

The Truth About Submerged Cultural Resource Management

In Canada with no graduate or undergraduate program in Underwater Archaeology, archaeologists have understandably been unable to generate a SMRC plan for the Province.

Archaeologists are not particularly well educated for SCRM they spend years studying that past and then are expected to generate SCRM plans based on their ability to predict the future. Submerged Cultural Resources like shipwreck sites do not require any management at all. Post depositional site degradation is caused by a variety of human activities and SCRM is little more than an archaeological code talk for people (diver) management problems.

There is no shame in cross disciplinary assistance. Parks and Recreation, Outdoor Recreation, Psychology, Sociology, Cultural Anthropology, Philosophy, History and Political Science all may have more to offer in terms of people management solutions than the Archaeology department has been able to generate.

The vast majority of Ontario's divers have embraced a conservation ethic and do not remove artifacts from shipwreck sites. If you were to go for a dive on one of the dive charter boats and removed an artifact from a shipwreck site, you may be given the opportunity to swim home. This would result in a lifetime ban from that boat and the other local dive charter boats and you would be reported.

When these incidents of throw back behaviour occur, and divers remove artifacts other divers complain about it and all the complaints make their way to the Ministry and the Ontario Marine Heritage Committee. This is a small group of people and half of them do not dive, after forty-five years of complaints of site degradation by divers they have unfortunately developed a jaded and inaccurate point of view regarding divers. Ontario is a large province.

While we would all like to think that SCRM decisions are being made in the best interest of the archaeological record to the highest professional and ethical standards, that is not always the case. Some management decisions have been profoundly biased and prejudicial. On occasion, Ontario has relied on voodoo agenda serving archaeology that is totally unique in all the world.

In the future if divers are asked how they lost their right to access shipwreck sites in Ontario the answer, will of course be, incrementally, and through apathy. In 2005 amendments were made to the Ontario Heritage Act to establish a 2,500-foot (750m) perimeter around an Ontario Marine Heritage site. This includes the

Hamilton and Scourge. There was also a change made to the Canada Shipping Act to facilitate joint agreements between the federal government or organization to administer or enforce regulations as they apply to a wreck (heritage site) in Canadian waters.

How did this first diver prohibition come to be? I was approached by council for an American researcher who had applied for and been denied an archaeological licence for the Hamilton and Scourge sites for an opinion. There is not much of an opportunity to enter either vessel due to high silt levels below decks. With the understanding that the diver would not enter the vessel and possibly effect micro environmental conditions there is no reason why a diver should be prohibited from visiting the site on a look but do not touch basis.

That is not the type of opinion you would want to be wrong on. I attended the 33rd Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology in Quebec City and asked every archaeologist in the place what they thought about it. The Keynote Speaker Dr. Paul Johnson from the Smithsonian Institute summed it up in his remarks, if a diver employs a minimum impact approach there is nothing wrong from an archaeological perspective with site visitation. There was unanimous consent and then the provincial archeologist left the hall and conference.

The best science is not making the decisions. It is a political environment, and everyone has an agenda. The Province's premier white elephant shipwreck project to raise the two vessels for display in the City of Hamilton died a painful death in the light of day and financial realities of our time. (Or they just argued themselves to death.)

Diver visitation does not equal site attrition and it never has. Except to this rather small group of people often with little field experience and a jaded and biased opinion of sport divers pushing agenda serving management plans. There has been conflict of interest situations like having the provincial underwater archaeologist on the Hamilton and Scourge Committee. While I have every confidence that the province will be without a submerged cultural resource management plan for another forty-five years under the current management system, there is a better way. I continue to encourage divers as the largest stakeholder group utilizing the resource to involve themselves in submerged cultural resource planning.

