

The Shipwreck Debate

As a stakeholder and a citizen I would like to clarify many of the inaccuracies being perpetuated by the various government agencies. Treasure Hunters DO NOT get to keep 90 % of what they recover, what all too often gets conveniently omitted by opponents is the fact that all artifacts (non treasure trove) items automatically become the property of the Nova Scotia Government (N.S. Museum). They are only allowed to keep 90 % of only what is deemed treasure trove – meaning “coins” only. One hundred percent of all artifacts recovered are turned over to the NS Museum, at least in practice anyway, as the thousands of artifacts that have already been turned over to the NS Museum and Parks Canada have yet to see the light of day, they are simply locked away in storage.

The Government's recent announcement is partly based on recommendations from the Nova Scotia Voluntary Planning Heritage Task Force, which as their website states held 27 community meetings and received contributions from over 2000 citizens and over 600 submissions. Are they aware that Nova Scotia currently has a population of over 900,000 people? So to be clear and to quantify this, they held discussions and heard from less than 1 % of the population and armed with that information they recommended that the Government repeal the treasure trove act and endorse the UNESCO Convention. This Convention was created in back in 2001 to prohibit the buying and selling of underwater “treasure trove” and artifacts and to forbid any private shipwreck exploration companies to conduct for-profit commercial or contract marine archaeology and underwater exploration of any type on shipwreck sites. While the academic world has embraced the UNESCO Convention, the nations of the world have been less enthusiastic and with good reason. The convention is flawed, to begin with it is written so that it is practically incomprehensible to the layperson. If it were to be adopted by Canada, it would become a legal instrument so blunt, so indiscriminate and draconian that its adoption will be a gift to the black market and would truly place what's left of our maritime heritage in greater danger. Many nations including Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Germany, Norway, Turkey, Venezuela, China and Russia have found its definition of underwater cultural heritage too ludicrous. Canada is not a signatory and let's hope it stays that way as it would mean the loss of more of Nova Scotia's resources.

The recently released 128 page Nova Scotia Treasure Hunting Study which the Government was in possession of for the past year and a half, actually represents a very fair and unbiased examination of the situation and recommended 3 possible options or scenarios for the current Government to consider.

1. Unrestricted exploitation of resources – meaning status quo.
2. Private Sector involvement but with new management conservation procedures
3. No commercial salvage and limited use of underwater cultural heritage which is in line with the UNESCO Convention and the rest of Canada.

The Minister of Natural Resources and the Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture were briefed by their respective departments and decided on option / scenario # 3.

There are some shipwrecks off our coast are worth preserving, “some” being the key word, but the vast majority are not, simply because of the sheer economics and time it would take to do so. Lastly I want to remind everyone that both the Federal and Provincial Governments have recently divested themselves of preserving our lighthouses, which are on dry land, because of the costs and liability associated with doing so. How can they possibly search for, preserve and protect the thousands of shipwrecks which lie underwater in some of the most remote and hostile parts of Nova Scotia. The only possible and realistic way forward is with involvement from the private sector.

Terry Dwyer

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