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Future challenges in European maritime science and technology

Committee Opinion[1]
Committee on Culture, Science and Education
Rapporteur: Mr Edward O'HARA, United Kingdom

A. Committee explanatory

The Committee on Culture and Education welcomes the opportunity to contribute an opinion to the debate on this subject and to recall the Assembly's ongoing interest in the underwater cultural heritage since the 1970s and Recommendation 848 (1978) adopted on the basis of a report by my compatriot John Roper.

Technology is the key to access to this underwater heritage. Until recently it was restricted to shallow waters, permitting access only to harbour structures and coastal wrecks. In the last few years however the technology has greatly advanced: underwater guidance and localisation can be provided by satellite (GPS); photogrammetry and computer-assisted interpretation save diving time; other techniques have been refined for removing sand and other debris and for lifting material; remotely-operated vehicles have no time limit to their operation. These technological advances now permit access to the hitherto unexplored deep-sea bed.

This is a significant change as it implies access to new material, to material that may well be far better preserved (unaffected by currents or exposed to teredo navalis or the sub-acqua diver), and to material in international waters not yet protected by international law or by restrictions on salvage.

The risk of commercial exploitation is great. So too is the danger of irreparable cultural loss. It should always be recalled that a wreck site is also a closed time capsule, and can therefore be of enormous historical importance.

All these points are illustrated by the attempts to recover material from the Titanic and the public interest and appetite aroused.

Unesco has at this moment relaunched efforts for drawing up an international convention on the underwater cultural heritage. This work is specifically aimed at the high seas and should be supported.

In order to draw Council of Europe attention to this aspect of the subject we have submitted a few further amendments to supplement the one reference made in the text proposed by the Committee on Science and Technology. We hope that they will be adopted by the Assembly.

Following the Round Table held in Lisbon on 31 August (an account of which is to be found in the document AS/Inf (1998) 9), and on the basis of the motion (Doc. 8055), the Committee on Culture and Education will develop the broad and varied subject of the maritime and fluvial cultural heritage in the course of the coming year as one of its main contributions to the forthcoming Council of Europe heritage campaign.

1. Doc. 7821 and Reference No. 2309 of 26 June 1998

In this joint debate on other matters relating to the oceans, it is also important to insist on the cultural dimension as being part of the multidisciplinary and international co-operation that must accompany management of the world's maritime resources. This point was well made in the statement adopted by the Assembly delegation and presented in Lisbon on 1 September.

Reporting committee: Committee on Science and Technology

Committee for opinion: Committee on Culture and Education

Reference to committee: Doc. 7821 and Reference No. 2309 of 26 June 1998

Opinion approved by the committee on 22 September 1998

Secretaries to the committee: Mr Ary, Mrs Theophilova-Permaul, Ms Kostenko