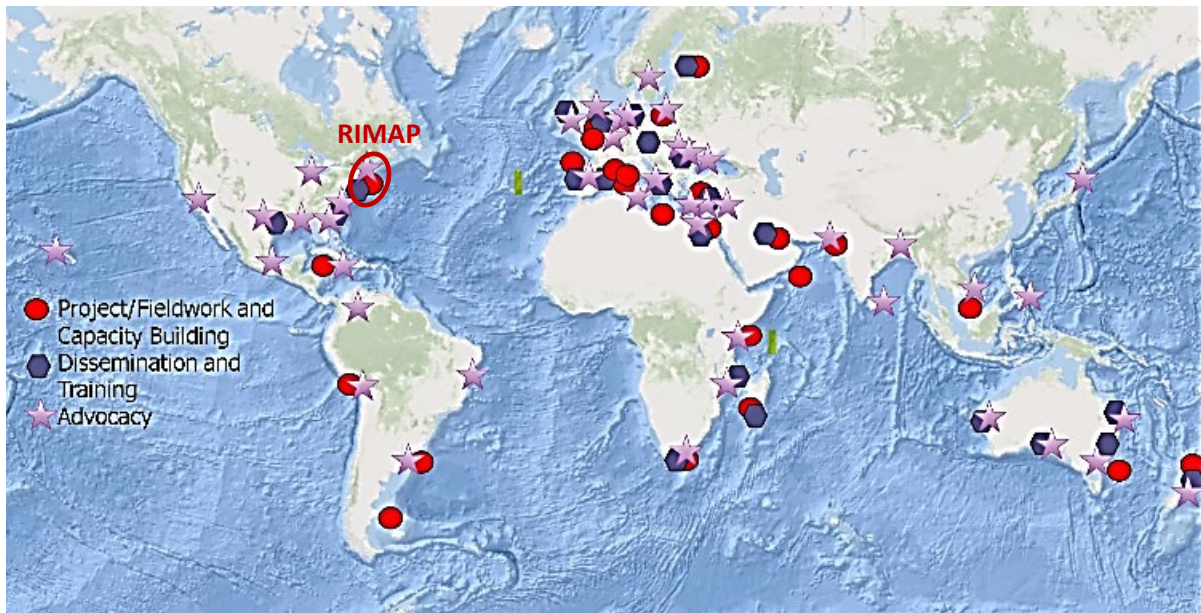


Report on the 2023 Meeting of States Parties to the 2001 UNESCO Convention of Underwater Cultural Heritage

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The Ninth session of the Meeting of States Parties to the 2001 Convention took place on June 12th and 13th in the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. There are 71 countries who have ratified the 2001 convention, and each country had two representatives; however, not all countries were in attendance for the entirety of the meeting. Alongside the 71 countries, there were many visitors and guests in attendance which included the UNESCO accredited NGOs.

NGOs in attendance included: Maritime Archaeological Trust (Australia), Centro Investigador del Sistema Acuifero de Quintana Roo A.C.(Mexico), Nautical Archaeological Society (United Kingdom), Institute of Nautical Archaeology (United States), Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology (Australia), Finnish Maritime Archaeology Association (Finland), Albaola Itsas Kultur Faktoria (Spain), International Council on Monuments and Sites (France), Society for Historical Archaeology (United States), Maritime Archaeology Sea Trust (United Kingdom), and, of course, Rhode Island Marine Archaeology Project (United States). Also in attendance were NGOs awaiting accreditation such as Maritime Archaeology and Heritage Institute (Pakistan), Ocean Foundation (United States), and National Monuments Services (Ireland). UNESCO accredited NGOs had representation from Mexico, Finland, Ireland, Australia, England, Pakistan, France, South America, The United States, and Canada. The United States had the most accredited NGOs followed by the United Kingdom and Australia.



A Map of projects being done by UNESCO Accredited NGOs. RIMAP appears to be the only US group that supports all three UNESCO Convention missions.

The ninth session began by electing the President who would stand as the acting president for two years. The elected president was one of the two chairs of Poland, Mariusz Lewicki . Each

country that ratified the 2001 convention was allowed to have two chairs present for convention meetings. Following the election of the President, the states parties adopted the agenda and then the meeting began. The first agenda item was to discuss the suspension of the Russian language and the Chinese language in future official UNESCO 2001 Convention meetings. The arguments stated by each side discussed the pros and cons of removing the Russian and Chinese languages. The reason for the proposed change was that no countries that speak those languages are currently a part of the UNESCO 2001 Convention, and, therefore, it would waste money to continue to support those languages. The main arguments against removing these two languages were to uphold multilingual meetings and to avoid limiting the languages used when discussing Underwater Cultural Heritage (UCH). The result of this discussion was to put this decision on hold until further notice. They spoke of continuing the discussions at the 10th meeting of the 2001 Convention.

