

Ecuador's Underwater Heritage

By William Gene Seliger – September 2009

Ecuador has a fascinating history and played an important role in the colonization of South America. The Pacific Ocean was South America's only link to Europe and all the supplies the colonists needed to survive in the new world arrived on ships. The colonists robbed the natives of their treasures and mined others and sent them back to Europe on the same ships.

Nearly all of the ships which traveled the Pacific coast were built in the shipyards of Guayaquil. Needless to say, hundreds of these ships met disaster along the way by sinking in storms, striking reefs, faulty construction and during battles with other ships. The colonists recovered whatever was possible off these wrecks, but many were unreachable or were quickly buried by sediment and were soon forgotten about. These shipwrecks and the artifacts they contain have lain forgotten for hundreds of years.



Very little research has been undertaken in Ecuador to discover these lost ships. Lack of public interest and limited funds are probably the main reasons for this. Today, most of the ships cargos remain buried under sand and sediment or lying on the seafloor and are subject to degradation by the sea water, currents, and fishing boats.

In 1997 a law was written in Ecuador which gave privately funded companies limited permission to search for and recover artifacts from colonial galleons in Ecuador's territorial waters. This led to the discovery of several colonial shipwrecks. Numerous artifacts were recovered, conserved and were divided between the salvors and el Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural. Many of these artifacts were put on display and can be seen in the maritime museum in Salinas. The rest were locked away in a vault in Banco Central where they are said to remain today.

In July of 2008, while rewriting the constitution of Ecuador, President Correa, under pressure from UNESCO, signed a new decree which put an end to all privately funded marine archeology. This decree followed UNESCO guidelines and it was decided that leaving the wrecks untouched in the water would be Ecuador's new approach on how to deal with marine cultural goods.

Article 3 "In-situ preservation of the underwater cultural heritage should be considered the first priority before authorizing or undertaking activities directed to that heritage. If in-situ preservation is not possible, its extraction will be carried out according to the presidential rules."

Article 3. La preservación in situ del patrimonio cultural subacuático deberá considerarse la opción prioritaria antes de autorizar o emprender actividades dirigidas a ese patrimonio. De no ser posible la preservación in situ, su extracción se realizará de conformidad con el presidente Reglamento.

The decision to end all marine archeology projects in Ecuador was made by our tax paid government officials, el Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural, and their friends and colleagues at UNESCO; the decision makes absolutely no sense. How can we justify to our future generations that we, in our time, with our technology, left all known wrecks lying on the seafloor to rot rather than recover them, conserve the artifacts they contain, and document the information and history they held? If a wreck is so important and valuable that it needs protection from professional archeologists, shouldn't it somehow be protected from the harsh undersea environment as well? The artifacts which were recovered while the law permitted salvage will still exist hundreds of years from now, in private collections and museums; the artifacts that are still lying on the seabed in-situ will be lost forever.

Privately funded companies, at their expense, had been doing research, search, and salvage of shipwrecks in Ecuador under contractual agreements with the Ecuadorian government and with the on-site participation of Patrimonio Cultural, and the Ecuadorian Navy for nearly twenty years. Under those contracts, the companies got 50% of the recoveries and the Ecuadorian government got 50%. Now, the government has implemented this new law stopping all that work; they have even gone so far as to retroactively enforce parts of the law, in conflict with legal contracts under which the private companies had been working for many years, depriving the salvors of their legally entitled share of the recoveries for which they expended years of effort and enormous sums of money. Nearly everything we know about colonial sailing vessels and most of what we know about our maritime history as well as all the artifacts that we have in our possession have been recovered and conserved by these private contractors with absolutely no cost to the people of Ecuador. No public tax payer money has ever been invested in these projects.

Most shipwreck sites in Ecuador have never been surveyed or monitored by the government officials to see the natural destruction of the wrecks by erosion, corrosion, looting, and by mechanical damage such as that caused by fishing trawlers. These bureaucrats think that letting the materials sit in the water and deteriorate (in-situ preservation) is the proper course of action to take rather than actually recovering the artifacts for study and setting up proper, land-based displays in museums. How can the people of Ecuador, the rightful owners of these artifacts ever see them if they are left in-situ?

“IN-SITU” PRESERVATION

Here is an example of “in-situ” preservation. On the left, a coin as it was placed on a ship in 1800; on the right, an identical coin after “in-situ” preservation for 208 years.



