

Discovering Shackleton's *Endurance* – future protection or pillaging?

The announcement on the 9th of March of the discovery of Ernest Shackleton's ship, the *Endurance*, lying in good condition upright on its keel some 3,000 meters below the site where it was sunk by ice damage in 1915, caused world-wide interest. It is reassuring that the press reports indicate that because the site is recognised as an Historic Site and Monument under the Antarctic Treaty, nothing was touched or removed, and that its initial recording was by off-wreck photography and LiDAR documentation alone. This responsible precautionary approach is to be applauded.

The *Endurance* wreck is emblematic of the history of the Antarctic, and of human persistence in adversity. The loss of the ship in the Weddell Sea, the long drift of the crew on the pack ice, Shackleton's 1,300 km journey in a small boat across the Southern Ocean to South Georgia, and his return to rescue his crew on Elephant Island, is the stuff of legend. The *Endurance* wreck is a powerful symbol of those historic events and evokes the past in the same way as other famous shipwrecks do, such as those of HMS *Erebus* and *Terror* in the Canadian Arctic, and the *Titanic* in the North Atlantic.

Yet the recent history of those other wreck sites shows that the long-term protection of the underwater cultural heritage is not necessarily assured just because the wreck is famous. Since its discovery in 1985, the *Titanic*, despite lying in 3,800 metres of water, has had a massive amount of material removed from it, including some 6,000 artefacts and a 17ton section of the hull. An auction in 2012 was reported in the press as expecting to return an estimated \$185 million from artefacts from the wreck. In November 2003, Canada, France, the UK and the US drafted an international agreement to try to safeguard the ship from further pillage. So far, only the UK and the US have ratified it. This agreement only controlled the activities of signatory State parties' ships, and other countries would have to ratify the agreement to offer wider protection. The wreck also falls under the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage. Recent reports indicate that the wreck is deteriorating, possibly accelerated by the degree of disturbance since 1985.

The management of the wrecks of the *Erebus* and *Terror* in the Canadian Arctic, on the other hand, show the role of careful protection and controlled systematic investigation and object removal policies in ensuring the long-term protection of the underwater cultural heritage. These ships were abandoned in the ice of the North-West Passage in 1848 by the surviving members of the Sir John Franklin expedition, after which the survivors started on a long and fatal trek across the Arctic waste. Their fate was not fully confirmed for over 30 years and after over 30 search expeditions. The ships themselves were discovered in 2014 and 2016. Parks Canada controlled the searches for the ships, and managed their protection and study thereafter, and the outcome is in marked contrast to that of the *Titanic*.

The International Polar Heritage Committee, and the International Committee on the Underwater Cultural Heritage, both part of the International Council on Monuments and Sites

(ICOMOS), is concerned to ensure that the best available standards of investigation and protection are afforded to the newly discovered *Endurance* site, and it is conscious that quick action to implement effective management is critical to achieving protection. The ICOMOS Charter on the Protection and Management of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, adopted in 1996 and mirrored in the Annex of the 2001 UNESCO Convention and the *Titanic* Agreement, as well as in the conditions imposed by US Admiralty courts for any activity directed at the *Titanic*, has been widely accepted as best practice by States and the scientific archaeological community.

So how can we be sure that the wreck of the *Endurance* will be properly protected and its investigation managed? Serious searching for the wreck commenced in 2019, and in anticipation of the need to control activities on the site the United Kingdom put forward the *Endurance* wreck site for listing on the Antarctic Historic Sites and Monuments List, the formal process for recognising heritage sites under the Antarctic Treaty. The site was then added to the List in 2019. The listing includes the wreck and ‘all artefacts contained within or formerly contained within the ship, which may be lying on the seabed in or near the wreck within a 150m radius. This includes all fixtures and fittings associated with the ship, including ship’s wheel, bell, etc. The designation also includes all items of personal possessions left on the ship by the ship’s company at the time of its sinking.’ The United Kingdom is identified as the managing nation. The Environment Protocol guiding the Treaty system requires that listed Historic Sites and Monuments (HSM) shall not be damaged, removed or destroyed.

While this listing would appear at first glance to guarantee the protection and appropriate management of the wreck, the site may come under intense pressure from cruise ships and private expeditions to gain video access using Remote Operated Vehicles (ROVs) and Autonomous Underwater Vehicles (AUVs), or even submarines, in which some companies have invested heavily. There are some aspects of the current listing that might leave all or parts of the site vulnerable to such visits. The exact location and depth of the wreck are now known, and it is likely that the 150 m radius protected area will be inadequate to cover the larger field of debris that will have fallen with the ship through over 3 kilometres of water. There are therefore likely to be artefacts scattered over this large ‘debris field’ that are not protected by HSM listing. Also, while the wreck and artefacts within 150 meters of the wreck are protected, it is in one plane only, so ROVs and AUVs could approach the wreck and sea bed with impunity, and a small miscalculation or mechanical malfunction at that depth could result in catastrophic damage. One protective approach is to apply a protected zone over the sea above the site, effectively a ‘column’ of protection that runs from the surface to the sea bed, a feature of some existing national underwater heritage legislation. This approach is used at the *Erebus* and *Terror* sites, and the presence of ships in or approaching the zone is monitored through ship-tracking technology. The protected area is best not centred on the wreck site, so as to not reveal its precise location, so a large protected area that might be able to be better monitored is necessary to both protect a wide debris field and to offer clear restrictions to approaching ships. A large protected area also reduces the opportunities for sending ROVs/AUVs from outside the protected waters. Devising a means to keep unauthorised vehicles away from the wreck site and debris field is a high priority challenge for the managers of the *Endurance* site.

Another threat to this site, as it is to many other heritage sites, is the often-misguided human reaction to remove artefacts or parts of the vessel ‘to protect them’. The reality is that the site is not in any apparent danger, except that of human actions – at the moment there is nothing

to ‘protect’ artefacts from except human greed or over-enthusiasm. Authorised responsible remote access for non-intrusive videoing and photography, such as has accompanied news of the discovery, will provide widespread public access and information. The urge to remove objects and parts from this extremely rare wreck for museum collections so that ‘people can see them’, however, should be strongly resisted. Artefacts may well be removed in the future as part of a systematic and carefully controlled research and conservation program, as they are from the *Erebus* wreck in Canada, or it may be decided that they should not be removed, but ad hoc smash and grab exercises by either government or private operators before those decisions are made must be prevented. It should be noted also that the granddaughter of Sir Ernest Shackleton, the Hon. Alexandra Shackleton, has stated in a television interview that she regards the wreck as legally her property, and while photography is acceptable there should be ‘no rummaging or touching’, and it should certainly not be raised.

The hope is that the United Kingdom, as site manager, will be able to communicate the importance of the *Endurance* site and the need for carefully considered and controlled investigations and management to a wider audience. For this, as well as for any future decision regarding the wreck site, a management plan should be submitted by the UK and discussed and approved under Annex V of the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty. The UK is also responsible for issuing permits to visit and work on the site, so its interest in ensuring best standards is very high. The International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO), which represents a large percentage of Antarctic cruise operators, has an excellent track record in promoting heritage-sensitive operations in the region, and it is hoped that it can help inform and monitor many of the private expeditions that might otherwise be ill-informed about the responsibilities that go with protecting this important and vulnerable wreck site. The International Polar Heritage Committee, and our fellow ICOMOS organisation the International Committee on Underwater Cultural Heritage, offer what help we might be able provide in devising protection, research and management solutions for this challenging site.

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