

ENVIRONMENT

NEWS RELEASE

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HERITAGE MINISTER ANNOUNCES NAUTICAL ARCHAEOLOGY INITIATIVES

Heritage Minister, Baroness Blatch, today announced new measures for the protection of historic wrecks in United Kingdom waters.

In reply to a Parliamentary Question from Lord Gainford who asked when the Government expected to respond to the recommendations of the Joint Nautical Archaeological Policy Committee's report 'Heritage at Sea,' Lady Blatch said:

"We have responded today and I am placing copies in the library of the House.

"In response to the report we have already announced two main changes. These were set out in the White Paper 'This Common Inheritance'. The first is the transfer of responsibility for the protection of historic wrecks in English waters from the Department of Transport to the Department of the Environment. This will bring together control of archaeology on land with that under water. Similar transfers will take place in relation to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The second is the preparation of a central record of historic wrecks by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. The Commission in Scotland will be asked to take on a similar

responsibility. In Wales, the Welsh Office will be reviewing the new work with the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales.

"In the fuller response made today we say we are ready to develop, in discussion with the organisations concerned, a code of practice for sea-bed operators whose activities could affect wreck sites. We are also willing to exercise Government powers of ownership, where these can be established, in favour of conserving wreck sites and the artefacts recovered from them. We will consider sympathetically applications for special grant for the development of diver training in the skills required for underwater archaeology. We also make a commitment to make the best of existing salvage reporting arrangements to encourage important finds to be properly conserved and displayed.

"The Government does not accept that there is a need for a new agency or legislation but it does intend to make the best use of the powers and resources available in the interest of conservation and to review these matters once the new allocation of responsibilities has had time to take effect.

"The Government is grateful to the Joint Committee for its work and hopes to have the benefit of its expertise and advice again on these matters in future."

NOTES TO EDITORS

"Heritage at Sea" was prepared and published in May 1989 by the Joint Nautical Archaeology Committee. The Committee is a group of representatives from the National Maritime Museum, the Nautical Archaeology Society, the Council for British Archaeology, the Institute of Field Archaeologists, and the Society for Nautical Research.

The main legislation covering underwater archaeological sites is the 1973 Protection of Wrecks Act. The Act is currently the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Transport who designates historic wreck sites in UK waters and licenses diving and other activities around them, where these are acceptable.

These responsibilities are to be transferred to the Secretary of State for the Environment, with similar transfers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, to bring together control of archaeology on land with that underwater. This element of the response made today was first foreshadowed in the White Paper "This Common Inheritance" published in September.

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THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO "HERITAGE AT SEA"

1. In May 1989 the Joint Nautical Archaeology Policy Committee published its report 'Heritage at Sea' which set out proposals for the better protection of archaeological sites underwater.
2. This memorandum sets out the Government's response to 'Heritage at Sea'. In September the Government published the White Paper, "This Common Inheritance", which announced a proposal to transfer from the Secretary of State for Transport to the Secretary of State for the Environment, responsibility for the designation of sites of historic wrecks in English waters and the licensing of diving and other activities around them. The White Paper announced similar transfers of responsibility in relation to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It also announced that the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England should begin work on a central record of historic wrecks.
3. These are the main changes which the Government proposes to make in response to 'Heritage at Sea', but there are also a number of other points which the Government intends to pursue. This memorandum responds more fully to each of the Committee's recommendations.

Recommendation 1

New legislation, specifically drafted for the protection of underwater archaeological sites and the artefacts associated with them, and covering all aspects of the underwater cultural heritage, should be enacted as soon as possible.

4. The Government considers that the existing provisions of the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973 have served quite well. Before

deciding whether to make changes, therefore, it intends to see how they operate following the transfer of responsibility to Departments which also have responsibility for archaeology on land. It is satisfied with the provisions of the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986, and with the protection they afford to these special sites.

5. The Government recognises that the provisions of the Merchant Shipping Act 1894 in relation to the reporting of salvaged wreck and the payment of salvage awards were framed in an earlier age. But it is not convinced that serious damage is done to archaeological material, nor that important material is being lost to public collections, simply as a result of the requirements of salvage law.

6. 'Heritage at Sea' did not itself recommend the way the Government should move forward in this area. Although some proposals have subsequently been submitted to the Government, it is apparent that changes to the system of reporting and awards are likely to prove controversial. For the present, it intends to keep the working of this legislation under review.

Recommendation 2

An inventory of underwater sites within territorial waters should be compiled and maintained at a national and local level. A set of criteria for assessing the importance of sites should be established and the sites should be graded accordingly.

7. The Government accepts that for better management and preservation of underwater archaeological sites we need to improve our knowledge of where they are and what they comprise. The Archaeological Diving Unit has already carried out some work and the advice of the Advisory Committee on Historic Wrecks has been an invaluable resource. The Government has now invited the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England to start

