

UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE (UCH) AT RISK

DEEP SEABED MINING WILL DESTROY UCH: SHIPWRECKS, HUMAN REMAINS, IMPORTANT CULTURAL PLACES

UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE: OUR COMMON CONNECTION WITH OUR ONE OCEAN

The stories of our societies and our ancestors are wrapped in intangible connection with the ocean, and captured on the sea floor as artefacts, shipwrecks, and remains of those lost or buried at sea. Focus on marine global heritage has largely been on natural heritage. However, UCH is ocean heritage. We can, and must, acknowledge and pay respect to our UCH.



Wayfaring Heritage

Cultural Sites and Pathways

Seafaring peoples have traversed the Pacific for at least the last few thousands of years. Movement from Polynesia to Hawaii was completed as early as 500 AD. Tangible evidence of these voyages is scant, so intangible heritage is even more important— even sacred. Pacific methods of ‘wayfinding’ led to inter- and intra-island connections with the sea and coast being seen as a sacred and spiritual place. In the Pacific, the sea as seen by some as both an ancestor itself, and as a resting place for ancestors. Many Pacific people also have a unique relationship with whales, and cetaceans will be affected by noise from DSM operations.



Age of Sail Remains

Age of Sail Shipwrecks and Remains

From the 16th to 19th centuries, European nations began colonising and trading across the globe. The Dutch East India Trade, the Spanish Manila Galleons, and the Middle Passage of the Slave Trade are a few examples. In the Atlantic Middle Passage, more than 12.5 million enslaved Africans were transported on more than 40,000 voyages from 1519 to 1865. Many (an estimated 1.8 million) did not survive, and the Atlantic seabed is their final resting place (Delgado and Varmer 2014).



Potentially Polluting
WW Wrecks

World War Shipwrecks and Remains

There are an estimated 1,100 wrecks on the seabed from WWI that are UCH and another 7,800 wrecks from WWII that will soon come within UNESCO’s legal definition of UCH (Monofills 2006). All of these historic wrecks are also threats to the marine environment through potential pollution. Additionally, there are an estimated 300,000 Japanese human remains in the waters of the Pacific alongside countless more from other nationalities (Jeffery 2021).

UCH AT THE INTERNATIONAL SEABED AUTHORITY (ISA)

Tangible Cultural Heritage

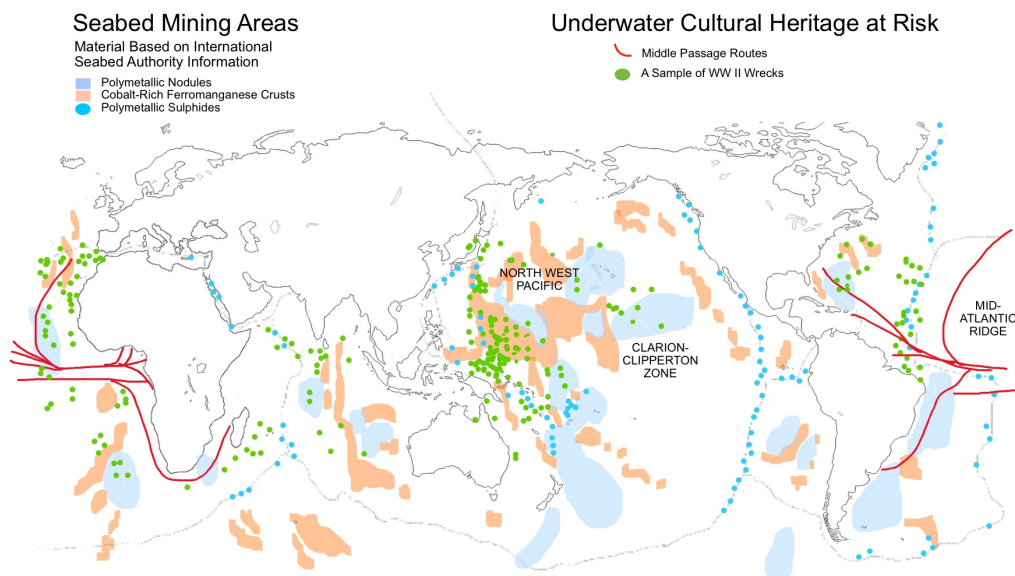
DSM operations that interact with tangible UCH will destroy such heritage (shipwrecks, human remains, or archaeological artefacts) by removing it from the seafloor and processing it in a machine before discharge. Current ISA exploration and draft exploitation regulations are **not** sufficiently protective of UCH. The definition of protected sites focuses only on human remains (DR35), which is too narrow and the process by which contractors must identify, report, and avoid damaging UCH is incomplete. It does not require consultations with independent experts or all relevant stakeholders (DR35). Moreover, the regulations do not require the real time monitoring of operations, and transmission of relevant data, that would enable identification of tangible UCH in a way which enables operations to be suspended to protect that heritage. It fails to acknowledge the rights of indigenous peoples, under international law, to have a say on matters that impact their cultural practices and traditional knowledge.

Intangible Cultural Heritage

DSM will also affect intangible cultural heritage. In one specific example, noise from DSM has the potential to negatively impact local practices, such as shark calling, as well as the migration of whales– which have cultural importance to many people globally. Concerns have also been raised about DSM's interactions with some cultures' understanding of responsibility to the ocean or special regard for the deep ocean. Such conversations have not found a place in regulatory development at the ISA. Thus, the voices of some stakeholders are not being heard, including those of Indigenous Peoples, who have a right to opine on matters that affect their cultural practices and traditional knowledge.

ISA PROCEEDINGS WOULD BENEFIT FROM INVOLVEMENT OF UCH EXPERTS FROM MEMBER STATES

The natural world and the cultural world are intertwined, and we need to protect both through integrated management. For example, in the U.S., Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument became first mixed natural; cultural UNESCO World Heritage Site in the U.S. and other sites can follow suit in order to ensure adequate protection of ocean heritage. ISA-27 Part II included calls for further recognition of UCH at the ISA, and that the Secretariat proactively seek out UCH stakeholders. Leads of Ministries of Culture, Archaeological Programs, or others focused on UCH may benefit from being made aware of, and invited into, discussions around DSM, including the drafting of regulations, standards, and guidelines occurring in Kingston.



Map of seabed mineral resources (Based on ISA 2021) with a small selection of UCH at risk also shown. Orange dots show only a small amount of the WW II wrecks in endangered zones. Only a few points in the CCZ are known with certainty, owing to the fact that it is largely unexplored. Red shows voyage routes and deaths on the Middle Passage. Intangible UCH is too vast to be shown here.

The presentation of the material in this fact sheet was made possible by a variety of publications and resources. For further reading and a list of sources see: <https://oceanfdn.org/underwater-cultural-heritage/>. The Ocean Foundation's understanding of UCH and DSM is evolving; comments and knowledge sharing are welcome.

oceanfdn.org | info@oceanfdn.org | +1 202-318-3178

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Further Resources

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