REALISING THE CULTURAL TOURISM POTENTIAL OF SOUTH AUSTRALIAN SHIPWRECKS

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**Introduction**

The demands of tourism on our cultural heritage are becoming greater each year as tourists, and this industry, are venturing further into areas of interest and concern. It can place a strain on the management of our heritage but if handled properly, can assist in the education and care of these places. This paper looks at a way in which shipwrecks can play a part in the tourism industry in South Australia. The paper provides some historical background on shipping in South Australia and the way in which shipwrecks are managed. It also sets out to explain a strategy for the establishment of regional shipwreck interpretation centres in South Australia and some methodology and philosophy behind the centres. Most shipwrecks are totally submerged under water and therefore out of sight. However this underwater world of historic shipwrecks can be a fascinating experience for tourists and plays an important role in the cultural tourism industry.

Approximately 21 per cent of the South Australian population is involved in recreational fishing. There are over 45 000 recreational boat owners and 2 000 new scuba divers being trained each year. It can be seen that the potential for water-related recreational/tourist activities in South Australia is very high and growing each year. Shipwrecks attract fish and so are frequently visited by fishermen. Shipwrecks are also important to scuba divers because, apart from their historical appeal, they contain a wide variety of marine life. Over the years, scuba divers have regarded shipwrecks as sites for collecting historical souvenirs. However, shipwrecks are beginning to be seen as important historical sites that should be left intact or excavated in a professional and systematic manner. This has been due to the proclamation of Historic Shipwreck legislation, active State maritime archaeology programmes, as well as a general community awareness about heritage sites.

**Historical background**

Australia’s human occupation, both Aboriginal and European, commenced through these people travelling across the oceans in various types of craft. European exploration and discovery of Australia was largely dependent on making long ocean voyages and therefore most of the earliest settlements were coastal sites.

Sealing and whaling was the first export industry to be developed in Australia (Bach 1976). Furthermore, international, interstate and intrastate migration, trading and transportation was dependent on shipping. Ports, buildings, railway stations and structures were established to facilitate these activities. The whole of the Australian coastline and internal waters are dotted with these places, some still in use, others merely as abandoned remnants of this life-style. The coastline and the internal waters are also dotted with shipwrecks.

Unfortunately for the romantics, there are no intact galleons in South Australia, full of gold and silver stolen by pirates, lying on the sea bed. Instead, they were ships of various sizes and shapes carrying mundane cargoes, such as wheat or coal. They were wrecked, sometimes in violent storms with a great loss of life, and now badly broken and deteriorated through the destructive forces of the sea (Fig 1). Many of the early international ships were British timber sailing vessels ranging in size from about one hundred to a few hundred tons, replaced in the second half of the nineteenth century by large iron sailing vessels and iron and steel steamers. Local shipbuilding was slow to get started. However, smaller locally built vessels, such as cutters, schooners and ketches, were developed into utilitarian vessels and the interstate coastal steamer transport system provided a reliable and effective service.

![Fig 1 Roofing slate and coils of fencing wire which formed part of the cargo of the Geltwood which sank in 1876.](image_url)
The management of shipwrecks

South Australia has about 600 shipwrecks dating from 1837 to 1988 and they represent the range of vessels and activities that have been a part of Australia’s maritime history (Sanders & Garratt 1989). The shipwrecks are often found around ports of call or departure, hazardous stretches of coastline due to rough seas or insufficient navigational aids, and in some cases, in locations of no obvious danger because of some unforeseen emergency.

Most of the ships conducted voyages to, or from South Australia. Some of them encountered difficulties en route to another colony, in particular along the treacherous coastline in the South-East and Kangaroo Island. These shipwrecks are in various states of preservation, or more accurately, deterioration. However, they can remain in one state for a considerable period of time without further deterioration. A number of factors, such as sea conditions, salinity, temperature of water, oxygen content and sea bed topography, often determine the extent of deterioration. Human interference has also played an important part in the deterioration process.

There are well-established techniques for discovering and conveying the historical and archaeological information contained in a shipwreck. The most common method, and a most effective one, is to carry out a survey, excavation, publication and public display project. The information gained from a shipwreck can confirm or add to the historical record. However, the shipwreck archaeology may throw a totally different light on the evidence.

There is potential for collecting significant historical information from the 600 South Australian shipwrecks. However, the ongoing deterioration of the material in shipwrecks means that this information is not going to survive indefinitely. Excavation can destroy the archaeological record. It is only by professional and careful formulation of research questions, recording every detail during the process, and analysing the data, that any significant results will be gained. A project involving excavation is a very expensive one, requiring considerable equipment, a large and experienced workforce, extensive conservation and well planned public displays of the recovered artefacts.

The cultural tourism of shipwrecks

Another complementary way to look at shipwrecks without excavation is to consider in situ interpretation and conservation. A considerable amount of information can be gained from measuring, photographing and analysing a sample of the shipwreck. This can then be used to produce underwater and land based interpretation signs and procedures for scuba divers, boat owners and tourists to view shipwrecks in situ (Fig 2).
Shipwrecks in conjunction with the maritime history of the area in which they were wrecked, can play an important role in the greater appreciation of this heritage. Although *in situ* conservation techniques for shipwrecks are new, there are sound processes that can be used to slow down the deterioration of some shipwrecks (MacLeod 1989). Statistics from Tourism South Australia show that 59 per cent of domestic and interstate tourists carry out 50 kilometre and longer pleasure trips as against 27 per cent who visit Adelaide based museums. It would appear that the development of some type of regional *in situ* shipwreck interpretation would suit the present form of tourism activity. It would be an effective way to educate the community.

