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## **A Future for Australian Maritime Archaeology?**

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### **Introduction**

For a small sub-discipline of archaeology, maritime archaeology seems to have had a relatively long and glorious history in Australia. Celebratory reviews or overviews of selected parts of the history of Australian maritime archaeology have been published fairly regularly since the 1986 appearance of Graeme Henderson's book *Maritime Archaeology in Australia* (Henderson 1986). These publications include two articles that were published in the pages of this journal (Hosty and Stuart 1994; McCarthy 1998). While there is obviously much to be celebrated about the history of maritime archaeology in Australia, a self-critical examination of the state of the sub-discipline with some ideas about where it might be going in the next two or three decades is, I suggest, a useful exercise as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In their 1994 review Hosty and Stuart presented an extended chronological but largely descriptive account of Australian maritime archaeology that focused on the growth and incorporation of maritime archaeology into cultural resource management (or 'heritage') studies and procedures (Hosty and Stuart 1994:9-14). Nevertheless, they also identified or reiterated some of the fundamental problems facing Australian maritime archaeology during the 1980s and early 1990s. These included the lack of undergraduate teaching in maritime archaeology, the lack of a strong theoretical base in maritime archaeology, the limited success of building links between maritime archaeology and historical archaeology, the failure to develop consistent national approaches to the shipwreck resource as well as posing the question - Where have the research programs gone?

Certainly some progress has been made since 1994 with regard to the undergraduate teaching of maritime archaeology, most notably at Flinders University and James Cook University (JCU). Furthermore, there is clear evidence of some increased links

between historical and maritime archaeology specifically in the form of the successful joint ASHA/AIMA conference in Tasmania (1995), the planned ASHA/AIMA conference for Adelaide in 2000, the AWSANZ (Archaeology of Whaling in Southern Australia and New Zealand) project and publication as well as the examples of collaborative work conducted in Western Australia cited by McCarthy (1998:35).

McCarthy provided a similarly celebratory overview of the early years of maritime archaeology in Australia. One major difference between the publications was the emphasis McCarthy placed on the publication in 1983 of *Shipwreck Anthropology* edited by Richard Gould. McCarthy suggested that for Australian maritime archaeology, *Shipwreck Anthropology* represented a 'philosophical watershed' and 'an alternative philosophical base on which to build upon the traditional foundations of Australian maritime archaeology' (McCarthy 1998:33). He also pointed to what he described as a 'fundamental set of interconnected weaknesses that mitigated against debate in maritime archaeology in Australia' (McCarthy 1998:33-34). Certainly anthropological approaches to maritime archaeology, whether processual or post-processual, have become more common in Australia during recent years (see Veth and McCarthy 1998; McCarthy forthcoming). Nevertheless, it must be said that at this time Australian maritime archaeology is still lacking theoretical sophistication.

The final two points raised by Hosty and Stuart about where the research programs have gone and the lack of consistency of national approaches to the shipwreck resource will be discussed further later in this paper.

Over the last two decades Australian maritime archaeology has been largely financially dependent on annual recurrent grants from the Commonwealth and State governments and, despite the occasional temporary reduction in Commonwealth funding, these sources have proved to be the mainstay for the vast majority of activities conducted. This paper presents the view that the future success of Australian maritime archaeology is largely dependent on having more people doing more things and that this will be largely dependent on increased levels of funding from more sources. Notwithstanding the on-going valuable work done by avocational (amateur) organisations such as the Maritime Archaeology Association of Victoria (MAAV) or Society for Underwater Historical Research (SUHR) and more recently by (largely unfunded) honours and postgraduate students, I contend that there needs to be a substantial increase in the number of maritime archaeologists who are able to make a full or part-time living within the profession.

## **The lack of job opportunities in Australian maritime archaeology**

There is no doubt that there has been a serious lack of newly created positions for maritime archaeologists in the last decade and there is no obvious sign that this situation may change in the short-term future.

After a period of growth in the number of positions for maritime archaeologists during the 1980s, the difficult economic conditions of the 1990s might, at first glance, be blamed for the poor job prospects experienced during the last decade. Closer examination of the situation, however, reveals that almost all of the qualified maritime archaeologists who are currently employed by museums or cultural heritage management agencies have been employed by their current organisation for at least a decade; indeed some maritime archaeologists have been in the same organisation for nearly three decades. Few have moved on to create new positions in other organisations or succeeded in establishing new junior positions within their own organisations. Furthermore a number of the incumbent maritime archaeologists have remained at the same level rather than experiencing the career progression that, in the normal course of events, would open opportunities at lower levels within their organisation. There are indications that at least some of the generation of maritime archaeologists who graduated in the 1980s have comfortably settled in for a long-term stay, possibly until retirement. One redeeming feature of the current situation is that at least some of the incumbents who were appointed in the 1970s will commence retirement during the next decade, thus opening opportunities for more recent graduates.

