

March 2020

Submission to the Inquiry into the Underwater Heritage Convention

Dear Inquiry.

I am writing to you from the land of the Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri peoples, I acknowledge they are the traditional custodians of this land and that sovereignty was never ceded. I pay respect to their Elders past, present, and emerging. I also acknowledge the many Indigenous tribes around Australia and the Torres Strait, and the rich and unique underwater heritage that they have given to this land and sea.

I am writing on behalf of the Melbourne University Classics and Archaeology Students Society (MUCLASS). We are a University of Melbourne club representing students studying or interested in ancient history and archaeology. We have an interest in Indigenous cultural heritage and believe there should be more value placed on archaeological preservation and learning about Indigenous cultural heritage. In October 2020, we also made a submission to the Inquiry into the Destruction of the 46,000-year-old Juukan Gorge Caves (submission 135).

We support Australia becoming a signatory to the Convention. Underwater heritage is important to protect, with a range of unique and interesting heritage in Australia. Australia has a significant amount of underwater heritage in our maritime territory, including considerable Indigenous heritage (Birch 2021; Michelmores 2020; Ketchell 2020, 2021). Australia also has national underwater heritage in other maritime areas (such as ships sunk or lost in wartime). Hence, Australia benefits from contributing to global cooperation on the protection of underwater heritage. It is an exciting field, even with two major discoveries in the last week of writing this submission, including an ancient Roman boat and Ernest Shackleton's Antarctica expedition boat (Jones 2022; Sherwood 2022).

As for Aboriginal cultural heritage, these underwater sea countries have incredible potential for historical research and cultural significance for Aboriginal groups. Spokesperson for the Australian Archaeological Association, Peter Veth, describes how knowledge of these sites link the oral histories of sea levels rising from Aboriginal groups with the archaeological material and underwater sites. The oldest site that has been excavated thus far is an 8,500-year-old site located around a spring at Cape Bruguieres, which 269 artefacts were procured from. Underwater sites are unique and important, as they provide one of the gateways into understanding Aboriginal people's lives, and Aboriginal Nation's societies, cultures, and histories before European colonisation.

We have seen that Australia does not protect and appreciate Indigenous heritage as much as it should, including with the outrageous demolition of the Juukan Gorge caves in 2020. This received wide reprobation and an Inquiry, which shows the public's interest in protecting (and not harming) Indigenous heritage, but there is much more work that needs to be done in providing protections for Indigenous heritage and supporting education and conservation

efforts. The need for more protection includes the vast amount of underwater Indigenous heritage around Australia.

We want children growing up to see learning about and preserving heritage as a worthy pursuit. As a student group in the humanities, we have been deeply concerned and affected by the changes to the University sector – namely the dramatic increases in fees for humanities courses with the Job Ready Graduate package. How do we inspire the maritime archaeologists and other scholars of the future, that will do the work to find, preserve and educate the public about our significant underwater heritage? Sending signals that humanities education is not worth as much public support and funding is the opposite course of action that needs to happen. However, becoming a signatory to this Convention is a good step for Australia to be part of global cooperation on protecting and learning about underwater heritage and provides an important impetus to enhance our preservation efforts. This can also provide opportunities to marine archaeologists and other people involved with the preservation or education around underwater heritage, which can also help the public to learn more about the many fascinating objects and sites of underwater heritage in Australia (including many Indigenous sites).

Kind Regards,

Daisy Norfolk.

Melbourne University Classics and Archaeology Students Society (MUCLASS).

References

Harriet Sherwood. 9th March 2022. “Ernest Shackleton’s ship Endurance found off coast of Antarctica.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/09/ernest-shackleton-wrecked-ship-endurance-antarctic>.

Karen Michlemore. 2th July 2020. “Ancient Aboriginal underwater archaeological sites discovered, and a new frontier or study.” *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-02/aboriginal-underwater-site-discovered-off-burup-peninsula/12391858>.

Laura Birch. 31st August 2021. “Pilbara discoveries see archaeologists call for greater protection of submerged heritage.” *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-31/archaeologist-call-for-greater-protection-submerged-heritage/100419636>.

Misha Ketchell. 2nd July 2020. “Scientists reveal ancient Aboriginal underwater archaeological sites.” *Australian Geographic*. <https://theconversation.com/in-a-first-discovery-of-its-kind-researchers-have-uncovered-an-ancient-aboriginal-archaeological-site-preserved-on-the-seabed-138108>.

Misha Ketchell. 31st August 2021. “Australia’s coastal waters are rich in Indigenous cultural heritage, but it remains hidden and under threat.” <https://theconversation.com/australias->

[coastal-waters-are-rich-in-indigenous-cultural-heritage-but-it-remains-hidden-and-under-threat-166564.](#)

Sam Jones. 8th March 2022. “Roman boat that sank in Mediterranean 1,700 years ago gives up its treasures.” *The Guardian*. [https://www.theguardian.com/science/2022/mar/08/roman-boat-that-sank-in-mediterranean-1700-years-ago-gives-up-its-treasures.](https://www.theguardian.com/science/2022/mar/08/roman-boat-that-sank-in-mediterranean-1700-years-ago-gives-up-its-treasures)