*. Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Groningen. The sections 'Sources' and 'Bibliography' contained herein provide detailed information on the theses, reports and publications mentioned in this context.

minimum numbers and can only serve as indicators of the shipwreck potential which might well be much greater.

Although shipwrecks can be found anywhere along the nearly 3000 kilometres long coastline, the section between the Orange River mouth and Cape Agulhas shows a significant concentration of wrecks. This is partly due to geographic and environmental factors whereby submerged obstacles and weather conditions, such as adverse winds and the occurrence of fog, have played an important role. In addition, historical factors also contributed to the foundering of ships in this region. The most important role which Table Bay has played since the seventeenth century, as a place of refuge for passing ships but also as the place from where expansionism into the interior was organised initially, can partly be used to explain this phenomenon.

Historical shipwrecks can be of importance to present-day society. Their values are diverse and range from commercial exploitation to education and research, cultural, memorial, recreational and even aesthetic values. Nevertheless, many are threatened by human interference. Such actions are motivated by development, for example when a natural place of refuge is changed into a harbour or when parts of an old roadstead become reclaimed land. Wrecks might also be destroyed when they pose a threat to navigation. Within a South African context, commercial exploitation of the cargo and contents of older shipwrecks seems, however, the most important motivation for interference with such sites. To control and curb these combined activities, various Acts have been introduced over the years. Of specific interest is the National Monuments Act, No.28 of 1969 (as amended), as this is the only South African Act which makes provision for the historical-archaeological and cultural values which can be attributed to shipwrecks.

The responsibility to manage, control and enforce regulations contained in the various Acts and their amendments is shared by different authorities. Unfortunately, a lack of control and public information, insufficient funding and disinterest shown by responsible authorities, as well as the attitude shown by profit-motivated divers, did not contribute to the adequate protection of the underwater cultural resource. In addition, financial constraints and a lack of support prevented institutes such as the University of Cape Town and coastal museums such as the South African Maritime Museum to make full use of historical wrecks for research and educational purposes. This is a matter of concern, bearing in mind the international importance of shipwrecks in South African waters and their status as non-renewable cultural resources which can make unique contributions to a better understanding of aspects of people's history.

In conclusion, it can be stated that formal efforts to protect and manage the underwater cultural resource in South Africa to date are of a limited nature and have not achieved the desired goals. Although the shipwreck resource is still under serious threat, no adequate system of control has been realized. Also management of authorised salvage activities and related issues, including the curation of recovered artefacts, has not reached an acceptable level. Although public interest in maritime archaeology is considerable, insufficient efforts have been undertaken by relevant authorities to inform and educate members of the general public, civil servants, developers, academics, sport divers, salvors and treasure hunters.

In this context it should be realized that many *bona fide* divers and others are willing to cooperate and their assistance is essential if the current situation in South Africa is to be improved. One way of stimulating such development is by providing practical examples, whereby allowance is made for public participation in research projects. Experiences elsewhere in the world, such as the *Mary Rose* and *Amsterdam* excavations, have shown that this approach is beneficial to specific projects while at the same token the educational, recreational and public relations role which maritime archaeological projects can play are enhanced. Another way in which a better situation can be created is represented by the example of the Institute of Maritime Archaeology which was established in Cape Town in mid-1998. This private initiative aims to stimulate proper development and management of the underwater cultural resource by providing advice, furthering scientific research and offering practical and theoretical courses to interested parties. It is hoped that through practical examples provided by research projects, as well as the activities of the above-mentioned Institute, the current unsatisfactory situation in South Africa can be rectified, at least in part.