

Protecting Wrecks: the next 50 years

Summary

A seminar was held at the Society of Antiquaries of London on 22 November 2023. The seminar was designed to present and discuss the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973 and its application, with a view to considering the Act's strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement in the future. The seminar was attended by more than 50 experts, including Protected Wreck Licensees, avocational divers, professional archaeologists, curators, politicians and policy makers representing various Government departments, agencies with interests in shipwrecks and the Royal Navy. Many more from across the sector watched the session online and contributed questions.

Speakers delivered short presentations, followed by discussion, which was wide ranging. The Act's successes were highlighted, including the legacy of protection, funding, and archaeological research, and the positive effects of protected wrecks on local economies, recreational opportunities, communities and volunteers, and the wider public. Challenges were also addressed: The effectiveness of the Act's provisions, enforceability, and potential reforms were considered. Finally, the modern context of marine development, fishing and archive capacity were discussed, along with how these pressures impact the protection of historic wrecks.

Key messages

1. **Protected Wrecks remain an important and evocative element of the UK's shared heritage:** Many speakers – including the Heritage Minister, Lord Stephen Parkinson and Chair of All Party Parliamentary Archaeology group, Tim Loughton MP – spoke of the importance of these cultural assets, including to coastal communities and to the UK's heritage as a seafaring nation.
2. **Protect Wreck Licensees provide unique benefits and opportunities:** While financial support for Licensees is limited, and administration of Licensee applications for works on sites could be improved, Licensees are strongly valued within the community and profession. They are skilled practitioners, committed volunteers, and community engagement keystones. They deliver public benefit in a range of ways, not least in the financial contributions they make.
3. **There are multiple statutory routes to protecting sites with pros and cons:** Protection is available under the '73 Act, '79 Act or in Scotland under the 2010 Marine Act which underpins Historic Marine Protected Areas. Each provides slightly different regulations for sites; affecting access restrictions, prohibited different actions, and applying different penalties. These differences are viewed as largely arbitrary, not strategic in their purpose. They could be reviewed. Use of terminology of 'protected wreck', 'scheduled monument', etc is perceived as technical – with 'protected wreck' being a term that has general utility covering all designated wreck sites.

4. **Protected Wreck legislation could be amended to improve protection:** The Act has long been acknowledged as an imperfect tool for protection. Some key design weaknesses are identified. These relate to the narrow scope of prohibitions which leave notable gaps for certain potentially damaging activities, the high bar for enforcement, and the limits on penalties that may act as deterrents. Some of these issues could be improved with relatively simple changes to the Act.

Next steps

[You can view the recording of the Seminar on YouTube.](#)

This project intends to produce a set of recommendations, based on the discussions at the seminar, which will be used to inform Government, politicians, heritage agencies, and others about possible goals for the next 50 years of protecting wrecks.

These recommendations will consider short, medium and long terms goals and will reflect recognition of external challenges such as funding and securing Parliamentary time for legislative change.

We welcome further thoughts and reflections on the subjects discussed during the seminar. We will also be consulting further with attendees once a draft set of recommendations has been produced. Further publications – a project report and a document to guide sector advocacy, will be shared in due course, but no later than April 2024.

Please [click here](#) if you would like to provide further comment on the Seminar or to inform the next stage of work.

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