After the results of the discussion surrounding the Russian and Chinese language suspension, the record of the prior meeting was adopted, and the Secretariat Report was discussed. These documents were sent around prior to the meeting and are also available online at: <https://en.unesco.org/events/ninth-session-meeting-states-parties-2001-convention>. The Secretariat Report stressed that UCH is at risk from many different fronts including climate change and fishing techniques such as trawling and explosives. To emphasize the importance of cultural heritage and the dangers that heritage sites face, the UNESCO 2001 convention is implementing training programs, is sponsoring an International Day of UCH held on November 2nd and is funding extra budgetary UCH projects. No specific projects were mentioned during the meeting. The secretariat also discussed different exploration techniques including looking at inland water bodies and using non-intrusive exploration methods.

The next topic was electing the new Science and Technology Advisory Board (STAB) president who was a representative from Mexico, Maria Helena Barba Meinecke. After this election, best archaeological and management practices were discussed. There were ten main best practices. The first was that an archaeological site must be a heritage site, meaning it is more than 100 years old and is classified as underwater heritage. Next, the site must be legally and practically protected. There must be responsible methods of access; there must be a strong effort to make sites available to the public, whether through tourism or a display of some sort. There must be sustainable management techniques in place. This management includes responsible, non-invasive access, awareness, protection, education, and visibility. The heritage site should promote the convention and support scientific research. These are all in place to maintain underwater cultural heritage.

When discussing the best practices, a board member brought up the topic of monitoring and reporting for each individual UCH site. These sites UCH sites are operated by countries that have ratified the 2001 convention and have been identified by UNESCO as UCH sites. It was not made clear whether or not there was a database of these sites. While there is not currently any monitoring in place, STAB would like to implement some sort of monitoring and reporting; however, obligatory reporting would be difficult as there are a lot of governmental processes involved. During this meeting, UCH sites from France, Mexico, and Spain were renewed; UCH

sites from Croatia, Italy, and Mexico were accepted; and sites from Portugal and Slovenia were archived, meaning they are still being seen as protected UCH sites but are no longer being actively studied. The newly implemented sites and renewed sites were chosen as sites that represent and fulfill best practices discussed by the convention.

In supporting these best practice sites, STAB hopes to step up visibility through the creation of databases and other online resources and to create a stronger connection between archaeology and other marine sciences. STAB discussed how including studies on water quality; animal life present and how it may affect cultural heritage sites; the impact of fishing; and other marine sciences can be used in conjunction with archaeological studies to fulfil more sustainable development goals that are a part of the 2001 Convention.

The STAB report discussed current missions and projects that are in place and supported by STAB such as the Skerki project (Italy), Oyo Negro (Mexico), Lake Atitlán (Guatemala), and a heritage site in Paraguay. New missions were proposed by STAB which included conserving La Isabela, a colony founded by Christopher Columbus in 1492; enlarging the geographic scope of the work being done by STAB; and asking countries to put forward new proposals for missions. The term mission in this case refers to projects being funded and supported by the 2001 UNESCO convention. Unfortunately these missions are only accepted if proposed by chair members from countries that have ratified the 2001 convention. While the US is not currently among the countries that have ratified the 2001 convention, there are plans to rejoin UNESCO, and hopefully in the future ratify the 2001 convention (Charlton and Lee).

During the 2023 meeting, archaeologists in South Africa approached STAB with a request for assistance. Having been denied a permit to conduct archaeological work on a sunken vessel of Chinese origin, the South African archaeologists reached out to STAB for a second opinion. STAB had not received such a request before. The South African archaeologists hoped STAB's support would allow them to continue their project. The project was to recover and repatriate artifacts from a sunken vessel of Chinese origin. After discussion of the project, STAB agreed that the archaeologists should not be allowed to go forward with the project and agreed with the denial of the permit. The main reason for denial is that they believed that the South African Archaeologists were attempting to treasure hunt and sell artifacts, and that given the ship was not South African property, as it was a Chinese vessel, they had no legal right to be on the ship in the first place.

After the STAB report, the NGOs gave their report. During this session, I was prepared to speak; however, only three individuals spoke on behalf of the accredited NGOs. One of the speakers was Chris Underwood President of the Accredited NGO Association who spoke over Zoom. The other two were from the Maritime Archaeology Trust and spoke on the database being created by the Accredited NGO Association. Brandon Mason of the Maritime Archaeology Trust, spoke about the database specifically and how it can be used to visualize the general location of various projects and NGOs. Garry Momber, also from the Maritime Archaeology Trust, discussed the website as a whole and the future goals of the NGO association. They reported on the goals of the accredited NGOs which are to work together to support the 2001 convention and to create visibility through an accessible database that showcases all the NGOs in

one place. On top of supporting the convention, the NGOs hope to make recreational and professional divers aware of cultural heritage sites and what to do in the case of discovering a cultural heritage site.

