



# RIPPING UP SHIPWRECKS

## The Wreck Watch Statement on Bottom Fishing, Underwater Cultural Heritage & Sustainable Practice (December 2015)

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### **Statement:**

Fishing is huge business of irreplaceable economic and social value. Bottom trawling and shellfish dredging cover 75% of the world's seas. Every year trawlers sweep an estimated area of seabed equivalent in size to half the world's continental shelves.

Fishing boats dragging heavy ground gear plough seabeds and physically flatten habitats, remove seagrass, corals and other invertebrates and expose buried fauna. Bottom fishing is notorious as amongst the most destructive form of impact on seabed communities. Marine conservationists dub these trawlers 'bulldozers of the deep' and have sought ways of reducing their collateral impacts since 1960.

Sunken cultural heritage is at even greater risk than marine habitats, but as a threat enjoys no proactive management. Damaged fauna and flora can regenerate, whether seasonally or over decades. Once a shipwreck has been struck by fishing gear, the damage and erosion of knowledge is permanent. Arguably no historic sea lanes once traversed by ancient and historical merchantmen and warships remain untouched.

In the space of a few generations some seas have witnessed the pandemic wiping of their archaeological hard drives. Whereas other forms of impacts – oil and gas pipelines, aggregate dredging and wind farms – follow pre-determined lines, which can be surveyed and mitigated when they run close to a wreck, the routes followed by bottom fishing are chaotic and insensitive to archaeology and conservation.

The Western Approaches, western English Channel and North Sea have been heavily impacted for over a century. All manner of finds from Palaeolithic axe heads to Second World War airplane propellers have been netted across European waters. The North Adriatic has been devastated. The waters of Sicily, southern Turkey and the Black Sea remain a hot zone where ancient amphoras, statues and even sections of hulls are frequently snagged. Trawlers have flattened wrecks off Greece, turning the seabed into the marine equivalent of an asphalt highway.

The obliteration of major porcelain cargoes and wooden hulls off Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand is widespread. Many ships reflecting the history of early American seafaring and seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Spanish colonial trade off Florida, Louisiana, Texas and in the Gulf of Mexico have been heavily eroded by shrimp fishing.

The root of the problem is economic and as such is unlikely to go away: society needs the commitment of hard-working fishing communities as a reliable source of food for a growing population. Currently fishing is conducted with little concern for heritage and is often unsustainable. There is an urgent need for targeted protection for both fish stocks and heritage. Setting large tracts of the seas off limits makes sound financial sense to protect fish communities: the World Bank report, *The Sunken Billions*, calculated that the major world stocks would produce 40% more if fished less. Marine conservationists have proposed that 30% of the world's oceans need to be blanketed with mosaics of marine reserves to lift stocks back to sustainable levels.

With so little perceived commercial value, underwater cultural heritage has no comparable economic or political power. Instead, it is an untold wealth of knowledge – the greatest museum in the world – at risk. The vast potential to humanity is almost inconceivable. The organic and metallic shipwrecked artefacts so well preserved underwater, but rarely encountered on land, enhance our appreciation of almost every civilisation that has inhabited the planet.

This statement calls on the governments of the world to recognise the profound threats of bottom fishing on the Marine Archaeological Critical Resource (MACR). It appeals to all stakeholders from divers to heritage managers to end the climate of denial and to respect the non-finite character of the resource.

Governments and heritage managers are entreated to:

1. Acknowledge the reality of irreversible damage from fishing gear and the existence of a problem needing critical attention.
2. Assess, quantify and understand the scale of the problem of fishing-induced damage at the national level.
3. Promote awareness of the negative implications of uncontrolled bottom fishing on unique underwater cultural heritage, education potential and human knowledge.
4. Examine and propose management options and assess their effectiveness.
5. Explore synergies and opportunities between environmental and heritage protection.

6. Interface with the fishing community to improve respect, understanding and consensus about practical management approaches.
7. Identify means of improving the evidence and research base to negotiate better outcomes for archaeological site management within national and international protocols and legal frameworks.
8. Seek changes to legislative frameworks to enhance protection.
9. Identify national Red Lists of unique wrecks endangered by bottom fishing for which protection is a crucial priority.
10. Promote global awareness of the Marine Archaeological Critical Resource.
11. Provide sufficient resources to facilitate sustainable protection.

Governments need to be flexible when considering practical management options. They must focus on sites with the most unique and important historical and evidential significance (the Marine Archaeological Critical Resource). Protection options may range from site avoidance to enforcing exclusion zones (video monitoring or concrete block emplacement), and equally preservation by record and removing material at risk from harm's way.

Many near-shore archaeological sites have reached the point of no return as bottom trawling flattens maritime landscapes. Around 40% of the world's trawling grounds lie in waters deeper than 200 metres. As trawlers work increasingly further from shore and deeper in search of catches, the cycle of destruction will start anew.

The following archaeologists, marine conservationists and biologists endorse this statement. We call on the world's governments to ensure the protection of the Marine Archaeological Critical Resource, endangered by bottom fishing, as humanity's obligation to the public trust and the safeguarding of irreplaceable cultural assets:

**Signatories (in alphabetical order):**

- Lawrence Babits, George Washington Distinguished Professor, Director of Maritime Studies, Department of History, East Carolina University, USA
- George Bass, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Texas A&M University; Founder and Chairman Emeritus, The Institute of Nautical Archaeology, Texas A&M University, USA
- Dr Carlo Beltrame, Lecturer of Maritime Archaeology & Methodologies of Archaeological Research, Università Ca' Foscari, Venice, Italy
- John D. Broadwater, Ph.D., President, Sprintsail Enterprises (marine archaeology consulting), USA

- Robert Cembrola, Curator of Maritime History & Adjunct Professor, Naval War College Museum, Newport, Rhode Island, USA
- Dr Katerina Dellaporta, Director, The Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens, Greece
- Dr Michael Flecker, Managing Director of Maritime Explorations, Singapore; Associate Fellow of the Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
- Alex Hildred, Curator, Mary Rose Trust, UK
- Prof. Richard Hodges, OBE, President, The American University of Rome, Italy
- Dr Thomas F. King, Senior Archaeologist, The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery, USA
- Dr Sean A. Kingsley, Director, Wreck Watch Int., London, UK
- Dr Claudio Lozano Guerra-Librero, Coastal Geology & Water Resources Investigation Group, Faculty of Experimental Sciences, Universidad de Huelva, Spain
- Emeritus Professor Andrew R.G. Price, FLS, School of Life Sciences, University of Warwick, Coventry; Honorary Professor, Environment Department, University of York, UK
- Callum Roberts, Professor of Marine Conservation, Environment Department, University of York, UK
- Sir Tony Robinson, Actor & Television Presenter (*Time Team*), UK
- Sten Sjostrand, Director, Nanhai Marine Archaeology, Malaysia
- Dr Ruth Thurstan, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, School of Biological Sciences, The University of Queensland, Australia
- Prof. Sebastiano Tusa, Soprintendenza del Mare, Sicily

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**Further Details:**

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