

Chapter 15

Managing Historic Shipwrecks in Argentina: Challenges to Reach the Public

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Abstract This chapter deals with the main shipwreck sites that have been studied to date by the underwater archaeology team of Argentina's National Institute of Anthropology. The ships range from the seventeenth to the twentieth century and all are located along the Atlantic coast of Patagonia. The possibilities for presenting these sites to the public is discussed based on their general characteristics, particularly the remote geographical context in which they are located and the legal status of those areas, such as being current or future nature preserves.

Introduction

The oceanic and fluvial coastlines of Argentina extend several thousands of kilometers which, combined with a great number of lakes and other inland waters, provides a great potential for the existence of submerged archaeological sites, both from prehistoric and historic periods. In fact, records of ship losses and other useful sources related to the subject indeed suggest that the potential is quite remarkable (Programa de Arqueología Subacuática 2012). However, actual knowledge about those sites, including the simple confirmation of their presence, is still extremely limited. This is because the approach to underwater cultural heritage in the country began by conducting archaeological research on one particular wrecksite, followed by a few others, before addressing any specific management issues.

The sunken ship that eventually gave birth to the field of maritime archaeology in the country is an eighteenth-century British sloop of war, the HMS *Swift*. It was discovered in 1982 by local divers from the town of Puerto Deseado, Province of

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Santa Cruz, and since then has been subject to different types of interventions, starting with the mere extraction of artifacts and gradually becoming a systematic research project. The latter, which is discussed below, has been conducted since 1997 by the underwater archaeology team (PROAS) of the Argentinean National Institute of Anthropology (INAPL). This is a federal government institution which is the competent authority for national legislation concerning archaeological heritage in Argentina.

Shortly after the finding of the *Swift*, a small museum was created to host the artifacts recovered, and the site was declared historical heritage. This was the first time an underwater archaeological site was given such status, and set a valuable precedent for subsequent legislation which, since 2003, protects archaeological heritage regardless of whether it is located on land or under water. The *Swift* case may have also played a role in the ratification by Argentina of the UNESCO 2001 Convention for the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage, which took place in 2010. Since the origin of the HMS *Swift* archaeological project, a few other sites (all shipwrecks or parts of them) have also been investigated by PROAS-INAPL. Coincidentally, they all happen to be located along the coast of Patagonia and in current or future marine protected areas.

It is worth noting that another team that has been conducting underwater archaeological research in the country for several years is associated with the University of Rosario, and they have mostly worked in fluvial and inland environments (Valentini 2003; Valentini and García Cano 2011).

This chapter presents the main sites undergoing research by the PROAS team, as illustrated in Fig. 15.1. The possibilities for presenting these sites to the public is then discussed based on their general characteristics, particularly the geographical context in which they are located and the legal status of those areas (such as being nature preserves). Some cultural and socioeconomic aspects also are taken into consideration.

Shipwreck Sites in Valdés Peninsula and Puerto Madryn

The Valdés Peninsula is located in the central coast of the province of Chubut, in northern Patagonia, close to the city of Puerto Madryn (Fig. 15.1). Because of its spectacular marine wildlife, the peninsula has been declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and every year thousands of tourists are attracted by the presence of whales, penguins, orcas, sea lions, and seals. In addition, the area is attractive to sport divers, and Puerto Madryn is regarded as the “Diving Capital” of the country (Instituto Nacional de Promoción Turística 2012; Semanario Parlamentario 2012). This is because of the favorable underwater environment of the Nuevo gulf, adjacent to the city of Puerto Madryn and the Valdés Peninsula. In comparison to the rest of the country’s oceanic coastline, the water in the gulf is much more benign in terms of temperature, currents, and visibility.