The current situation is particularly unfortunate as it parallels what happened in the universities where academic departments made most of their appointments during the 'golden years' in the 1960s and 1970s. As a result of tenure and a lack of available positions through the leaner 1980s and 1990s, very few or no new appointments were made and this situation is only now changing as that generation of older academics retire. Like academia, Australian maritime archaeology is showing signs of a 'lost generation' of bright young graduates from the 1990s who have become disillusioned with the lack of job opportunities and have drifted off into other employment.

A related point is the lack of opportunities in contract (consultancy) maritime archaeology. Despite attempts by maritime archaeologists to work as consultants in their field, it has proved almost impossible to make a full-time living without also

working in another sub-discipline of archaeology such as historical archaeology. In the short-term future it is difficult to see this changing, and, as a result, those who want to work as consultant maritime archaeologists are likely to be forced to do so on a part time basis only. Again this is particularly unfortunate in the light of the solid and sustained growth in the Australia economy that is currently occurring. One of the consequences of this economic growth will be increased pressure on underwater and maritime archaeological heritage along the Australian coastline and inland waterways. The economic growth is likely to result in new development – new port facilities, marinas, dredging, the construction of power stations and even global warming and sea level change will threaten the maritime archaeological resource. Whether this translates into increased levels of consultancy work in maritime archaeology is very much in the hands of the underwater cultural heritage managers.

### **The role of the Commonwealth government**

In 1995 I was part of a consultancy team that undertook the development of the National Historic Shipwrecks Research Plan (HSNRP) for the Commonwealth government. In addition to making recommendations about the future directions that National Historic Shipwrecks Research might take, this study identified some of the problems faced by the National Historic Shipwrecks Program including those created by operating the program at a State level through such philosophically divergent organisations as museums and cultural heritage management agencies (Edmonds et al 1995). It is in this context that Hosty and Stuart's comment about the lack of a consistent national approach to the shipwreck resource can best be appreciated (see also Staniforth 1993). Unfortunately the Commonwealth has made very little visible progress towards solving this problem, and there are still dramatically different approaches to the National Historic Shipwrecks Program taken by the individual states and their agencies. Perhaps more importantly, the HSNRP report recommended a significant increase in the level of Commonwealth funding to the states which has not been implemented to date. Unfortunately the HSNRP report has never been published, it is not publicly available and like so many consultancy reports that contain unpalatable recommendations about increased government funding it has largely been left to collect dust on the shelves.

The appointment of the Commonwealth Historic Shipwrecks Officer (HSO) on an approximately three yearly cycle has been interesting to watch over the past two decades. The cynical view (perhaps generated by watching too many episodes of 'Yes Minister') would suggest that the relevant Commonwealth government agency has a

conscious policy of appointing someone to the position who knows nothing of the subject area, and then allowing them to remain in that position for only three years. Once the individual begins to develop knowledge, appreciation or support for maritime archaeology, then they are moved sideways or promoted. Certainly the most recent in this cycle of appointments has clearly demonstrated to me that recent qualifications in maritime archaeology, long-standing experience as an underwater cultural resource manager or employment as a maritime archaeologist in a related Commonwealth agency is not, and is unlikely ever to be, sufficient to tip out an 'insider' Canberra bureaucrat.

At the Commonwealth government level another important factor that stifles the further development of Australian maritime archaeology is the very thing that created so many of the job opportunities for maritime archaeologists in the 1980s - the Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act* 1976. The legislation is seriously dated and in urgent need of a complete rewrite (see Staniforth 1999) and the focus on 'historic shipwrecks' is stifling further developments in the wider field of maritime archaeology. As Hosty and Stuart (1994) have quite rightly suggested: 'Maritime archaeology in Australia has evolved to cover virtually any underwater archaeology' and point to Sarah Kenderdine's valuable work on the Murray-Darling River system as an example (Hosty and Stuart 1994:9; Kenderdine 1993, 1994). Nevertheless the legislative base, certainly at the Commonwealth level, and therefore the *raison d'être* for many maritime archaeological units as well as most of their work in Australia remains focused firmly on 'historic shipwrecks'. As a result much of the funding (including virtually all of the available Commonwealth funding) and therefore most of the staff time is devoted to the documentation and interpretation of 'historic shipwrecks'.

### **Not-for-profit and community-based organisations**

There has always been the potential for the Australian Institute for Maritime Archaeology (AIMA) to operate in a similar manner to the 'Not-for-profit' foundations established in the USA, such as the Institute for Nautical Archaeology (INA), Ships of Discovery, the Rhode Island Maritime Archaeology Project (RIMAP) or the Pan-American Institute for Maritime Archaeology (PIMA). Australian maritime archaeology has had limited success in obtaining money to create foundations or not-for-profit organisations. The best examples of this have been the establishment of the *Pandora* Foundation that, unfortunately, has not been translated into positions for maritime archaeologists; and the National Centre for Excellence in

Maritime Archaeology that has been very largely government funded and is currently facing an uncertain financial future. Unfortunately funding for AIMA has always proved a problem as Australia in general doesn't have the tradition of philanthropy or the tax advantages that exist in the USA. Nevertheless, 'Not-for-profit' organisations can survive, if not prosper, in Australia - note the example of AUSHeritage, and therefore are likely to provide opportunities for creative maritime archaeology graduates with an interest in public education.

