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Doing Maritime Archaeology in Australia

Maritime archaeology encompasses more than just shipwrecks; it also includes the many land-based activities associated with maritime industry and trade, such as whaling stations, docks, jetties and shipyards, the intangible record (for instance oral histories), as well as the material vestiges of maritime lifestyles. It can incorporate ports and the various services that support maritime activities, such as lighthouses and warehouses, as well as the domestic sites associated with the people who lived and worked in these places. Inland waters and the material traces they contain are also part of maritime archaeology. For example, the Murray River, a major waterway which in part forms the boundary between NSW and Victoria and runs into South Australia, has a 19th century drydock, several historic port towns, and the fully conserved 105 year old paddle steamer, *PS Marion*, as well as wrecks of many other paddle steamers and barges along its length. Even the remains of the relatively recent past, such as sunken wartime relics, can become the responsibility of maritime archaeologists.

Shipwrecks are probably the most commonly envisaged maritime archaeological site, however, and there are over six thousand such wrecks in Australian coastal and inland waters. Many wrecks, while known about, have not been located; others are completely unknown. Only a relatively small percentage have been investigated and conserved by maritime archaeologists; even fewer have been excavated. In South Australia, for example, there are over 800 known wrecks, but only some 200 of these have been located and identified. While maritime archaeology in Australia is conducted by specially trained maritime practitioners, because of its time-depth and the terrestrial nature of many maritime sites, its methods and research processes also overlap considerably with the practice of historical archaeology. There is also the potential for maritime archaeology to intersect with Indigenous archaeology, as the rich ecological zones of the coastal areas have been occupied and exploited for tens of thousands of years. Coastal sites can include fish-traps, shell-middens, hearths, etc., and are usually very fragile. Any maritime archaeologist working in Australia needs to be aware of this potential, since working with Indigenous peoples requires you to follow particular ethical practices (for more information see Chapter 6).

Joe Flatman's Tips for Maritime Archaeologists

- Remember that maritime archaeology isn't just underwater and includes a lot of coastal/waterfront remains such as jetties, wharves, or quays. These can often be the best things to get involved in analyzing—anyone can do a basic survey of an old wharf or suchlike using a hand-tape, sketchbook and camera. Maritime archaeology doesn't need to include the use of costly equipment or specialized training.
- Safety is just as much an issue in land-based maritime archaeological fieldwork as in underwater. Remember to check tides and weather, access points to the site, and tell someone where you are going, and what time you will leave/return. Tell them when you get back safe too! This might also include leaving a visible note in your car saying when you left/will return. Bring all the equipment you might bring when safely doing historical archaeological fieldwork—a mobile phone or even short-wave radio when out in very remote areas, sufficient food, water, clothing, etc. and a first aid kit.
- If you're serious about becoming a maritime archaeologist and already have qualifications in archaeology or a closely related discipline, then think about enrolling in a graduate program specializing in maritime archaeology. Several universities in Australia offer postgraduate qualifications in this area, including Flinders University in South Australia, James Cook University* in Queensland and the University of Western Australia*.

Joe Flatman is a maritime archaeologist and lecturer at University College London. He has worked on many sites in Australia and the UK.

8.1. Legislation Protecting Maritime Sites

Both State and Commonwealth legislation protects underwater cultural heritage in Australia. Some maritime sites—including terrestrial sites and shipwrecks located in inland waters, bays, harbors and rivers—may be covered by general state heritage legislation (including separate acts governing marine parks and reserves) because they lie in State waters. Most shipwrecks are protected under the *Commonwealth Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976* (for more information on this act and on general State heritage legislation, see Chapter 5). This means that shipwrecks in Commonwealth waters (extending from below the low water mark to the edge of the continental shelf) that are more than 75 years old are automatically protected as designated historic shipwrecks under the Commonwealth Act. Environment Australia is the Commonwealth body responsible for administering the *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976*, although in practice this is delegated to State agencies. There are over 6,000 declared historic shipwrecks around Australia (see Figure 8.1) that are currently protected under this act.

In addition to the protection from damage or disturbance afforded to designated historic shipwrecks, the *Commonwealth HS Act* also has a provision for declaring a protected zone around any wreck site that is deemed to be sufficiently sensitive.