

Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage in French Polynesia Fifteen Years of Work by GRAN

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French Polynesia, an Overseas Country: A Specific Regulatory Framework

Since March 12, 2004, French Polynesia has been an “Overseas Country” (formerly an overseas territory) within the French Republic. It is a freely and democratically self-governing autonomous overseas community. The High Commissioner of the Republic is the representative of the State and holds its powers. More simply, the State is responsible for all matters relating to nationality and civil rights; justice; foreign policy; defense and security; currency; some air transport and maritime regulations; municipal administration; the public service; audiovisual communication; and finally, university education and research. Archaeological research, on the other hand, is the responsibility of French Polynesia. The regulations governing underwater archaeology are, however, the same as those in effect in metropolitan France. The Heritage Code has been in effect in French Polynesia since 2004. It includes Consolidated Law No. 89-874 of December 1, 1989 on maritime cultural property, which has been in effect in the territory for more than ten years.

Given this specific legal context, we leave it to the legal authorities to determine whether the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage is subject to the accession of French Polynesia.

GRAN Activities in French Polynesia

The Research Group for Naval Archaeology (Groupe de recherche en archéologie navale, or “GRAN”) is a non-profit association dedicated to underwater archaeology, maritime history and maritime cultural heritage. The GRAN team in French Polynesia was established in 1990. Prior to that time, there had been no scientific research on underwater cultural heritage. The only activities were the usual recovery of anchors, cannons, wreckage or hewn stone by underwater contractors, fishermen, divers or private individuals, for collections, trophies or sale. A number of ethnologists and archaeologists, primarily Anglo-Saxons, had studied land archaeology since the beginning of the 20th-century, while French research began with Pierre Vérin in the early 1960s. Underwater archaeology, however, had received no attention.

In the past fifteen years, GRAN has been involved in a wide variety of activities in French Polynesia. The conclusion of a

framework agreement with the Ministry of Culture, assigning us responsibility for an inventory of Polynesia’s underwater heritage, has made it possible to begin looking at the problem of underwater archaeology as a whole.

Three types of activities have been undertaken in connection with the responsibility entrusted to us:

1. Systematic review of archival and documentary sources, to establish as complete a list as possible of the shipwrecks that have occurred in the area.
2. Survey of underwater workers (divers, underwater contractors, fishermen) to establish an inventory of known underwater relics.
3. Operations to verify information on the sites inventoried: exploration, expert appraisals or excavations undertaken on our own initiative or at the request of the Polynesian Ministry of Culture.

GRAN has also carried out operations at the request of other agencies or associations, including museums, municipalities and local or metropolitan French associations. It has also been assigned responsibility by the Ministry of Culture for overseeing the archaeological research being conducted by an Anglo-Saxon team.

At the same time, GRAN has undertaken to:

4. Provide information on its activities to the media and the public.
5. Educate decision-makers and students on the protection of underwater cultural heritage through an educational program in the schools.

Education on the Protection of Underwater Heritage

Since 2000, every GRAN operation has included a multilingual daily log on its website at www.archeonavale.org. This log, our primary tool for communication, allows members of the public to monitor the progress of the work. Between 300 and 500 people follow every stage of our archaeological operations on a daily basis. The log does more than simply recount events; the documents that accompany it give readers a more complete view of the technical, historical, archaeological and environmental aspects of the operation. To allow teachers from different school systems to use the site for educational purposes, the texts are presented in three languages: French, Tahitian and English. Some other GRAN sites, depending on their location, use other languages as well, such as Spanish or Arabic.

Raising student awareness does not stop at the computer screen. GRAN carries out activities in the schools to ensure that even the very youngest children are aware of the need to protect our underwater heritage. These activities take the form of guided three-level exhibits that allow the children to discover, discuss and handle materials. In some cases, GRAN responds



to individual requests for assistance on educational projects (marine trades, wildlife, plant life, environmental protection, etc.) by providing specific additional information.

GRAN also attends cultural or environmental events (mayors' conferences, sea days, island language days, etc.), at which it interacts with the general public. It has established excellent relations with the Department of Culture, the Museum of Tahiti and the Islands, and the Customs Administration, and participates in the marine science activities of the Natural Sites and Monuments Commission. Its primary concern is to ensure that marine engineering operations are aware of the needs of underwater archaeology.

Example of a Protective Measure: Excavation of the Tupaparau Underwater Site in Mo'orea

This campaign was triggered by the discovery of numerous stone objects in Mo'orea near Tupaparau Pass in the Afareaitu lagoon. The site was discovered by Mr. Lailau Matahiapo, a well-known Polynesian diver. He kept it secret for three years, before deciding to inform the members of the "Na To E Va'u No Aimeho Nui" Association so that protective measures could be taken.

Alerted by the President of the Association and the senior assistant to the mayor of the island, the Minister of Culture asked the GRAN team in Polynesia to assume responsibility for organizing and carrying out excavation operations. Initial assessment dives were followed by archaeological recovery work between February 22 and April 6, 2003 to avoid possible looting.

The site is significant in terms of both its size (nearly 250 by 50 metres) and the number of articles that it contains (between 2,000 and 3,000). These include not only hewn or worked stone objects, but also volcanic rocks apparently in their natural state. The worked objects found (several hundred) relate to fishing: anchors and fishing weights for lines or nets. Some stones may have come from ceremonial sites such as Marae, while others include unworked basalt prisms, finished basalt tools (adzes) and a very small number of domestic objects, such as a pestle and other less readily identifiable objects.

Figure 1: (Top) Two divers label anchors and stone fishing weights in the central portion of the site; the concentration of objects is due to the slope of the site and its relief: coral masses, faults and differences in height (GRAN Polynesia © 2003)

Figure 2: (Lower Left) After being identified on the bottom, positioned and photographed, objects are removed and brought to land; they are placed in freshwater tanks for several days for desalination (GRAN Polynesia © 2003)

Figure 3: (Lower Right) View of anchors and fishing weights from square R9. Each object has an identification label; the method used in this case was a PVC plate (bearing a number written with an indelible felt pen) attached by an elastic band; this method has proven unsatisfactory in areas affected by swell (loss of labels); in addition, the elastic breaks down in the medium term (GRAN Polynesia © 2003)

While certain passes in the Polynesian islands contain similar objects and some have been looted, this is the first time that a site of this kind has been studied.

The discovery of underwater sites of this kind poses the problem of protecting them against looting. Although this discovery was kept secret for some time by the man who first located it, it was beginning to arouse greed among individuals who do not subscribe to the UNESCO precept: "Underwater cultural heritage shall not be commercially exploited."

This campaign, set up in less than two months, has made it possible to study the archaeological site and to protect nearly 700 objects.

In conclusion, French Polynesia represents an area of 1800 km x 1800 km, including 118 islands and atolls. Given the significance of underwater archaeology in this very large area, GRAN's activities and the means available to it remain relatively limited in practice, but its constant presence, its network of informants, its field work and efforts to develop public awareness have helped to publicize the concept of underwater cultural heritage. As the excavation of the Tupaparau underwater site in Mo'orea indicates, GRAN also represents an effective tool when the Ministry of Culture is called upon to respond to an urgent situation.

Information Sources

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