CURRENT APPROACHES TO THE UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE - STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES.
THE AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE.

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The Australian approach to its cultural heritage situated underwater is one of protection and management through public programmes centred on shipwrecks and the material associated with shipwrecks.

In order to understand the current Australian approach it is necessary to look at the history of the programme and the background to its development. The roots go back to Western Australia in the 1960s and the discovery of four Dutch shipwrecks. The Western Australian government proclaimed State legislation to assist in their protection and management. However, legal action contesting the validity of this legislation (and which prevented salvage of the material by a member of the community) was upheld. This forced the Commonwealth government into proclaiming legislation and a formal agreement was reached between Australia and the Netherlands (being heirs to the shipwrecks) about the dispersal of the archaeological material. This was in 1976 and it was the Western Australian Museum that took on the responsibility of running an associated maritime archaeology programme. Extensive archaeological recording and recovery of the four Dutch shipwrecks has led to the present collections and knowledge based at the Western Australian Maritime Museum, one of which includes the timber hull of the Batavia wrecked in 1629.

Since then all of the other States and the Northern Territory have taken on maritime archaeology programmes proclaiming Commonwealth legislation and separate State legislation where required.

At the national level, a uniform programme across the country has been developed, and financial assistance is provided to the States to assist in implementation of the programmes. Certain powers under the legislation have been delegated to State officials to allow for a quicker response to these aspects. The delegates and Commonwealth officials meet annually to report on matters and to keep abreast with current and future needs. A matter not uniform yet but being developed, is that of enforcing the legislation. Inspectors other than police are being appointed in several regions to assist in a more effective surveillance of historic shipwrecks.

At the State and Territory level, in addition to the delegates (who are at upper management level), there are several maritime archaeologists employed. Those presently employed are graduates of (or teachers of) the Graduate Diploma in Maritime Archaeology offered by Curtin University in cooperation with the Western Australian Maritime Museum. The State and Territory agencies responsible for programmes vary in type from state museums, to government departments such as the Department of Environment and Planning in South Australia. While this may see different priorities emerging from time to time, for example in the acquisition of collections, the basic premises of inventory, protection, conservation and public enhancement is common throughout the country.

The Australian programme developed close links with interested community groups right from the beginning of the programmes, and volunteer maritime archaeology associations have been formed in all the States. They assist in providing advice to many of the government agencies through
formal Advisory Committees. The Australian Institute for Maritime Archaeology (AIMA), encompassing Australian practitioners, associated professionals, members of the community and international representatives, was formed in 1982 to promote the field of maritime archaeology. This Institute has been responsible for the continued exchange of ideas through annual conferences, the 11th being in Sydney in November 1992. They have developed a Code of Ethics and a Standard for Research for people working in the field, and have been commissioned by DASET to prepare guidelines for the management of Australia’s historic shipwrecks. AIMA are also compiling a register of the 5 or 6,000 shipwrecks for DASET.

The Australian programme has been developing closer links with the community through national and State strategies. Nationally uniform guidelines formalising public access to historic shipwrecks are in production, and at a more interactive level, educational and interpretive aspects are being aimed to reach a greater range of the community. A small number of permits for the survey and recovery of material by community groups have been issued, and they have been carried out under supervision and only after careful assessment of a proposal. Educational resource kits, hands on wrecksite training, land based and underwater shipwreck trails, and photographic competitions, are all designed to stimulate and educate the community on the worth of shipwrecks. Many of these projects are conservation orientated but there is also a continuing programme of archaeological recording, excavation and research where appropriate. There is an obvious need to show people that cannot dive (a large proportion of the population) the value of shipwrecks through publications and exhibitions. Displays which include recovered artefacts and the information obtained from conducting this work are shown within the regions encompassing shipwrecks as well as in the state museums. The philosophy of looking but not touching amongst divers when visiting shipwrecks is partly due to the current environmental/heritage consciousness, as well as from the effects of running the Historic Shipwrecks Programme.

Education aspects are very important and I have already mentioned the training carried out by Curtin University. In addition, maritime archaeology aspects are being slowly included in undergraduate studies and this could be intensified. Educational officers based at maritime museums offer facilities in teaching about maritime archaeology and maritime history to primary and secondary schools.

As was stated at the beginning of this paper, Australia’s approach to its underwater cultural heritage is through public programmes centred on shipwrecks. Although the Western Australian Maritime Museum has played a major role in the direction of many aspects of the programme, the Australian programme has developed from considering the views from all the States and the Territory, and the policies reflected by these agencies.

Shipwrecks are not the only concern for the International Committee on Underwater Cultural Heritage, it is also concerned with aircraft, structures and other evidences of human occupation. Given that the major objectives for the Committee are the promotion of international cooperation in the identification, protection and conservation of these sites, and Australia’s lead in a uniform national programme encompassing similar aspects, it is fitting that this committee should be established in Australia.