Other examples of “in-situ” preservation:

The image below shows is what is left of a copper cooking pot and an olive jar after 325 years of “in-situ” preservation



This is what is left of a rectangular tin ingot after 325 years of “in-situ” preservation



The photo below is what is left of an anchor after over 300 years of “in-situ” preservation. As you can see, the iron has completely rusted away, leaving only a void surrounded by encrustation. The first fishing net that snags it, or the first storm that moves it around will break it into small pieces of encrustation that will blend with the sediment on the ocean bottom and it will be lost forever. Salvaging and preserving such artifacts BEFORE they reach this state is the only way for any future generations to ever see them.



According to article 3 of our new presidential decree which was mandated in July of 2008, concerning Maritime Cultural Heritage, under the political constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, “the State has a fundamental responsibility to protect the cultural and natural heritage of our country.”

Que al amparo del Art. 3 numeral 3 de la Constitución Política de la República, el Estado tiene como deber primordial defender el patrimonio natural y cultural del país

Leaving shipwrecks and the artifacts they contain to deteriorate on the sea floor is certainly not protecting them. Every year countless artifacts are dragged across the seabed by fishing nets and countless other treasures are eroded and degraded by the galvanic action of the sea.

Some artifacts have been lost or destroyed by poor conservation and experimental conservation, but this is true with any new type of conservation. Needless to say, university educated archeologists as well as amateur archeologists are both guilty of destroying a few artifacts. We consider this a very small price to pay for the massive amount of information gleaned from these treasures. I have personally seen buckets of iron artifacts which were turned in to Patrimony, dried out, cracked, and disintegrating because of improper handling and lack of resources. After over 20 years of working with private salvage companies, The Guayaquil office of Patrimony Cultural still has no conservation laboratory; Guayaquil has always been one of the most important cities on the South American continent in regards to seafaring and it is unthinkable that the government hasn't spent the time or money to set up a proper maritime history conservation laboratory. Before any salvage was ever undertaken, a proper conservation laboratory should have been set up jointly between the salvors and Patrimony.

According to article 10 of the new presidential decree “The removal from the country of Ecuador or the commercialization of items that are recovered by the activities related to underwater cultural heritage is prohibited, by the terms of the Law of Cultural Heritage”

Queda prohibido, en los términos de la Codificación de la Ley de Patrimonio Cultural, la salida del Ecuador, o la comercialización de los bienes que se extraigan como producto de las actividades dirigidas al patrimonio cultural subacuático.

Shipwreck projects are expensive; archival research, work vessels, remote sensing equipment, remote-operated-vehicles, excavation equipment, dive equipment, fuel, and salaries are just some of the expenses incurred. Most long-term marine archeological projects spend millions of dollars every year. The sad fact is that our government just doesn't have the funds to sponsor these types of projects, and leaving them lying on the ocean floor is clearly not acceptable. The only realistic option available is to rescue these important time capsules from permanent destruction by using private companies who are willing to work under supervision from government archeologists, using investor money to fund the projects. In return for the millions of dollars spent recovering artifacts, a division of common, non-unique trade goods is a necessity.

Colonial ships generally traveled back and forth along the coast picking up and delivering trade goods. These items were intended to be traded or sold upon arrival at their destination. Some examples of trade goods are coins, ceramics, cloth, silver and gold items such as silverware and jewelry, weapons, and even small religious medallions and beads. Coins are probably the most common artifacts found on

shipwrecks because non-organic objects survive far better than organic objects. Many objects such as wooden or cloth items are usually completely deteriorated and no trace of them remains. Colonial coins, known as Maququinas or Cobs, are all very similar and were never designed to be kept together as a collection; they were made only as a means of counting and transporting the precious metals to Spain. Most of the ones that made it to Spain and other countries were melted down and recast into proper coinage upon their arrival. It only seems logical that selling a small portion of these coins to private collectors and using the money earned to recover and conserve the countless other unique artifacts which could then be put in museums for the people of Ecuador to enjoy forever is the right thing to do.

I see nothing wrong with giving people a chance to own and treasure a piece of history. Holding something in your hand and reliving its history has a far greater effect on a person than just looking at it through a piece of glass. A large portion of all of the trade goods and also any rare or one-of-a-kind items obviously belong in public displays where they can be studied and enjoyed; but there is absolutely no reason for ordinary trade goods which can still be purchased today, to be hoarded by governments of countries where they were found. Many of these items were privately owned and were never destined for the countries who claim them today.



A display of artifacts recovered by private contractors working with government officials on display at the Maritime Museum in Salinas. These artifacts were recovered from the *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción* (The Capitana of the 1654 Armada) near Chanduy, Ecuador, and the *Santa Maria de la Consolación* near Santa Clara Island in the bay of Guayaquil. These artifacts have been professionally conserved and are no longer being destroyed by the sea. They are stable and will remain intact forever.

