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The Smithsonian's startling about-face came after a meeting that its officials held on 8 and 9 December with a blue-ribbon advisory committee consisting of representatives from the U.N. Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; and other key agencies. Some archaeologists in attendance expected a stormy session, fearing that senior Smithsonian officials—including Julian Raby, the director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, who had originally advocated strongly for the exhibit—planned to stick to their guns. But by lunchtime of the first day, the committee had reached a unanimous agreement, recommending cancelling the original exhibit and excavating the Belitung wreck scientifically with a team led by Southeast Asian scientists. "With the approval and involvement of the Indonesian authorities this can become an exemplary initiative in international collaboration," said Raby in the press release. "It can achieve multiple goals, and that is why it elicited consensus from the participants."
The decision caught many off guard. "The chance to have such a positive outcome never even occurred to me," says nautical archaeologist Paul Johnston of the National Museum of American History in Washington.

Existing documents from the Seabed Explorations excavation suggest that much vital scientific data still lies on the sea floor. A massive, naturally-forming mineral concretion, for example, appears to be covering and protecting the bottom of the ship's hull. By carefully excavating it, a research team could learn key details about how and where the ship was built. "This could be of incalculable value to our knowledge of seafaring in that part of the world and during that time," Johnston says.

Those who attended last week's meeting are now looking for ways to finance such a dig before the next advisory committee meeting in early 2012. Johnston notes that UNESCO has already promised its support, an important first step.

For many nautical archaeologists who have been fighting to preserve the world's shipwrecks from treasure hunters and looters, the real importance of the Smithsonian decision this week is the message it sends to the international community. "I think it shows everyone that nations shouldn't allow treasure hunting," says Johnston. "You really can't put a price on underwater cultural heritage."

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