The lesson for today is taken from the Book of Genesis in Chapters 1 to 9.

Whether you believe the accounts of creation to be allegorical or factual I will leave to your own intellect and conscience. Here however we find an account of the beginnings of the natural world; the establishment of cultural traditions; the development of knowledge and in particular, knowledge of good and evil; and of course the world’s first recorded shipwreck. Now whether you believe all that or not is unimportant, but the establishment of the ICOMOS International Committee on Underwater Cultural Heritage involves important concepts of culture, knowledge, shipwrecks, and good and evil.

The realm of underwater cultural heritage is surrounded by allegorical serpents who would quite happily divert the community from a search for cultural traditions and knowledge in favour of personal monetary reward. During the 1980s Australia ICOMOS had become a prominent well-respected organisation in the area of cultural heritage conservation. The Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter was becoming the ethically excitable statement of principles guiding the intervention in places of cultural heritage significance.

Significantly this charter has been developed around practices relating to heritage places on land. At the same time it is important to understand some of the Australian and international events relating to places of cultural heritage significance which lie underwater. Australia had developed an enviable reputation largely through the work of the institution where we are today gathered, the Western Australian Museum, for the legislative and practical management of historic shipwrecks.

In other parts of the world however there were very different approaches. The strong private interests either of the United States of America or many other countries still control investment in ‘treasure hunting’ expeditions and maintain a less than appropriate approach to investigation, intervention and management of underwater cultural heritage sites. This approach is exemplified in the 1983 discovery, after four years search, of the wreck of the Geldermalsen with its precious cargo of Nanking ceramics and gold ingots. This important cultural heritage site was salvaged and the recovered ‘treasure’ broken up as a collection of unique cultural artefacts and sold for a reputed 10 million pounds.

The advance of underwater exploration technology was also having its impact. The accessibility of inshore underwater cultural heritage sites had been improved by SCUBA technology but deep-water sites remained relatively inaccessible and therefore less threatened. The mid 1980s however saw the Scrips Oceanographic Research Institute at Woods Hole in the United States of America developing technology for deep ocean research and exploration. In testing and developing that technology the Institute went in search of one of the most evocative of contemporary wrecks - the SS Titanic.

The finding of the wreck of the SS Titanic was an emotional and fascinating discovery. The Institute struggled desperately, in an environment where there are few if any means of protecting such cultural heritage sites, to ensure that there was an appropriate approach adopted to its
protection and management. The cheap sensational television event which followed a year or so after the discovery of the wreck site and a second expedition to the site, throw into sharp focus the very real dilemmas of different attitudes to underwater cultural heritage sites and the lack of legal jurisdiction.

Closer to home again, notwithstanding strong legislative measures for the protection of historic shipwrecks in Australian waters, there began to appear a series of prospectuses seeking to raise funds for the discovery and salvage of historic shipwrecks. While not illegal, these prospectuses were certainly not in keeping with the expectation which Australian authorities sought to create.

In 1987, ICOMOS met for its triennial General Assembly in Washington DC and for the first time the Symposia conducted at the Assembly discussed the ethics and problems of managing underwater cultural heritage sites. The Assembly resolved that action should be taken by ICOMOS to investigate and promote the practice of conservation of underwater cultural heritage sites. Looking back through my records of the Assembly I note that much of the discussion at the ICOMOS General Assembly was stimulated by publicity surrounding the discovery of the wreck of the Titanic.

Back in Australia several things happened during 1988 which have been significant in arriving at the present circumstances. I had a very personal experience of the passion with which those that are interested in the monetary rewards which can be gained through the salvage of historic shipwrecks pursue their interests. It taught me the strength of that passion but more importantly that I needed to hide the family silver better than an historic shipwreck. You’ll be pleased to know that the family silver is still intact and I believe the wreck concerned remains undiscovered.

Secondly, there was an emerging collaboration between Australia ICOMOS and AIMA which arrived through a simple request by AIMA to join Australia ICOMOS. The agreements which had been evolved to allow the Bicentennial Project on the HMS Sirius wreck site had brought AIMA members in touch with the Burra Charter. Through this collaboration there emerged a debate about the application of the Burra Charter to underwater cultural heritage sites and artefacts recovered from those sites.

More importantly the Executive Committee of ICOMOS asked Australia ICOMOS to develop a proposal for an International Committee on Underwater Cultural Heritage. The proposal served two purposes - it enabled Australia ICOMOS to secure funding from DASET to support the establishment of the International Committee, and it led late last year to approval by ICOMOS of the membership and functions of the Committee.

The following comments are quoted from the Australia ICOMOS proposal:

There is a continuing pattern of exploitation of historic shipwrecks reminiscent of the early exploitation of terrestrial archaeological sites by collectors and treasure hunters. International understanding of the need to protect and conserve terrestrial sites from indiscriminate salvage has reached a high level. The same cannot be said of historic shipwrecks which often remain vulnerable and unprotected.

There is of course more to the world’s underwater cultural heritage than historic shipwrecks. Changing sea levels have left the sites of early human occupation buried beneath the sea. The natural or man made dams across rivers have inundated land with its evidence of human occupation, which in some cases include major structures such as buildings and bridges.
The purpose of the International Committee is to:

1. Stimulate international interest in and conservation of the world's underwater cultural heritage among the general public and government institutions.

2. Promote the systematic inventorying of the world's underwater cultural heritage.

3. Develop and promote effective strategies for the conservation and management of the world's underwater cultural heritage.

4. Promote the improvement of methods and standards applicable to the location, exploration, recording and intervention in underwater cultural heritage sites.

5. Encourage the sharing of experience and expertise in the conservation and management of underwater cultural heritage sites.

Through the establishment of this ICOMOS International Committee there is the opportunity to bring about new directions and improved standards of performance in relation to the management of the world's underwater cultural heritage.