

NOT JUST DIVERS AND FISHERMEN: INCREASING THE PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN THE SAFEGUARDING OF UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE IN TIERRA DEL FUEGO, ARGENTINA

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Introduction

Underwater archaeologists often acknowledge the important role played by other people who are in direct contact with water, such as fisherpersons and divers, in many aspects related to underwater cultural heritage. As it is known, submerged sites are quite frequently even discovered by them. In recent years, actors who are less 'obvious' than the ones mentioned above have also emerged to become stakeholders when dealing with underwater cultural heritage. For example, there are now many metal detecting *aficionados* who spend a good deal of time combing intertidal zones in search of finds which frequently have historical significance.

This chapter presents examples of positive experiences regarding the involvement of all-terrain vehicle drivers (ATV) and horseback riders in the coastal heritage of Tierra del Fuego, southern Argentina. It is expected that the gradual and non-linear processes leading to good results can be inspiring in comparable situations in other parts of the world.

Tierra del Fuego is an archipelago located in the southernmost part of the Americas, some 1,000 kilometres north of Antarctica, and it is politically divided into a portion in Chile to the west and Argentina to the east (Fig. 1). The region has a subpolar oceanic climate, with general environmental conditions characterized by a humid cold climate, average annual temperatures below 7°C, and precipitations ranging from 400 mm to more than 3,000 mm per year.

Until the mid-19th century the region was only inhabited permanently by various native groups¹ and the European presence since that time first consisted of small missionary colonies and later of different settlements associated with the respective new Republics. The Chilean locality of Punta Arenas, on the continental shore of the Strait of Magellan, was founded in 1848 as a penal colony, while in 1884 a coast-guard office was established in Ushuaia, positioned on the Argentine side of the Beagle Channel on main island of Tierra del Fuego. A penal colony was also established by Argentina that same year on Staten Island, across the Strait of Le Maire. In subsequent years the Chilean and Argentine populations in the region increased to some degree, supplemented by European immigrants who contributed to the colonies and the 'civilization' process.



Fig. 1 Location of Tierra del Fuego, Argentina and of Donata Beach in the eastern portion (in the box). © Geomatics division, Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Pensamiento Latinoamericano.

Well before those times, however, the native population of the archipelago already had direct and indirect contact with Europeans (see, for example, Saletta 2017). Because of the geographical location of Tierra del Fuego, vessels connecting the South Atlantic and South Pacific Oceans have sailed past it continuously since the 16th century, and both the treacherous Cape Horn and the Magellan passages caused many human and material losses. Adventurous sealers and whalers also visited the area periodically, and the few lighthouses built in the region were insufficient. The main change took place with the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 which led to a significant reduction in nautical passages around Cape Horn.

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The case presented in this text is a marine archaeological site located on Peninsula Mitre, the easternmost part of the main island of Tierra del Fuego. This is a portion of land of over 3,000 km² (approximately 160,000 m²) surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean, the Strait of Le Maire, and the Beagle Channel.

This remote portion of the island remains extremely isolated, even nowadays. Until the first decades of the 20th century the main — and almost only — economic activity here were a few sheep farming *estancias* (ranches), but they were gradually abandoned due to the competition with other international and domestic producers followed by the decrease in the price of the wool, factors which no longer justified the investment and hardships involved.

At present two un-paved roads approach the Peninsula from the West, but except for a few kilometres along the northern route which allows the circulation of regular vehicles, almost the entire peninsula is only accessible by horse, foot, all-terrain vehicle (ATV) or helicopter. As for ships or any form of watercraft, the only ones which go to Peninsula Mitre are supply vessels from the Argentine Navy which occasionally stop in a natural harbour called Buen Suceso, by the Strait of Le Maire, on their route to Islas de los Estados (Staten Island) or Antarctica.

The point to stress is the remoteness and wilderness of this region, and it is precisely this characteristic which is nowadays attracting an increasing number of visitors. Some are nature-oriented hikers or horseback riders but the vast majority are groups of people who use ATVs to carry out extreme, adventurous expeditions, without speed limits or any other form of control over their activity.

In 2016, during one of these ATV expeditions to Peninsula Mitre, a significant and unusual archaeological discovery took place in Playa Donata, a 2,5 kilometre sandy beach on the Atlantic coast of the peninsula nearby Caleta Policarpo (Fig. 1). What the group of ATV riders spotted in the intertidal zone consisted of a series of wooden baskets containing large quantities of historic pottery, predominantly whiteware cups and plates (Figs. 2a, b). It is worth noting that this beach had been surveyed on many occasions by different archaeological teams, the last ones conducted by the underwater archaeology unit of the National Institute of Anthropology between 2010 and 2014 (Vázquez et al. 2010, 2013; Elkin et al. 2017), and these type of remains had never been seen before. The baskets were obviously buried during these previous surveys, then over time the overlying sediment had been naturally eroded, and the artefacts had become exposed at the time the ATV group passed along the beach.

The finders collected some material - probably as much as they could - and apparently left some accumulated together to be collected later. Clearly, the archaeological context was

severely disturbed not just by the removal of artefacts but because of the displacement and damage done to less attractive pieces such as the baskets themselves. Shortly thereafter some members of the expedition uploaded comments and photographs of the event on social-media networks.



Fig. 2a Basket containing whiteware chamber pots – Playa Donata. © Dirección de Patrimonio de la Provincia de Tierra del Fuego (provincial heritage agency).



