What is maritime archaeology?

Archaeology is an international discipline concerned with studying the past using physical evidence in conjunction with historical and/or oral sources as well as geological, biological and other scientific evidence.

Archaeological study provides a lively and detailed picture of our history because it is concerned with real things and places. It deals with all people and their everyday lives. It can show how people worked and played, how they ate, the things they used, what they did with them and how they were made.

Australian archaeology consists of three main areas of archaeological study: Aboriginal, historical, and maritime.

This brochure provides information about maritime archaeology, sometimes called nautical archaeology, marine or underwater archaeology. The names refer to the medium in which the sites are predominantly found although shipwrecks out of water are still classified as maritime or nautical in nature.

Maritime archaeological sites include shipwrecks, Aboriginal and historical cultural deposits or structures that are underwater. The sites may represent civilisations that are ancient or modern.

Maritime archaeology is more than excavation

While underwater excavation is one of the skills of a professional maritime archaeologist, excavation permanently and irretrievably changes a site. If all shipwrecks were excavated, their aesthetic, recreational and habitat values would be lost. Excavation is usually limited to sites that have the potential to answer important research questions or which are under threat of destruction due to redevelopment proposals. Much of the work of maritime archaeologists involves surveying maritime sites, assessing archaeological potential and in interpreting the sites to the wider community.
How is our maritime archaeological heritage protected?

There are two main pieces of legislation which protect historic shipwrecks and other submerged heritage in NSW.

The **Heritage Act 1977** (NSW) protects the State’s natural and cultural heritage and contains measures to protect archaeological remains. Aboriginal sites and relics are primarily cared for by the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The Act protects archaeological relics from being disturbed without a permit from the Heritage Council which administers the Act. A relic is defined as anything over 50 years old. Therefore virtually every item of heritage significance in NSW is protected.

Anyone who finds relics, including shipwrecks and other underwater heritage, in the internal waters of NSW (that is rivers, harbours, lakes and enclosed bays) which relate to the colonisation of Australia or are more than 50 years old are required to notify the Heritage Council.

The **Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976** (Cwlth) protects historic shipwrecks in Australian waters including those adjacent to NSW. Anyone who finds a shipwreck or article associated with a shipwreck in these waters, below low water mark and on the NSW coast, is required to notify the Minister for Communications and the Arts. The notification should be made through the Director of the Heritage Office, who is the NSW delegate for the Act.

All wrecks and submerged deposits which are 75 years old or more are automatically protected under this Act. This means divers are free to visit the wrecks provided they do not disturb or remove relics and do not damage or interfere with the sites.

**Excavation & archaeological relics**
Any person or group wishing to excavate anywhere in NSW to discover a relic or investigate a site must apply for an excavation permit through the NSW Heritage Office. For sites that are subject to the *NSW Heritage Act*, the application will be considered by the NSW Heritage Council.

For sites subject to the *Commonwealth Historic Shipwrecks Act* the application will be considered by the Director of the Heritage Office as the State Delegate for that Act.

The excavation director must have professional qualifications and experience in maritime archaeology.

Once a site is excavated it is irretrievably altered. In order to protect our heritage, stringent requirements must be met before a permit will be issued. These requirements ensure that the site fulfills its potential to contribute to our knowledge of the past and that information is not lost unnecessarily.
Underwater heritage is fragile! We need to remember that the record and remains of shipwrecks and other maritime heritage cannot be added to, only diminished. They remain a unique and irreplaceable resource, yielding vital information about our past.

Penalties

The heritage of NSW is irreplaceable and heavy penalties exist for offences under the Heritage Act and the Historic Shipwrecks Act. Penalties may include fines, confiscation of equipment and/or imprisonment.

What can you do?

Archaeological excavation is a specialised field which must be supervised by a trained archaeologist. However, volunteers can assist by:

- carrying out surveys of shipwreck sites
- making photographic records or measured drawings of the shipwreck
- collecting historical plans or photographs about industries, places and people associated with particular shipwrecks.
- recording the memories of people who are familiar with aspects of maritime history or people who survived or who are descendants of shipwreck survivors.
- researching themes in Australian social and economic history to provide information for archaeological studies
- researching particular developments that have influenced a particular shipping trade or style of ship construction

Such projects are the backbone of future archaeological study and will help to identify and conserve our heritage.

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Further Information

The Heritage Office has assembled a wealth of information
material about NSW shipwreck. This includes:

- *The Shipwreck Atlas of New South Wales*
- Annual Shipwreck Posters
- Dive tank, dive tub, boat stickers
- Postcards
- Guidelines on establishing shipwreck information signs
- Guidelines on researching and documenting shipwrecks

Produced by the Heritage Office for the Heritage Council of NSW. For further information or advice contact:

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