



IUCN AND ICOMOS STATEMENT ON POTENTIALLY POLLUTING WRECKS

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More than 8,500 shipwrecks worldwide - most caused by 20th century conflict - containing an estimated 2.5 - 20 million tons of pollutants, serve as a stark reminder of the legacy of humanity's common past. They are often labelled *Ticking Time Bombs*, especially given that the positions of many potentially polluting wrecks remain imprecise.

Physical, biological and chemical processes - exacerbated by climate change - are compromising the structural integrity of these shipwrecks, with some already known to be leaking contaminants into the natural environment. A sudden structural failure of one or more of these vessels, resulting in a major oil spill, would pose an existential environmental threat. The impacts can be local, through the potential destruction of a shipwreck's associated ecosystem, but may also result in significant damage to underwater cultural heritage values, and possibly disturb human remains.

BLUE ECONOMIES AT RISK

Tourism centred around natural heritage ecosystems and the cultural and historic values associated with shipwrecks constitute a key economic activity in many places. The consequences of such a sudden structural failure, coupled with the subsequent clean-up efforts or pre-emptive actions to mitigate contaminants, will deliver a significant economic shock to these and other Blue Economies such as artisanal fishing.

PREVENTATIVE MITIGATION IS MORE COST-EFFECTIVE

Oil pollution carries enormous human and environmental costs, in addition to the financial burden of clean-up operations. The preventative management of potentially polluting wrecks to avert oil spills carries a significant financial cost. This can range from non-intrusive monitoring, utilising new technology that provides innovative options for remote surveillance, to planned interventions for oil removal. However, every available metric and case study clearly demonstrates that the cost of emergency response and clean-up vastly exceeds that of strategic management. In addition, experience has shown that it is near impossible to avoid long-term harm. The full natural and cultural value of a polluted ecosystem may never be fully restored.

Considering this existential threat to the Ocean's health, IUCN and ICOMOS encourage governments and their relevant agencies to monitor, assess, and continue to develop and share innovative tools and best practices for the strategic management of and, where feasible, the removal of pollutants from sunken ships.

Furthermore, IUCN and ICOMOS call on the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) to explore collaboration with governments and their relevant agencies to develop guidelines or a toolkit for use in evaluating the threat of pollution from shipwrecks and identifying possible solutions, keeping in mind that many potentially polluting wrecks are, at the same time, maritime gravesites and underwater cultural heritage. This initiative will be in direct support of the number one challenge identified by the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainability (2021-2030); understand and beat marine pollution. IUCN and ICOMOS stand ready to support UNEP in this effort.

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The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) is a non-governmental, not for profit international organisation, committed to furthering the conservation, protection, use and enhancement of the world's cultural heritage. With over 12,000 members, 110+ National Committees, 31 International Scientific Committees and several Working Groups, ICOMOS has built a solid philosophical, doctrinal and managerial framework for the sustainable conservation of heritage around the world. As an official Advisory Body to the World Heritage Committee for the implementation of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, ICOMOS evaluates nominations and advises on the state of conservation of properties inscribed on the World Heritage List.

The International Scientific Committee on Underwater Cultural Heritage (ICUCH) is one of ICOMOS' International Scientific Committees that works to promote international cooperation in the protection and management of underwater cultural heritage. ICOMOS-ICUCH is an active partner in [Project Tangaroa](#), a global initiative to address the environmental and cultural risks posed by potentially polluting historic shipwrecks. It aims to develop an international framework for risk assessment, data sharing, and coordinated response.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is a membership Union uniquely composed of both government and civil society organisations. It provides public, private and non-governmental organisations with the knowledge and tools that enable human progress, economic development and nature conservation to take place together. Created in 1948, IUCN is now the world's largest and most diverse environmental network, harnessing the knowledge, resources and reach of more than 1,400 Member organisations and around 17,000 experts. It is a leading provider of conservation data, assessments and analysis. Its broad membership enables IUCN to fill the role of incubator and trusted repository of best practices, tools and international standards.

IUCN provides a neutral space in which diverse stakeholders including governments, NGOs, scientists, businesses, local communities, indigenous peoples organisations and others can work together to forge and implement solutions to environmental challenges and achieve sustainable development. Working with many partners and supporters, IUCN implements a large and diverse portfolio of conservation projects worldwide. Combining the latest science with the traditional knowledge of local communities, these projects work to reverse habitat loss, restore ecosystems and improve people's well-being.