Fig. 2b Excavation and recording of one of the containers. © Christopher J. Underwood

Archaeological heritage in Argentina is protected by law at various levels. National law 25.743 defines it as cultural elements over 100 years of age which are in an archaeological context on land or underwater (Law 25.743/2003). The province of Tierra del Fuego has a similar legal framework (Law Nr. 370) with an additional Decree which protects all historic shipwrecks lying within their jurisdictional waters (Decree Nr. 858/98). Finally, since 2010 Argentina is a State Party to the

UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2001). Nonetheless, and despite the efforts to create public awareness on the subject and disseminate information on such regulations (Murray et al. 2016) many citizens continue to behave as finders-keepers, particularly with respect to historical material. Shipwreck remains and their cargoes are probably the most vulnerable elements in that sense.



Fig. 3 Image of a ship's timber, probably part of a keel structure, sent by Mr. Gabriel Muñoz, who passed through Playa Donata on his ATV. © G. Muñoz, 2018.

Whether the quad-bikers knew or did not know that they were acting in an illicit manner, representatives of the Secretary of Culture of Tierra del Fuego started a legal process shortly after finding out about what had happened, which resulted in the confiscation of the materials and their (reluctant) restitution to the provincial public domain.

Even since, there was a clear confrontation between the heritage authorities, along with several archaeologists, and the loose category of 'the quad-bikers' which more or less encompassed any owner of this type of vehicle going to Peninsula Mitre and who was regarded as a potential destroyer of not only cultural heritage but also the delicate natural environment of the area.

In the course of the following months, rescue archaeological fieldwork was conducted on the site with the support of the provincial authorities on archaeological heritage and the Museo del Fin del Mundo in Ushuaia, revealing that the collection consisted of 19th Century British pottery and glassware. The baskets were interpreted as part of the cargo of a

vessel heading to the Pacific Ocean along the Cape Horn route; however, there is no wreck site in the vicinity which can be associated with the baskets, and the process of trying to identify the circumstances by which they were deposited in the Donata beach is still ongoing (Elkin 2019).

In parallel to the archaeological research and the conservation of the materials that has been conducted since 2016 (Elkin 2019, Pousa et al. 2018), it was considered appropriate to implement a series of awareness raising initiatives for Peninsula Mitre in a holistic manner, attempting to reach as many stakeholders as possible. So far, the actions have consisted of the following:

1. Placing permanent informative panels and distributing leaflets at the entrance to the Peninsula with regard to its cultural and natural heritage and the legal framework which protects archaeological remains in the province. The leaflets also indicate the procedure to be followed in case of archaeological discoveries.
2. Setting up museum exhibits with the materials recovered from Playa Donata at the two main cities in the province: Ushuaia and Rio Grande. The exhibits include information on archaeological methodology, the legislation which protects such heritage, the importance of preserving the context, and other relevant awareness raising points.
3. Producing a documentary film on the rescue archaeology work conducted on Playa Donata, with support of the Culture Secretary of the province. It has already been shown in many venues and is now available on the internet (Fernandez Arroyo 2017).
4. Giving periodical public talks and mass media interviews in Ushuaia and Rio Grande with an update on the research and conservation. People related to the fields of tourism, education, diving, fishing, horseback riding, ATV expeditions, science, media, police and military forces, NGOs, rural management, and of course cultural heritage, are regularly invited to the talks. These also provide an opportunity for questions and interaction with the public.
5. More recently, making a special approach to the people who go to Peninsula Mitre through clubs and other associations of ATVs and motorbikes. The first amicable dialogues with individual people who practice these activities are already yielding positive results in terms of reporting archaeological finds to the specialists or the authorities (Fig. 3). There is a major difference between this attitude versus removing or disturbing them, generating legal confrontations, or simply not bothering to notify anyone.

A round-table meeting is planned, with one of the main proposals to discuss will be the possibility of their actual involvement in archaeological projects in the form of logistical support and/or citizen science.

Aside from this change in behaviour of at least some of the ATV expeditioners, other people who have reported archaeological material in the area are hikers, tourism helicopter pilots, law enforcement officers, former ranch owners and the leaders of horseback expeditions. The Ushuaia horse riding club has even put signs referring to the historical, archaeological, and natural resources of the area, encouraging people to respect them. One of the signs is about one of the most emblematic shipwrecks in the area, the British merchant sailing ship *Duchess of Albany*, stranded on the coast in 1893 (Elkin et al. 2017).

There is also a public initiative to create a protected area in Peninsula Mitre and the surrounding marine territory. This is led by conservationist organizations and already has considerable political support. If this is achieved, the natural and cultural resources in Peninsula Mitre will have an effective protection system, with regulations on the different degrees of accessibility, including special layouts of tracks for the usual visitors: horseback riders, hikers and ATV riders. Helicopters will probably be allowed to land only in selected places, and a respectful behaviour will be ensured for visitors in general. At present there are no recreational diving or fishing activities in Peninsula Mitre, but it is not inconceivable that it will start taking place in the future. If and when that happens, the underwater cultural heritage of this marvellous part of the world will hopefully have more allies in its protection.

Summary

In summary, and with the risk of stating the obvious, our experience revealed that the more stakeholders are involved in activities directed at underwater cultural heritage the greater the chances of successful outcomes. This is something already noted by other authors based on their experiences in different parts of the world revealing that multivocality, participation, and empowerment is the way to move forward (see Scott Iretton 2014). Cultural heritage will only be properly valued and protected when it is clear that it belongs to us all.

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¹ These were the *Selk'nam*, the *Haush*, the *Yaghan* and the *Alakaluf*.