Clearly the support of an informed public and increasing levels of community-based activity in the maritime archaeological field is crucial. In this respect one of the important advances in Australian maritime archaeology during the last few years has been the introduction of the AIMA/NAS Training program (Moran and Staniforth 1998; Smith 2000). One of the few 'new' opportunities in maritime archaeology in recent years is the currently part-time appointment of an AIMA National Training Officer (AIMA/NAS Training newsletter Nos. 1, 2, 3 & 4).

### **Education in maritime archaeology**

There is no question that the teaching of maritime archaeology at tertiary level has progressed considerably since Hosty and Stuart wrote in 1994 that 'Surprisingly no university has sought to include maritime archaeology as part of their undergraduate teaching although it would no doubt be a popular course' (Hosty and Stuart 1994:13). McCarthy pointed out the long-standing bias in Australian terrestrial archaeology towards 'prehistory' and suggested that 'the opportunity to forge the required academic links with university-based archaeology in Australia had been lost in the 1970s' (McCarthy 1998:34). Despite this gloomy pronouncement, McCarthy clearly recognised that changes were taking place during the last few years of the 1990s, most notably with the 1996 intake of the Postgraduate Diploma in Maritime Archaeology at Curtin University. This has since been supplemented by the new undergraduate teaching and postgraduate research in maritime archaeology being conducted at the Departments of Archaeology at James Cook University (JCU) in Townsville and Flinders University in Adelaide. The teaching of maritime archaeology at undergraduate level in a way that is fully integrated into Archaeology degrees has started to clearly demonstrate both the academic acceptability of maritime archaeology and its on-going popularity with students.

One future area of growth in Australian maritime archaeology has to be the possibility of the expansion of teaching of maritime archaeology at tertiary level.

Archaeology is taught in virtually every state of Australia and there is no reason why maritime archaeology could not be integrated into the curriculum of virtually every Department of Archaeology. The intention here is not to produce large numbers of graduates who go on to work as maritime archaeologists or underwater cultural heritage managers, although it is likely that some will have the initiative, drive and imagination to create positions for themselves. Instead, it is to ensure that every student who does an archaeology topic in first year and goes on to complete a BA - usually in history, geography, or something else, which is where the vast majority of students end up - has, at least, heard of maritime archaeology. Furthermore that those relatively few who go on to complete an honours degree in Archaeology, thus becoming qualified to work as archaeologists, are reasonably familiar with, and perhaps even supportive of, maritime archaeology and not, as McCarthy has suggested, affected by the 'disinterest and/or disdain that their tutors and lecturers had for the subject' (McCarthy 1998:34).

### **The future of research in Australian maritime archaeology**

Hopefully, existing programs and projects such as the *Pandora* Foundation at the Museum of Tropical Queensland and the National Centre for Excellence in Maritime Archaeology at the WA Maritime Museum represent the best opportunities for the future of research in maritime archaeology in Australia. These museums have the existing collections, facilities and expertise to foster significant amounts of scholarly research and publication in Australian maritime archaeology. The ways in which these organisations link with their local University will be a measure of how successful their research programs become in the medium to long-term future.

One of the best 'new' opportunities for funding research in Australian maritime archaeology comes in the form of funding available through the Australian Research Council (ARC) and from other funding sources such as Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) scholarships. These sources are already being tapped for projects like AWSANZ and to support the research conducted at Universities by academic staff and postgraduate students. Furthermore Government policy in this area is pushing the Universities towards 'collaborative' research with 'Industry' which in this context means museums and cultural heritage management agencies. The SPIRT program, for example, which funds postgraduate and post-doctoral scholarships as well as other collaborative research is one area of considerable potential for funding maritime archaeological research.



## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have suggested that there has been a serious lack of newly created positions for maritime archaeologists in the last decade and there is no obvious sign that this situation may change in the short-term future. I have argued that there needs to be a substantial increase in the number of maritime archaeologists who are able to make a full or part-time living within the profession. Seriously dated Commonwealth legislation, a complacent bureaucracy and a serious lack of creativity and imagination among some of the current practitioners do not help this situation.

It is suggested that several areas of opportunity exist that may provide a better and brighter future for Australian maritime archaeology. These include the establishment of 'Not-for-profit' organisations to conduct maritime archaeological research, the expansion of public education through the AIMA/NAS Training program and positions such as the AIMA National Training Officer, increased teaching of maritime archaeology at the undergraduate level and University funding sources such as the ARC, APA and SPIRT schemes for funding maritime archaeological research.

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