

Sydney Morning Herald – Weekend Edition, November 3-4, 2001

Treasures of the deep have friends in high places

By Nick Leys



**Anchor of the Sirius.
Photo: Western
Australian Maritime
Museum**

A vast cultural museum in the form of shipwrecks litters ocean floors, waiting to be discovered.

But wrecks in international waters are at risk from treasure hunters who seek to plunder possibly valuable remains. Even the Titanic, which lies in such waters, is up for grabs.

But UNESCO, the United Nations cultural organisation, may today pass a convention designed to protect those shipwrecks and sunken archaeological sites from pillage and destruction.

UNESCO's 188 member states, including Australia, are meeting in Paris and will consider adopting the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage. It would outlaw raids on shipwrecks and their treasures which occur at the expense of the world's cultural heritage.

The director of UNESCO's cultural heritage division, Lyndel Prott, said: "Protecting our underwater heritage is extremely important and increasingly urgent as no site or shipwreck is now out of bounds for treasure hunters. New technologies have made deep-water wrecks easily accessible, and these technologies are getting cheaper."

Kieran Hosty, of the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney, said the convention would provide valuable protection for cultural heritage. It would also have implications for well known maritime archaeological sites, such as the First Fleet's HMS Sirius, wrecked off Norfolk Island in 1790.

Australia's Historic Shipwrecks Act was a benchmark for protecting shipwrecks in other countries, he said, and the convention would complement it to encompass projects in international waters.

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