

UNESCO suggests the inclusion in the upcoming UN Conference, of a partnership dialogue on underwater cultural and natural heritage, animated by UNESCO, and to present the theme of underwater cultural and natural heritage protection in the plenary meeting. Moreover, UNESCO would like to organize a side-event on the protection of underwater cultural and natural heritage.

On the topics:

The inclusion of **Underwater Cultural Heritage** is suggested, as this heritage provides the necessary socio-historic component to ocean understanding, illustrating the history not only of humanity's relations with the oceans, but also of climate change. It encompasses all traces of human existence having a cultural, historical and archaeological character and which have been partially or totally under water, periodically or continuously for at least hundred years (shipwrecks, sunken cities, prehistoric sites). Underwater Cultural Heritage offers a great possibility for research, sustainable development and tourism. This heritage is however extremely endangered by treasure-hunt and the impact of industrial seabed related activities. The UNESCO 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage proposes scientific standards for its improved protection and gives also an example for heritage protection in the High Seas.

The inclusion of **World Heritage Marine Sites** is suggested, as these are very visible, and are thus in a unique position to lead by example and inspire improved management in marine protected areas globally. The World Heritage Marine Programme holds a wealth of management best practices from World Heritage marine sites all over the world. Cooperation with other United Nations partners (such as UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission and the International Maritime Organization), States Parties, civil society organizations, academic institutions, private sector and philanthropic organizations has already led to tangible results.

The 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage

Humanity and the oceans have always been closely connected. The waters served as means to gain food, to connect civilizations, to trade, to travel and to conquer, but also as a sacred place of veneration. These exchanges on the waters have left behind precious traces on the seabed. Thus, underwater cultural heritage encompasses a vast legacy. It is estimated that some three million ancient shipwrecks and sunken cities lie on the ocean floor. Examples of important sites are the 150 ancient cities submerged in the Mediterranean, the *Lusitania* and *Titanic* wrecks, the lighthouse ruins in Alexandria, Egypt, remains of one of the Seven

Wonders of the antique world, as well as ancient human remains and offerings found off Scandinavian coasts.

Underwater cultural heritage is also an important witness to climate change and the development of civilizations. Indeed, for 90% of human existence, sea levels have been lower than today by as much as 130 m with an average of 30 m of change. As humans mainly lived close to the water, a large majority of humanity's development took place on areas that are now submerged. Underwater cultural heritage is thus an important proof for the seriousness of climate change.

It is only within the past decade that there has been recognition of how important the missing data on the submerged shelf is. Research is yet limited. Nevertheless, archaeologists estimate that the future great discoveries of archaeology will be found under water.

While the world has already fully registered the need to better protect, research and valorize the ocean environment and biodiversity, the second part of the world's heritage, fully acknowledged on land – cultural heritage – has yet to be completely acknowledged for the ocean environs. It is urgent to draw more attention to this aspect. Underwater cultural heritage provides the social and historic component to ocean understanding. It is also a chance for sustainable development and tourism. The importance of this issue has already been recognized by several UN resolutions, and inscribed in the **UNESCO 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage**, already ratified by 55 States. The topic is however proposed for a specific partnership dialogue led by UNESCO, as well as side-events and discussions in the upcoming SDG 14 Conference.

SDG Contribution:

Underwater Cultural Heritage preservation and research contributes to several SDG. SDG 4.7 – Improving education on the cultural heritage of the oceans and lakes; SDG 11.4 - Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's underwater cultural heritage; SDG 14.4 - Regulating destructive fishing practices impacting negatively underwater cultural heritage; SDG 14.5 - Conserve coastal and marine areas and their cultural heritage; and SDG 14.7 - Increase the economic benefits from the sustainable use of underwater cultural heritage, including through tourism, especially for SIDS and LDC.

More information: www.unesco.org/culture/en/underwater

The 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention (Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage)

The 1972 World Heritage Convention unites 192 nations behind a shared commitment to preserve the world's outstanding heritage for the benefit of present and future generations. It recognizes that the protection of these exceptional places is the duty of the international community as a whole and it ensures that the preservation of these special sites becomes a shared responsibility.

The UNESCO World Heritage List includes 49 ocean places – distributed across 37 countries – recognized for their unique marine biodiversity, singular ecosystem, unique geological

processes or incomparable beauty. Together these sites cover about 10 percent by surface area of all existing marine protected areas. World Heritage marine sites are also prime ocean observatories and windows to the past. Their disappearance would be an irreversible loss to humanity.

Despite their iconic World Heritage status, none of these sites are immune to the effects of accelerating ocean industrialization, increasing pressure for coastal development or the serious impacts from climate change. Nearly a third of all marine sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List are threatened by unsustainable or illegal fisheries. Pollution from plastic and maritime transport are increasing and invasive species become rapidly more common. Most sites struggle to comprehend the increasingly dangerous mix of cumulative and combined effects.

Launched in 2005, the mission of the World Heritage Marine Programme is to establish effective conservation of existing and potential marine areas of Outstanding Universal Value to make sure they will be maintained and thrive for generations to come.

More information:

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/marine-programme>