Precisely because of the presence of sport divers and diving operators, the work of PROAS in the Madryn-Valdés area, which began in 2004, is not just aimed at the



Fig. 15.1 Map of Argentina indicating the general location of the main sites under investigation: *Emma*, *Presidente Roca*, and *BG2* in Valdés Peninsula; *HMS Swift* and *Hoorn* in Puerto Deseado; and *Duchess of Albany* in the Atlantic coast of Tierra del Fuego (based on map from <http://www.ign.gov.ar/node/344>, 2012)

archaeological study of underwater cultural heritage but also at involving divers in a public archaeology program. The first step was to assess the potential number of underwater sites which could have historical and/or archaeological significance. As a result, of a total of 30 shipwrecks or nautical remains, a small group was selected for a more detailed survey and for the subsequent proposal of a management plan involving public outreach. The first three sites to become the subject of sufficient historical and archaeological research are the schooner *Emma* (1883–1947), the steamer *Presidente Roca* (1896–1909), and an unidentified wooden-hulled vessel known as Bahía Galenses 2 (BG2).

The *Emma* is located underwater in front of the city of Puerto Madryn, at a depth of around 15 m. It is a popular diving site in the Golfo Nuevo together with other attractions (<http://www.aquatours.com.ar/emma.html>). Regrettably, very little of the ship is left, partly due to decades of souvenir collecting by divers and partly due to the natural degradation of the site. The main elements that are still visible above the sediment are parts of the keel and keelson, a ballast mound, and parts of the engine (Cristian Murray 2012, pers. comm.).

The steamer *Presidente Roca* is located in the intertidal zone on the Atlantic coast of the Valdés Peninsula. The archaeological site comprises the bottom part of the metal hull and one of the boilers in place, plus various other parts scattered around the main wreckage and up to a considerable distance from the wrecksite itself (Gutierrez and Elkin 2010). Despite not being underwater, access to the *Presidente Roca* is limited by several factors. First, its location coincides with that of an elephant seal colony and the public are not allowed in the place. Second, the shipwreck cannot be seen from the main (dirt) road that connects different points around the peninsula and, since there are no signs indicating its presence, there is no reason for people to take a short detour to the top of a cliff which could make a good viewing point. Finally, due to safety reasons it is generally not advisable to approach the edge of the peninsula cliffs unless a specially built catwalk or similar structure for visitors is present.

The so-called Bahía Galenses 2 (or BG2 for short) consists of part of the wooden hull of a sailing vessel, probably a nineteenth-century merchant ship (Murray et al. 2008a). It is located in the intertidal zone adjacent to the city of Puerto Madryn, and is on a beach visited by a considerable number of tourists and locals, especially in the summer. With low water, a series of wooden frames and other parts of the structure slightly protruding from the sand level can be seen; there is evidence that some parts have been removed, probably as souvenirs (Fernando Coronato 2010, pers. comm.). With high tide, the ship remains can be a hazard for people entering the water. For those reasons the site has been temporarily covered with sandbags until a long-term protection mechanism (both for people and the wreck) can be implemented.

Puerto Deseado: The *Swift* and the *Hoorn*

More than 15 years of research conducted by the PROAS team on the HMS *Swift* site, including several excavation seasons, have provided a great deal of information related to various research questions. Besides the very well-preserved wooden hull

structure, hundreds of artifacts of ceramic, glass, metal, wood, leather, and bone, plus significant biological remains including food items and a complete human skeleton, have been recovered from this site. As a consequence, cultural aspects related to an eighteenth-century warship, such as technology, social hierarchies, sanitary conditions, food and drink, and many others, are now better understood both from an archaeological and an interdisciplinary approach (Elkin et al. 2007, 2011). Site formation processes are also addressed from a biological and sedimentological perspective (Bastida et al. 2004, 2011).

The *Hoorn* was one of the two Dutch vessels of the early seventeenth-century expedition led by Jacob Le Maire and Willem C. Schouten in search of a new passage to the Spice Islands. The ship was lost in 1615 due to accidentally catching fire while being careened on the shore in the Deseado estuary. A bilateral research project conducted by archaeologists from Argentina and the Netherlands began in 2003 with the goal of locating and studying the remains of the *Hoorn*. Some remains of the site were eventually found on the intertidal beach, mostly consisting of rocks interpreted as ballast materials, various ceramic sherds, and melted metallic fragments attributed to the fire. Subsequent remote sensing surveys combined with selected diving operations conducted on the adjacent seabed resulted in the location of ferrous concretions which revealed the impressions of corroded iron artifacts such as nails, fittings, and bolts. No hull remains were found underwater or on land (Murray et al. 2007, 2008b).