There is a push by both the countries that ratified the convention, and by the accredited NGO associations to help support NGOs in underrepresented areas such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America. To increase support for underrepresented areas, the accredited NGOs hope to make NGO work public, visible, and relevant. Part of the way they hope to do this is through increased public understanding of the connection between natural and cultural heritage; raising ocean literacy among the general population; and integrating UCH into marine environment assessments such as the discussions surrounding ocean trawling, deep sea mining, and potentially polluting wrecks.

Overall the main goals of the meeting were strengthening the visibility of UCH; expanding how people view and understand UCH; and creating a climate smart ecosystem focused on ethical and equitable management. The 2001 Convention emphasized that there must be a focus on sustainable management and protection of UCH in the face of climate change. They highlighted that some of the ways that NGOs can participate in these goals is to promote ocean literacy within our own organizations; continue following best practices; focus on diverse voices among the community; and promote sustainable archaeological practices.

Outside of the formal sessions of the 2001 convention meeting I was invited to eat lunch with other representatives of the accredited NGOs. During these lunch meetings we discussed the future of accredited NGOs as a unified organization. These discussions included continuing the work that was previously done on a website and database for the accredited NGOs. The website can be found here: <https://2001convention-uch.ngo/>. This website contains a database of current projects of NGOs; specialists and experts; and organizations that are accredited NGOs. During these lunches we spoke about the desire to expand the UNESCO accredited NGO group to NGOs that may not be focused solely on tangible underwater cultural heritage i.e. shipwrecks, weirs, and other physical historical sites. During these lunches I mentioned that many environmental NGOs see their environment and landscape as their own cultural heritage just as much as any physical site.

With these discussions there was also talk about expanding the accredited NGO network to less represented areas. Many of the NGOs come from the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and other European countries. While we did discuss the desire to support NGOs from underrepresented regions, none of us came up with a good way to do so. During our lunches many commented on the Polish chair and how he was very efficient and to the point. They also commented on the discussion that surrounded the Suspension of Russian and Chinese as official NGO languages for the 2001 convention. They pointed out that the only countries that seemed to be in support of maintaining the languages were other communist countries such as Cuba. It was an interesting discussion and while I listened to these discussions, I did not participate in them. At one point I commented that the proceedings seemed very political and was corrected by Peta who said it was bureaucratic.

While I was not asked much about RIMAP specifically, I was asked why I was chosen to represent RIMAP. I explained how I had been volunteering for RIMAP for 5 years and am involved in both field work and lab work, and I have a decent understanding of French and was available to attend the meetings. I explained to them that the entire organization, including our board of directors and founder, is entirely volunteer run and organized. This seemed to impress many other NGO representatives.

Outside of meetings and lunch we went out to get drinks and dinner. From the convention center we went to a streetside restaurant called Aux Ministeres. We talked about the proceedings of the day over a glass of wine. Many of the attendees knew each other from previous years, or like Peta Knott, the secretary of the NGO association and representative from Nautical Archaeology Society and Toni, representative from Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology were friends from grad school. Peta was also a student of Kieran, a diver representative from the Australian Maritime Museum who worked with RIMAP. Amanda Evans a representative from SHA and Toni Massi were very welcoming and made sure I was always included in dinner and drinks.

Our last evening I went out to dinner with Karl Brady (National Monument Services), Marc-Andre Bernier (Albaola Itsas Kultur Faktoria), Garry Momber (Maritime Archaeology Trust), Brandon Mason (Maritime Archaeology Trust), Vesa Saarinen (Maritime Archaeological Society of Finland), and Marnix Pieters, the Chairperson for the 13th Session of the Scientific Advisory Board Meeting. Much of the conversation revolved around work being done by individual organizations. Karl Brady asked me briefly about the search for the Endeavour. My response was that RIMAP has been working on many projects in Rhode Island, including looking at the transport vessels sunk in Newport Harbor, one of which could be the Endeavour. He asked if we believed we found the Endeavour. I told them that we do not feel comfortable identifying a specific vessel as the Endeavour and there is work to be done on other sites in the area. The conversation ended after that, and we went on to talk about non-archaeology related work such as how I was taking a photo of my dinner to send to my family.

Despite being a new organization, and a young member of the accredited NGO organization, I felt very welcome and immediately accepted into the group. We all exchanged information with hopes that we would stay in touch and hopefully meet again at future events whether UNESCO affiliated or archaeological.

Through RIMAP's presence at the Meeting of States Parties to the 2001 UNESCO Convention of Underwater Cultural Heritage, RIMAP continues to strengthen its international connections and presence, and RIMAP confirmed its commitment to best practices for its archaeological projects.

References

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