South Australia has several prominent maritime centres, old and new, with shipwrecks in the region which would suit this type of project. In developing a strategy for one particular region it is worth considering beforehand a strategy for the whole of the State. Initially this should take the form of an identification of the significant maritime ports in South Australia. A total of 52 ports have been identified. These ports located throughout South Australia, including the River Murray, played a significant part in the State’s maritime history. Other criteria to consider in developing a strategy are, the location of shipwrecks, ongoing maritime activities for ports, maritime museums and other maritime heritage artefacts, places and structures, facilities for recreational boating and scuba diving, and local community interest and support.

Some analysis of the repetitious nature of trade in different ports, types of vessels involved, period of operation and regional location, in conjunction with the other factors, suggests that the regional shipwreck interpretation centres would best be located at the following ports (Fig 3):

1. Semaphore, Gulf St Vincent
2. Port Willunga, Gulf St Vincent
3. Encounter Bay, South coast
4. Kingscote, Kangaroo Island
5. Robe, South-East coast
6. Port MacDonnell, South-East coast
7. Edithburgh, Gulf St. Vincent
8. Port Victoria, Spencer Gulf
9. Port Lincoln, Spencer Gulf
10. Streaky Bay, West coast
11. Mannum, River Murray

One of these ports, Port Victoria, is presently under investigation for implementation of a regional shipwreck interpretation centre. It is the first regional site to be considered by means of the process described. However, it is not the first location of some type of *in situ* shipwreck public recreation facility to be established in South Australia. This occurred in 1987 off metropolitan Adelaide with the promotion of four shipwrecks, through *in situ* plaques and a brochure. The four were chosen because they had become popular scuba diving sites and had as an historical theme, the four types of construction of nineteenth century sailing vessels, i.e. timber, composite (timber and iron), iron and steel.

**The Wardang Island underwater heritage trail**

Port Victoria was an important centre for the export of the State’s wheat produce. It began to be used for this activity in 1876 and soon developed into a prominent port with Wardang Island providing a large, relatively sheltered harbour for large international vessels. A jetty was constructed in 1878 and by 1914 it was the fourth largest overseas shipping port in South Australia. Schooners and ketches (small, two or three masted vessels of between 30-100 tons) conveyed the bagged wheat from the jetty out to the international trading vessels awaiting at the Wardang Island anchorage. During the 1920s and 1930s, Port Victoria became a key terminal in the Grain Races from Australia to England, and great vessels like the Parma, Passat, Moskito, Lawhill, Pamir and Viking anchored in its waters. The eight shipwrecks located around Wardang Island (which is about 8 km from Port Victoria) comprise three large international traders, two steamers and three schooners, built in a number of different places such as France, Scotland and Queensland to Echuca in Victoria, and are a good range of vessels once employed at Port Victoria (Fig 4).

Today, Port Victoria does not support the bustle of the great grain ships and local traders, but numerous

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recreational fishermen, boat owners and scuba divers visit during the holiday season. Off-season it is a very quiet little town. It contains some relics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the jetty and adjacent storage shed, now a National Trust Museum displaying artefacts and photographs of the past maritime activity, as well as the mandatory nineteenth century style (Admiralty pattern) anchor and commemorative plaques. Port Victoria is also within a comfortable driving distance from Adelaide (192 km) and it attracts a fair share of day-trippers. It is therefore an ideal location for a regional shipwreck interpretation centre.

The museum is the only source of information on the maritime history of the area and the shipwrecks located around Wardang Island. It is a pity that the display (or parts of it) cannot be viewed in the open considering that there is such a prominent view of the bay inside Wardang Island and the jetty. It would provide the viewer with the opportunity to link the site with the documentary record. The viewer could study the landscape and seascape, how changing weather conditions affected the loss of vessels as well as the shipwrecks which can be seen from Port Victoria. At the same time the viewer could also study the historical material such as newspapers and photographs. It is very difficult to convey this perspective from inside a building. There are also problems associated with strategically placed lights to enhance displays and air-conditioning to stabilize the environment. The type of outside display that is envisaged consists of weather-proof signs with photographs, maps and text housed in some type of shelter but with adequate viewing of the surrounding area. This would complement the museum display of artefacts and the additional maritime historical information.

Viewing shipwrecks *in situ*, can also convey several factors beyond what is possible in a museum. It will often be immediately obvious why a vessel was wrecked in a particular location. Visiting shipwrecks *in situ* is normally not a hazardous manoeuvre for modern boats with up-to-date charts. The location of shipwrecks will also give information about the routes taken by these vessels. Coupled with information on the types of vessels, such as steamers and large and small sailing vessels, the location can also provide information about the performance of particular vessel types.

An initial investigation of a shipwreck by a scuba diver often reveals little about the structure of a vessel. However, it can reveal a great deal more about the marine life inhabiting the site. This can be a fascinating subject in itself especially when there is little marine life in the surrounding sea bed. Vessels using different types of construction material will attract a variety of marine life. There are also other oceanographic factors which play a large part in this diversity of marine life.

It requires several dives to a shipwreck before a scuba diver becomes aware of the various parts of the vessel still in existence. It is hoped that this level of understanding will be achieved by the scuba diver visiting the shipwreck for the first time, through the explanatory text, photographs, maps and diagrams accompanying the regional shipwreck interpretation centre.
It is a major aim of this project to create an immediate awareness of the historical and archaeological value of shipwrecks. There is also the adventure of exploring past technologies and cultures in a foreign environment, as well as day-tripping to an old port, viewing and being informed about people associated with the shipping industry, ships and facilities that helped to establish the port and surrounding region. Therefore, this type of project has considerable potential for the development of cultural tourism.

References