Shipwreck Sites on the Atlantic Coast of Tierra del Fuego

In 2008, the *Museo del Fin del Mundo* (Museum of the End of the Earth), of the city of Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego, undertook an archaeological baseline project consisting of surveying 200 km along the Atlantic coastline of the island in search of prehistoric and historic cultural evidence. The study area, called Peninsula Mitre and located in the southwestern portion of Tierra del Fuego, is extremely remote and inaccessible, without any roads or railways on land, and is too dangerous for most vessels to approach from the water. In prehistoric times it was mostly occupied by nomadic hunter-gatherers, and in the nineteenth century a few sheep-breeding *estancias* (ranches) were established in the area. Today there is virtually no human occupation. Partly because of the considerably pristine nature of Peninsula Mitre, a group of stakeholders from Tierra del Fuego are developing a proposal to declare it a protected area (Martín Vazquez 2010, pers. comm.).

Archaeological surveys related to historic shipwrecks, led by the PROAS team, were conducted throughout three short seasons with the purpose of acquiring baseline data on the subject while trying to cover as much area as possible within the available time. Historical records indicate that numerous vessels were lost in the area, particularly European and North American ships either en route to the Pacific Ocean or engaged in whaling activities in the region. In this early stage of the project, the search for shipwreck remains started by surveying the intertidal and



Fig. 15.2 (a, b) The remains of the *Duchess of Albany* in Tierra del Fuego seen from the bow, and details of the windlass and capstan in place (Photos by Chris Underwood 2012 and PROAS 2012, respectively)

supratidal zone. As a result, a number of metal and wooden shipwreck sites, as well as hundreds of scattered remains, have been preliminarily recorded. One of the most conspicuous wrecksites located in the study area is the *Duchess of Albany*, a British merchant vessel lost in 1893 and currently lying in the intertidal zone (Fig. 15.2a, b). This ship is quite iconic for the *Museo del Fin del Mundo* in Ushuaia since its main

exhibition room displays the figurehead, removed from the site in the late 1970s, as well as old photographs of the ship.

Although many people visit the *Museo del Fin del Mundo* every year, very few have the chance to see the actual remains of the *Duchess of Albany* due to the above-mentioned remoteness of the area where the site is located. Today, the place is only accessible by horse, quadbikes, or foot, and there is no available shelter other than a handful of small constructions located some kilometers away which are part of estancias no longer in use, and which lack the minimum facilities that the average visitor would expect, such as running water, electricity, and some form of heating other than firewood.

Discussion

With a couple of exceptions, the shipwreck sites described above are located in places of difficult access, whether they are underwater (such as the *Swift*, due to adverse diving conditions) or on land (especially on the Atlantic coast of Tierra del Fuego, due to the geographical remoteness of the place and the lack of access infrastructure). In other cases, mainly in the Puerto Madryn-Valdés Peninsula area, sites can be more accessible both for divers as well as non-divers.

Despite the challenges for connecting some of these sites with the public, actions in that sense could—and should—be taken with all of them. The main current proposals are summarized in Table 15.1. One of the cases, which is quite favorable for public outreach, is the *Emma*, which basically needs some interpretive material in order to enhance the diving experience at the site. PROAS has already prepared a one-sheet brochure containing a drawing and interpretation of the visible remains on one side and a brief text on the other regarding the main aspects of the *Emma* in the context of the underwater cultural heritage of Argentina and the area. This sheet can be laminated so that divers can take it underwater to use as a site guide. The material was sent to the Association of Diving Operators of Puerto Madryn and hopefully will be well received, especially if they become aware that, aside from current legal obligations, the greater the preservation of the sites, the better for their business.