The Regulation of Exploration and Salvage of Shipwrecks violates the rights of the State regarding items of underwater heritage. The salvage without a methodological investigative process does not contribute to the scientific knowledge of the history of Ecuador, and contributes to the loss of the distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize the Ecuadorian culture, which renders the above-mentioned Executive Decree unjust.

Que por lo expuesto, el Reglamento de Exploración y Rescate de Naves Naufragadas vulnera el derecho de propiedad del Estado sobre los bienes patrimoniales subacuáticos, al regular una extracción sin un proceso investigativo metodológico que no aporta al conocimiento científico de la historia del Ecuador, que genera la pérdida de los rasgos distintivos, espirituales, materiales,

intelectuales y afectivos que caracterizan a la sociedad ecuatoriana, lo que hace injustificada la vigencia del mencionado Decreto Ejecutivo.

Proper archeology is obviously very important when excavating any site from our past. Trying to determine the cause of the shipwreck and other factors leading to the destruction of the ship are as important as actually recovering artifacts for proper analysis in land based laboratories. Many sites, such as one recently discovered in Manabi, are buried under several meters of mud and at the mouth of a river where it is literally impossible to do anything under water except for feel around and take anything found to the surface to identify it. Shipwrecks are also adversely affected by storms, tides, currents, and fishermen's nets, and wreck sites change daily. Most ships wreck in shallow water or on reefs and their cargos are strewn over large areas. Hundreds of years of storms further spread the remains of the ship and its cargo. It is virtually impossible to say what really happened at the time the ship sank. And most "shipwrecks" are little more than huge scatter trails of artifacts some extending many miles.

Employing marine archeologists is important, but most have very little actual experience working on wreck sites, and since most shipwrecks are so spread out, they can do little that a common sport diver can not do.

Marine Archeologist Robert Marx says "There are less than 250 so-called professional underwater archaeologists worldwide and less than a dozen of those work on full time projects. This means that most marine archeologists work a few weeks on a wreck or submerged settlement in the summer and then sit at a desk the rest of the year studying their findings or lack of findings."

With the shortage of qualified, degree-holding marine archeologists it is clear that many of these projects can be carried out by experienced amateur archeologists. The majority of people that are actually interested in marine archeology are amateurs, so-called because they hold no degree in archeology. Yet they undertake more field work and laboratory research and publish more reports on their findings than do the limited number of professionals. Many of them have extensive experience working on projects. In an underwater excavation, many non-academics also contribute specialized skills such as advanced diving techniques, surveying, drafting, or photography which they learned in pursuit of other vocations in which degree holding archeologists have no experience.

Marine archeologist Robert Marx says the following regarding the State of Florida's Archeology program: "Despite the State of Florida having full time underwater archaeologists employed since the year 1960 and having the unique opportunity of publishing a vast amount of archaeological data in reports and monographs on all of the shipwrecks salvaged, the artifacts and treasure recovered and preserved in their own laboratory in Tallahassee, THEY HAVEN'T PUBLISHED ONE REPORT, OR ANYTHING SIMILAR. This is absolutely criminal. As an example during my three and a half year excavation of the Sunken City of Port Royal I published 68 huge reports with hundreds of facts and data, as well as illustrations, graphs, plot charts, etc. That's what underwater archaeology is all about, not people sitting at some desk getting paid to fabricate reasons that privately funded shipwreck salvage projects need to be terminated."

The stark reality of the situation is that, worldwide, there are literally hundreds of thousands of shipwrecks. If they are all left to "in-situ" preservation, they will continue to deteriorate until our future generations have NOTHING to study. If they are all excavated by government archaeologists funded by

governments, it will take thousands of years at the rate governments are funding projects now. Virtually everything of interest or value will be lost forever. Robert Marx says "there are over two million lost shipwrecks lying in-situ world wide". In the last 60 years since the advent of SCUBA equipment less than 100 shipwrecks have been salvaged in the US and most of those were in Florida." "There were 11 ships lost in the 1715 fleet, six of these have been salvaged and despite as many as 50 salvage vessels working on these wrecks each year in the 1960's-1980's they are still not completely salvaged. Of the 1200+ Spanish shipwrecks off Florida less than 30 have ever been located, let alone salvaged."

Until some kind of an agreement with the government can be reached in Ecuador and worldwide, the regrettable and unnecessary loss of valuable historical and archeological information will be the inevitable result of government's unwillingness to work with the private sector.