

Photo: A. Vanzo © UNESCO, Taiwanese shipwreck, Coral Sea – Graphic design: Stéphane Hébillon.

# THE UNESCO CONVENTION ON THE PROTECTION OF THE UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



The Protection of the  
Underwater Cultural Heritage

In the last years many important submerged archaeological sites have been looted.

One example is the wreck of the *Tek Sing*, which was found in the South China Sea close to Indonesia. Little concern was given by private salvors to the fact that the wreck gave testimony to one of the biggest catastrophes in the history of seafaring. The sinking ship had taken with her almost 1,500 persons to the bottom of the sea – more than were killed when the Titanic sank. Nevertheless, its invaluable cargo was dispersed and the wreck destroyed.

The famous *Geldermalsen* and the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* shared this fate. Their precious cargo was dispersed in auctions all over the world, leaving almost no trace in public collections. There are many other such examples.



Ancient Indonesian fresco, showing a vessel.  
U. Koschtial © UNESCO.

However, recovered objects are not only threatened by dispersal – an object that has been immersed for a long period in saltwater and is recovered faces a risk of rapid deterioration when brought into contact with air. It has to undergo adequate desalting and conservation treatment to be preserved.

Many precious cultural objects have been lost already and a protection of underwater cultural heritage is urgently needed.

## THE 2001 UNESCO CONVENTION ON THE PROTECTION OF THE UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE

is an international treaty strengthening the protection of underwater cultural heritage containing

- basic principles for protecting such heritage;
- provisions for an international cooperation scheme; and
- practical guidelines for dealing with such heritage.

## UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE SHOULD:

- be preserved;
- not be moved, except for a scientific reason;
- not be looted and dispersed.



Removing sand covering a wreck. D. Metzger/Drassm © UNESCO.



Wreck of the *Umbria*, Wingate Reef, Port Sudan. E.Trainito © UNESCO.

The richness of the world's underwater cultural heritage is often underestimated. Oceans, which cover the larger part of our planet, still retain many of their secrets.

However, the looting of such heritage is augmenting rapidly due to improved diving technology. Worldwide, art markets and collectors along with treasure hunters increasingly turn to objects coming from the seabed. However, there is still a lack of awareness of its existence and historical importance.

**UNESCO fights for effective protection of underwater cultural heritage and fosters State cooperation and knowledge exchange.**

**Support UNESCO**  
by supporting the ratification and implementation of the  
**2001 UNESCO**  
**Convention for the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage**

Contact :

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