

Should we protect shipwrecks?

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... Or is it acceptable to plunder?

The line between the exploration of (lost) knowledge and defiling underwater graves is thin. Even though UNESCO's Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage entered into force in 2009, the debate on the protection of shipwrecks remains. There are more advantages to protecting shipwrecks than you might think.

In 2016 a Belgian law was imposed to protect cultural heritage under water. It prevents certain historical shipwrecks from being moved or damaged by underwater works conducted in the area. The law concerns mostly ships from WOI and WOII but also the lightship West-Hinder (Van Haelst, Pieters, 2017).

Commercial purposes

Wrecks close to the coast serve as tourist attraction for scuba divers and they give the public a chance to learn about these wonderful new ecosystems and their history. The increased fish population around these wrecks is also beneficial for the local fishermen (US National Park Service, 2017).

Artificial reefs

Sinking old ships is a great way to create artificial reefs. When the ships stay on the seabed untouched long enough, they become a part of the environment and provide a breeding ground so that life begins to form around them. The hard surface of the ships provide a good bottom for algae, corals, barnacles, oysters and many more creatures to attach. These in turn provide shelter and food for fish, which, in turn, create a food source for larger animals, etc (Gaukel Andrews, C. 2017). The wrecks also provide a stable ocean floor and decrease erosion. This can help with the maturation of the reef and given time the corals will start to expand the reef on their own (Elias, S. A. 2018).



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Degradation of coral reefs

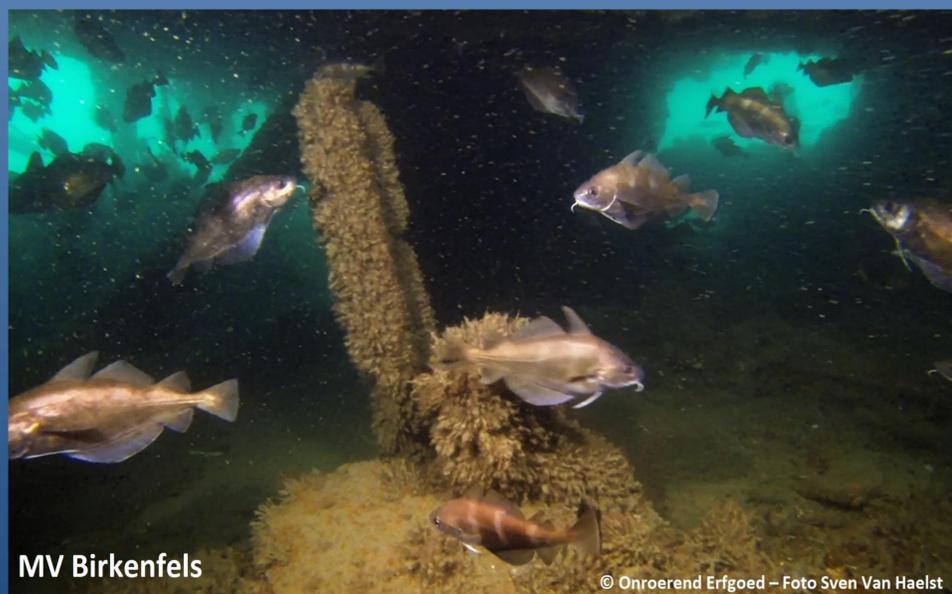
Coral reefs are home to 25% of all marine fish species and are the most threatened ecosystems on the planet. 70% of all tropical reefs may be destroyed by 2050, unless degradation is stopped. Shipwrecks can help sustain the biodiversity of our oceans by providing shelter for a large number of species found in these threatened reefs (Glynn, P. W., & Manzello, D. P. 2015).

Historical value:

A sunken ship gives historians an untouched look into the past. It is a time capsule that can be explored and examined for many generations and maybe can help prevent future losses (Blackburn, M. 2013).

Corrosion

Marine biofilms on submerged shipwrecks support settlement of micro- and macro-biota and protects the wreck against corrosion (Mugge et al., 2019). Scientific research can be conducted on the shipwrecks to learn more about the protection of ships against corrosion.



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Conclusion

The protection of shipwrecks is important on multiple levels. From marine life, researchers and historians to the local fishermen and scuba divers, everybody benefits from these sites.

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