As for the *Presidente Roca*, it will be necessary to discuss alternatives of public outreach with the culture, wildlife, and tourism authorities, as well as with other possible stakeholders such as travel operators. Access to the site will probably continue to be denied or severely restricted in order to protect the elephant seal colony, but it might be possible to install a safe lookout point on the top of the cliff close to the site for displaying interpretive illustrations of at least the most conspicuous visible parts, as well as for providing information on the history of the ship. Additionally, some simple brochures can be made available for tourists both in the city of Puerto Madryn and in some key locations within the peninsula, such as the lighthouse of Punta Delgada, now a tourist lodge. In future stages of a management plan for this site, the possibility of displaying a scale model of the ship or replicas of some of its

Table 15.1 Sites currently under study and proposed measures for public outreach

	<i>Emma</i> 1883–1947, wooden hull	<i>Presidente Roca</i> 1896–1909, iron hull	“BG 2” Nineteenth century wooden hull	<i>Swift</i> 1762–1770, wooden hull	<i>Hoorn</i> Ca. 1610–1615 wooden hull	<i>Duchess of Albany</i> 1884–1893 iron hull
Location/environment	Underwater	Intertidal and supratidal	Intertidal	underwater	Intertidal	Intertidal
Difficulty of access	Low	Moderate	Low	High	Low	High
Risk of cultural impact	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Low	Low	Low
Risk of natural impact	Low	High	Moderate	Low	Moderate	High
Main current proposed outreach measures	One-sheet brochures that can be laminated to take underwater by divers	View point on the top of the cliff nearby the site. Brochures in key locations close to the site	Exhibits at the Museo del Desembarco in Puerto Madryn	Permanent exhibits at the Museo Brozowski in Puerto Deseado; temporary exhibits in other venues	Permanent exhibits at the Museo Brozowski in Puerto Deseado; temporary exhibits in other venues	Brochures that can be taken to the site for interpretation+ exhibits at the Museo del Fin del Mundo in Ushuaia

main components might also be considered. There have been some successful experiences along this line in other parts of the world, such as with the scale model of the stern of the SS *Xantho* which is displayed at the Western Australia Maritime Museum in Fremantle (Gilman 2009).

The BG2 is really “invisible” to the public given the sandbags that cover it. However, those same bags indicate that something important is underneath, which may well encourage an interest in the site. It is worth noting also that various members of the community of Puerto Madryn have collaborated in the sandbag-covering process, thereby displaying local stewardship and care of the site. In terms of public outreach, the nearby visitor center focused on the Welsh colony in Puerto Madryn, to which the vessel might be related, has recently prepared a special exhibition about the BG2 including the display of a few elements (Puerto Madryn Website 1996–2007).

The town of Puerto Deseado is directly associated with the two main archaeological projects conducted by PROAS so far, investigation of the wrecks of the *Swift* and the *Hoorn*. Especially in the case of the *Swift*, given the fact that it is a very significant archaeological wrecksite (probably the most significant in the country), it would unquestionably be attractive to divers despite the predominant poor visibility and other unfavorable conditions underwater. During the early stages of work on the site, the possibility of allowing the public to see it was considered (Elkin and Cafferata 2001). However, the experience acquired during subsequent years suggests that this initiative might be quite risky in terms of diver safety, not just due to the underwater conditions but also because the site is located within the local harbor, which presents additional hazards from marine traffic.

With the exception of the harbor, the Deseado estuary is a provincial marine protected area and a forthcoming management plan soon will be implemented, taking into account both the natural and the cultural heritage related to it (Chantal Torlaschi 2012, pers. comm.). In this context, perhaps the possibility of controlled access by divers to the *Swift* site may be discussed, bearing in mind that challenging diving conditions can be appealing for certain people. Even if the number of divers is extremely limited, the greater the number of people who are aware of the heritage and its importance, the greater are chances for that heritage to be preserved for future generations.

For the moment then, the Brozoski Museum of Puerto Deseado, which hosts the entire archaeological collection of the site, will continue to be the main way in which the public is connected to the *Swift*. As regard the *Hoorn* wreck, of which a few remains are still scattered on the beach some 12 km from Puerto Deseado, at present there is no intention to promote the presence of visitors in the area due to limitations for exerting any form of control and for preventing people from collecting things like ceramic fragments and other archaeological remains (Cristian Murray 2012, pers. comm.). Again, the Brozoski Museum can become the main connection between this site and the public, ideally in the form of permanent exhibitions but at least through periodic displays. Some of the latter have already been successfully implemented. The management plan for the Deseado estuary mentioned above will also consider the situation of the remains of the *Hoorn* which are still in situ.

