

The Role of Heritage in Ocean Science and Governance under the UN Ocean Decade

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OUR CONTENTION IS NOT JUST “HOW CAN CULTURAL HERITAGE HELP DELIVER THE DECADE?” BUT “WITHOUT CULTURAL HERITAGE, HOW CAN YOU DELIVER THE DECADE?”

The *UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development 2021-2030* presents an opportunity to showcase and increase the contribution of cultural heritage to maintaining the health of the world's oceans and to reaching Sustainable Development Goals. Maritime and underwater cultural heritage (MUCH) – drawing upon both tangible and intangible resources – is indispensable to the Ocean Decade if its Challenges are to be met and Societal Objectives achieved.

Fortuitously, there is a growing recognition amongst Ocean Decade stakeholders that transformative change and obtaining the “Ocean we want” also includes input from the social sciences and humanities, and therefore cultural heritage data and knowledge.

Tangible cultural heritage resources are obtained through archaeological investigations – where the relationships of humankind to each other and to the environment over time are explored. These data are extremely relevant to the Ocean Decade and to understanding the long-term timescales for gauging the impacts of pollution and climate change. Tangible archaeological data often focuses on time-depth: what happened in the past and its implications on the present and for the future.

Intangible cultural heritage includes a multitude of expressions, actions and knowledge that can derive from communities' long-term presence on coasts and at sea. Traditional Knowledge (TK) and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) can support and provide long-term data of the health of historic and current marine animal populations and inform recovery efforts and management of complex marine ecosystems.



A CLEAN OCEAN: HERITAGE AND POLLUTION



Fishing in traditional waters connected to important heritage sites in the coastal zone, Mozambique Island, Mozambique. Both sites and marine ecosystems can be impacted by pollution. Photo: Rising from the Depths.

Cultural heritage can contribute to a clean ocean by enabling better understanding of the extent and risks of legacy pollution from shipwrecks, mining waste and land-based sources. A clean ocean is also important for the long-term preservation of MUCH.

Under water, tangible cultural heritage—including ancient and historical shipwrecks—is also impacted by anthropogenic and natural pollution. For example, ghost fishing nets, and plastic pollution, trawling and potentially deep-sea mining. This can also extend to the intertidal zone and on low-lying islands and atolls which include a large portion of the SIDS populations and their ancestral sites. Data collected from these sites reveal impact long-term timescales and TK can provide important information about baselines and recovery management.

