INTRODUCTION

UNESCO adopted in 2001, the Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage as a response of the international community of years of commercial exploitation, illicit trafficking and unethical recovery of archaeological artefacts found in underwater contexts\(^1\), including not only the oceans but also internal waters such as lakes and rivers. This Convention sets recognized international standards for all activities directed at underwater archaeological sites, fostering international cooperation, capacity-building and sustainable development through the appropriate management and effective implementation. The 2001 Convention contains minimum requirements however, so each State Party, if it so wishes, may choose to develop even higher standards of protection.

The goal of the 2001 Convention is to ensure the effective protection of underwater cultural heritage and its preservation for future generations. It also aims to enable States to effectively provide such protection.

Following the recent signature of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea by Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan in August 2018, UNESCO is organizing a regional meeting to tackle the importance of cultural heritage in the region and to promote the ratification of the UNESCO 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage for the first time in the region. Only one country (Iran) is a State party to the UNESCO 2001 Convention in Central Asia, and the ratification of the 2001 Convention remains a major challenge in the region.

One of the main reasons for this low rate of ratification is the lack of technical and professional capacity, and of awareness of the immense importance of protecting underwater cultural heritage. Sites are lost every day, be it to looting or to industrial activities impacting on the

\(^1\) The UNESCO 2001 Convention defines underwater cultural heritage as “all traces of human existence having a cultural, historical or archaeological character which have been partially or totally under water, periodically or continuously, for at least 100 years.” (Article 1).
seabed - a challenge that is especially relevant in light of high impact urban development in important areas of the Caspian Sea. Therefore, the underwater cultural heritage is in dire need of legal and operational protection, which can only be achieved by a universal ratification of the UNESCO 2001 Convention, its national implementation in harmony with other UNESCO Culture Conventions (i.e. the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property or the 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, among others), the adoption of appropriate national legislation, building of research and protection capacity, and the creation of a firm cooperation network.

At the same time this heritage cannot be regarded in isolation from the heritage found on land and along the coasts. It has to be understood and managed in an integral way since they all form part of the same maritime cultural landscape. This entire heritage is threatened by a consistent pattern of deliberate vandalism, incidental destruction, climate change and unsustainable coastal development and use of maritime resources - putting this significant part of humanity's heritage in peril.

Seizing the opportunity of recent developments in the legal status of the Caspian Sea, this meeting aims to raise awareness on the importance of protecting the underwater cultural heritage in the region and to promote the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage as a major tool to safeguard this valuable heritage of humanity and transmit it to future generations.

**THE REGIONAL MEETING**

Located on the periphery of European civilization, the Caspian Sea has been veiled in mystery and legend for centuries.

The Caspian Sea is the largest inland body of water on Earth. It extends from the marshy delta of the Volga River in Russia in the North to the coast of Iran in the south, from the mountain ranges of the Northern or Great Caucasus of Azerbaijan in the west, to the Turkmen and Kazakh deserts in the east. Long and relatively narrow, it extends 1,200 km north to south and 320 km east to west.

Shallow along the northern shores, the sea deepens towards the south, reaching its maximum depth at about 1,025 meters. Its north-south orientation and significant depth variation create rich and diverse ecosystems and contribute to the wealth of the sea's biological resources, which have attracted people to settle along its shores for millennia. The Caspian is known for significant variation in its water level. Over the last 700,000 years, the Caspian Sea’s level has fluctuated between 130 metres below and 50 metres above absolute sea level. The mediaeval port of Abaskun on the south-eastern shore of the Caspian Sea and the city of Itihl are two of
the many examples of entire cities that have been covered by water, in the area of the Caspian Sea.

The Caspian Sea and its coastal zone are said to have over 80 sunken and abandoned ships and metallic construction. However, the Caspian Sea and underwater archaeology in the region remain underexplored and there is little information and few studies on the underwater cultural heritage covering the whole region. The archaeological remains found in the waters are a vivid catalogue of human history and hold enormous potential for tourism and economic development. It is therefore urgent to raise awareness of the importance of safeguarding this underwater cultural heritage and to promote understanding and ratification of the UNESCO 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage as an effective tool to protect this valuable heritage.

OBJECTIVES OF THE MEETING

The meeting presents a valuable opportunity for the countries neighboring the Caspian Sea to gather and discuss the protection and potential of the underwater cultural heritage in their respective countries and the region as a whole. It seeks to identify and assess the needs of the Member States in the research, identification, evaluation, protection and management of the underwater cultural heritage while guiding them towards the ratification of the UNESCO 2001 Convention and the adaptation of their national laws.

The meeting aims specifically to:

1. increase the awareness and interest of the competent authorities in the region on the potential and importance of the underwater cultural heritage and the UNESCO 2001 Convention;
2. Increase the awareness of policy makers on the need to protect the underwater cultural heritage and to ratify and properly apply the UNESCO 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage;
3. take stock of underwater cultural heritage sites in the region, identify issues, needs and challenges, and foster cooperation to protect underwater cultural heritage by establishing a regional network on underwater cultural heritage protection by all stakeholders involved;
4. Adoption of recommendations and an action plan with priority areas and actions to be undertaken to advance in the research, identification and protection of the underwater cultural heritage for sustainable development in the region.

The Regional Meeting should identify key priority areas where future activities will develop. This can be for instance a decision to build up a capacity-building strategy for the Region taking into account needs assessments, establishment of pilot projects among stakeholders and authorities involved that could serve as a model on underwater archaeology practice in the region as well as a training ground, etc.
MEMBER STATES / PARTICIPANTS

• Participating countries
  • Armenia
  • Azerbaijan
  • Georgia
  • Kazakhstan
  • Kyrgyzstan
  • Russia
  • Tajikistan
  • Turkmenistan
  • Uzbekistan

• This Regional Meeting will be addressed to policy makers and practitioners in charge of implementing cultural heritage protection policies in the Caspian Sea region countries as well as to the National Commissions for UNESCO;

• It should be also addressed to archaeologists and heritage professionals, including universities with related programmes.

• The meeting will provide Russian and English interpretation.

LOGISTICS AND EXPENSES

The organizers will cover to the participants:

• Travel expenses and local transport to the venue of the meeting;
• Accommodation and food during the days of the meeting;

Other costs, especially expenses incurred to obtain visas required, need to be covered by the participants or their institutions.

CONTACT

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