The Atlantic coast of Tierra del Fuego is a more challenging case in terms of making the maritime cultural heritage accessible to the public, even for those sites located in the intertidal zone. As long as there are no roads and only minimal infrastructure facilities to encourage the presence of people in the area, the number of visitors will continue to be extremely limited and will consist mostly of individuals who own quads and are prepared to make long, adventurous drives, literally “in the middle of nowhere.” Besides, the main attraction will probably continue to be fishing and camping rather than visiting cultural heritage sites.

However, at least the shipwreck of the *Duchess of Albany* seems to be worth attempting to present to the public in some form, ideally complementing what the *Museo del Fin del Mundo* already displays about this wrecksite. Some options might be implemented, such as encouraging a local horseback riding club from Ushuaia, which already organizes expeditions to the area, to include a special visit to the *Duchess of Albany* conducted by people who can operate as guides. Basic interpretive brochures can be given to the visitors as well. Another option, compatible with the one just mentioned, would be to take a significant element from the site to a place where more people can enjoy it and, at the same time, the item could be preserved from the natural degradation that increasingly affects the site. This type of action has been conducted with the USS *Monitor* rotating gun turret in the USA (Broadwater 2009) and with the *Xantho* engine in Australia (García 2009), and may well be applicable in this case. Pieces like the windlass or the pumps from the *Duchess of Albany* might be good candidates if such a decision is made (Murray et al. 2012). On the other hand, removing any item from the wreck implies taking it out of context and preventing people from seeing it in situ, so the advantages and disadvantages of either option should be carefully assessed. The possibility of making replicas of special components of the ship could be considered as well.

Final Comments

The public enjoyment of underwater cultural heritage should be encouraged, ideally in situ (UNESCO 2001), although this is not always a feasible option. In the case of sites that present difficult access (either because of geographical location or adverse diving conditions), there are still various actions that can be taken in order to “show” them to the people in one way or another. The costs of implementing some of these initiatives, both for land and underwater visitors, do not need to be expensive. For divers, the one-sheet brochure with an interpreted sketch, which can be laminated to take underwater, is a very low-cost option and does not require any installation at the site for its interpretation, which also needs periodic maintenance.

Non-divers can be presented with various ways to “see” submerged sites in the form of images, texts, sounds, scale models, or other ways of representing them which do not have to be very costly. Even replicas of selected portions of sites, displayed in places that are accessible to the general public, can be made with a relatively low budget (Gilman 2009). Monetary issues are of course quite relevant in

any decision-making process related to public archaeology, and it becomes particularly critical in developing countries such as Argentina which usually cannot afford sophisticated or high-technology means. Whatever decisions are taken, it is essential to involve as many stakeholders as possible (Scott-Ireton 2003) so that the interpretive strategies are the product of a community consensus rather than a heritage agency imposition.

Beyond each specific case, a global approach to raising awareness about underwater cultural heritage should be constantly reinforced by actions such as talks, lectures, mass media, and web dissemination, and other public archaeology and education initiatives. This is something that the PROAS team has been conducting since its creation, actually prior to focusing on management plans for the different sites under study. In addition, the team has been periodically running the Nautical Archaeology Society introductory courses aimed at sport divers. The latter has led some of the participants to engage with the underwater cultural heritage in a more active, committed, and respectful manner, and they have even begun working as volunteers on some of the research projects conducted by PROAS.

The sites under study by the team from the National Institute of Anthropology provide insight into the history of seafaring in Patagonia and may constitute a significant complement to the wildlife and other natural attractions that the area already offers. In that sense, the fact that most of these sites are located in current or foreseen marine protected areas (despite the remote and cold environment) should be regarded as an opportunity rather than a limitation.

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