A HEALTHY AND RESILIENT OCEAN: HERITAGE AND ECOSYSTEMS

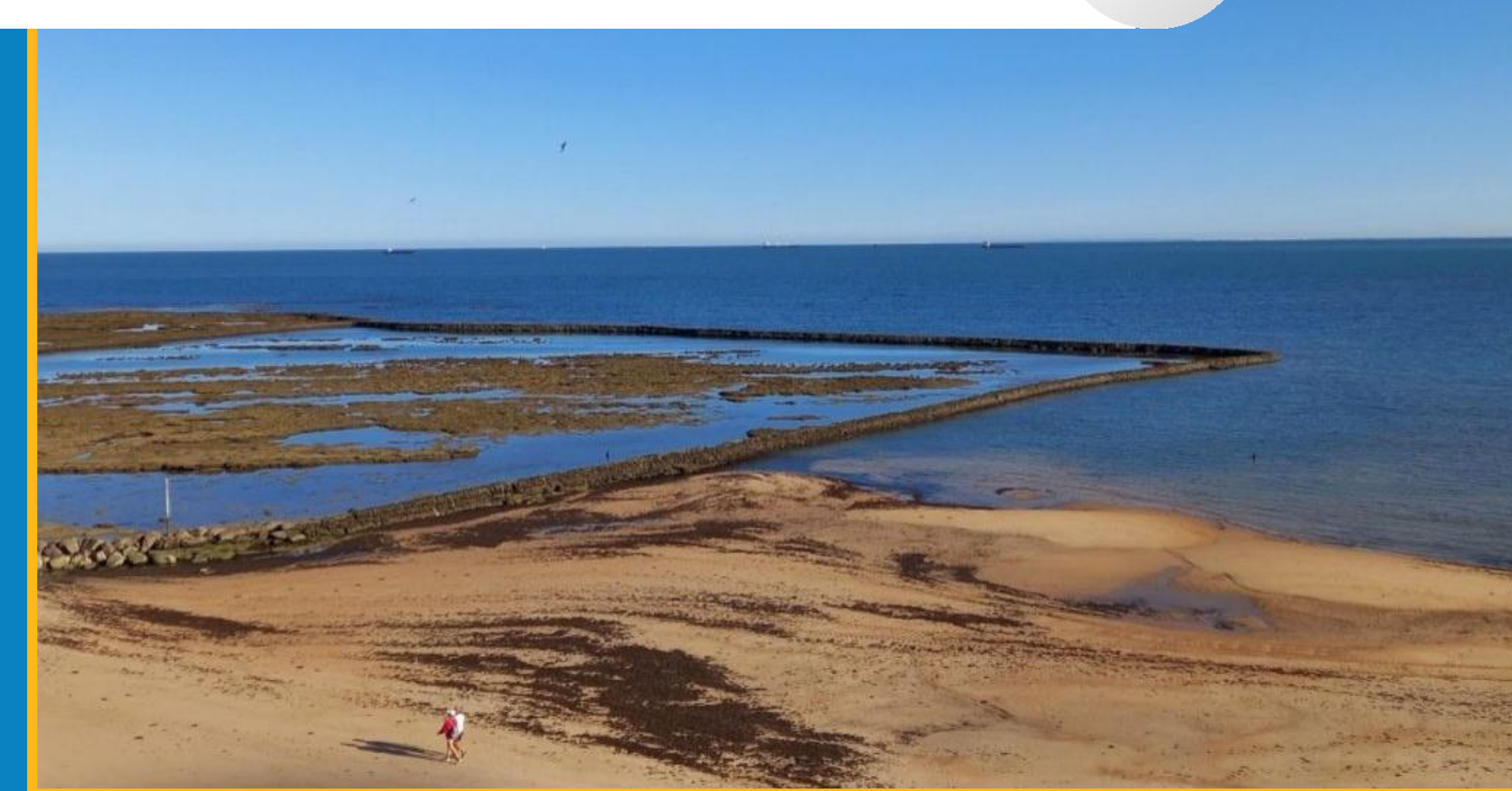


At the Papahānaumokuākea World Heritage Site in Hawaii, there are numerous metal shipwrecks as well as airplanes that largely date from the 18th century and from WW II. Legacy pollution from these can impact the marine environment, and this is a testing ground for degradation studies. Photo: NOAA.

Culture heritage is fundamental to understanding how many coastal and marine ecosystems achieved their present form, and to understanding the pressures upon them. Shipwrecks, for example, serve as aquatic nurseries and ecological niches.

Also, through collection and inclusion of TEK, like in Papahānaumokuākea MPA in the US Hawaiian Islands, sites are also representative of ancestral environments, where maritime living heritage can provide qualitative data such as information on fishing grounds and biodiversity, past and present. This really is a special effort to integrate native Hawaiian culture into management plans and guidance notes, and apply it to understanding ecosystem pressures, and ecosystem-based approaches in management.

A SAFE OCEAN: HERITAGE AND ADAPTION



Stone fish weir (Los Corrales de Pesca) at Chipiona, province of Cádiz, Spain 2022. Photo: Dr Paul Montgomery, TCD Ireland.

Cultural heritage informs the understanding of coastal inhabitation and intervention in the past and present—including the impact of previous catastrophes—to identify risks, present examples of human adaptations, and to encourage resilience.

Tangible cultural heritage such as submerged prehistoric and historic settlements and shipwrecks provide not only evidence of past cultural contacts but of very measurable quantitative data of sea level rise, erosion, subsidence, and effects of climate change.

Traditional fishing practices, exemplified by stone fishing weirs, reveal long-term changes in climate, relative sea levels, water quality and ecosystem health.

THE OCEAN DECADE HERITAGE NETWORK AIMS TO:

- Raise awareness in the global cultural heritage community about the Ocean Decade.
- Facilitate a platform for information sharing regarding this endeavour.
- Facilitate contact and communication between archaeologists, marine scientists, and related stakeholders in the Preparatory (2018-2020) and Implementation Phases (2021-2030) of the Decade.
- Encourage participation by archaeologists not only in international efforts but also in regional and national programmes inspired by the Ocean Decade.
- Ensure that archaeologists, individually and through their own institutions and networks, are enabled to engage constructively with the marine sciences over the next ten years under the auspices of the Ocean Decade, and to make the best of the opportunity that the Ocean Decade presents in supporting interdisciplinary marine research.

THE CULTURAL HERITAGE FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME (CHFP)



ODHN leads the endorsed Decade Action #69, the Cultural Heritage Framework Programme. CHFP serves as a global platform – through inclusion, outreach and activities – in which scientific information is shared by and through its relationship to cultural heritage.

The impacts of Decade Actions relating to cultural heritage will be greater together than they would be individually. CHFP aims to assist and support cultural heritage stakeholders enact this transformation through their proposed Decade Actions (programmes, projects, and activities).

WHY AN OCEAN DECADE HERITAGE NETWORK?

The Decade initiative presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve the integration of archaeology and cultural heritage management within the marine sciences. The Ocean Decade Heritage Network was established in June 2019, after the Decade's First Global Planning Meeting, to raise awareness in the global cultural heritage community about the Decade and coordinate related activities towards this opportunity.

As of May 2025, ODHN has close to 400 members across six continents from diverse backgrounds, including scientists and heritage specialists in academia or NGOs and intergovernmental agencies, stakeholders, traditional communities and the general public.

By the end of the Ocean Decade, the historical dimension of people's relationships with the sea will be fully integrated within marine science and policy. The 'ocean we want' will be inspired and informed by the long and diverse histories and living heritage of people and the sea.

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ODHN website
<http://www.oceandecadeheritage.org>

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