

Namibia Underwater Cultural Heritage: Country Report

15 March 2017

Introduction

Namibia is famous for shipwrecks along the skeleton coast among other major attractions as such the country is striving to protect this heritage ,the existing law on heritage partially protect shipwrecks older than 35 years upon declaration by the Minister. In 2011 Namibia ratified the 2001 UNESCO convention on the protection of underwater cultural heritage. Challenges in technical and legal integration of the convention still face the country but we look forward with great positive optimism in protection of underwater cultural heritage in the country.

Competent authorities

The National Museum of Namibia and National Heritage Council of Namibia are the two competent authorities in charge of protecting Namibia underwater cultural heritage. The Mission is to provide leadership role on the African continent in research and scholarship (maritime / underwater heritage) through promoting an understanding of Namibia's history and maritime heritage within a global perspective.

Objective

The overarching objective is to present and promote Namibia's underwater heritage through conservation, explaining the cultural significance of the Oranjemund shipwreck in the history of Namibia and the world at large. Six objectives of the National Museum underwater cultural heritage department are to provide diverse local and international audiences with the best quality underwater heritage experience and optimum access to Namibia's shipwreck and maritime heritage collections physically and digitally. • To be acknowledged and respected internationally as the world's leading museum of African maritime and underwater heritage and shipwrecks. • To promote, develop and contribute to the Namibia heritage sector economy by leading the field in debate, inspiring researchers, scholars, curators, heritage managers and stimulating enjoyment and appreciation of Namibian heritage. • To transfer and disseminate information on the shipwreck discovery including temporal and travelling exhibition locally and internationally • To encourage immediate and long term human resources capacity building including qualifying training of personnel. • To establish a modern world-class museum, with an architectural compatibility to its socio-economic context, that will operate with financial and organizational initiative, sustainability and efficiency through its life cycle

Historical Background

Namibia is a country located in South West Africa, in the past the country has been inhabited by Khoisan people some living along the country `s perennial rivers, earlier archaeological evidence by Dr Jill Kinahan at the Kuiseb river mouth along the local settlements indicate a healthy exchange of

goods existed between Europeans and local people in the 18 and 19 centuries. Cape Cross was the last point Diego Cao reached South before return back in the 15th century. Namibia has several perennial rivers, permanent rivers and deep inland lakes. All these water bodies exist within thriving groups of people in the country who have interacted with them for thousands of years and these remain untapped source of underwater cultural heritage. Namibia had been colonised by German in late 19th century and South Africa at the end of the First World War.



Eduard Bolen one of the famous shipwrecks on the Namibian shores

Existing Legal Document on Underwater cultural Heritage.

Namibia has existing laws concerning shipwrecks. The National heritage Act number 27 of 2004 Section number 27 states that:

"(1) The remains of all ships that have been situated on the coast or in the territorial waters or the contiguous zone of Namibia for 35 years or more are historic shipwrecks for the purposes of this section. (2) All articles that have been situated on the coast or in the territorial waters or the contiguous zone of Namibia for 35 years or more and that were associated with ships are historic shipwreck objects for the purposes of this section. (3) The Minister may, by notice in the Gazette, declare that (a) subsection (1) does not apply to the remains or part of the remains, of a particular ship or class of ships; or (b) subsection (2) does not apply to any specified article or class of articles. (4) If the Council proposes to recommend to the Minister (a) under section 28, that (i) a place where the remains of a ship are located be declared a protected place; or (ii) an article associated with a ship be declared a protected object; or (b) under section 41 that a provisional protection order be made in relation to a place where an article or articles appearing to be the remains of a ship are located. the Council must obtain and submit to the Minister, together with the Council's report and recommendation, any comments or advice which the Minister responsible for fisheries and marine resources may wish to make or give in relation to the proposed declaration".

This in short is the complete legal document that exists on the protection of underwater cultural heritage.

According to the legal document above shipwrecks that are older than 35 years are regarded as historic shipwrecks and may be forfeited to the state if they are not claimed by their owners and declared as such by a declaration by the minister. In 2015 a developer was awarded a tender to construct an oil tanker terminal this included dredging and deepening a channel to be used by oil

tanker ships. During preliminary survey they discovered three boats dating from the 1980s that were thought to possess cultural value based on the 35 year historic shipwreck clause. As such a Heritage impact was carried out.

However this existing law does not give full protection to underwater cultural heritage, thus Namibia was encouraged to ratify the 2001 convention in order to fully protect shipwrecks and other underwater cultural heritage in the lakes, river and sea.

Lake Otjikoto is a natural sinkhole located in the central part of Namibia near the town of Tsumeb, the lake is regarded as of immense cultural value since it has sustained the local Khoisan people for thousands of year. In the recent past the German colonial forces scuttled hundreds of canons and ammunitions in the lake during the First World War having faced defeat against the British-South African forces in 1915. 2015 marked a centenary since the event thus officially the site qualifies to be protected by the UNESCO 2001 Convention on the protection of underwater cultural heritage.

Steps towards integrating the convention statutes

The first creative arts and culture conference was held in Namibia Windhoek in April 2015 the first of its kind. Experts in the field of arts and culture from around the world and within Namibia met to discuss new ideas and current ones with the aim of drafting an effective arts and culture policy at the end of the conference. Among other thing the conference deliberated on the need to have the UNESCO 2001 convention statutes integrated into the existing Heritage Act. Up to date 2017 we still await this integration.



Arts and Culture conference, April 2015.

Namibia is littered with thousands of shipwrecks on its coast and thousands of tourist flock to the country to see this, thus there is a growing need for legislature that would protect this untamed heritage even among stake holders.

The discovery of the Oranjemund shipwreck was a turning point for Namibia. It became clear that the country's maritime environment is rich with historic shipwreck of enormous cultural value such as the Portuguese Nau *Bom Jesus* that was discovered in 2008.

Against this background the Namibian government realised that it was high time to ratify the 2001 convention, the convention will help guide the country to adopt and implement best practices in underwater cultural heritage.

Conservation

The Oranjemund shipwreck is envisioned as an institution for research in conservation of underwater cultural heritage as such the government of the republic of Namibia with the help of the American ambassadors funds purchased conservation laboratory equipment to equip the conservation facility with the much needed conservation tools and chemicals.



Professor Andreas Hauptmann from Deutsches Bergbau-Museum Bochum in German; a world renown Archaeo-Mettallugist.

Research

Namibian is open to outside institution willing to do research on Namibia's underwater cultural heritage are welcome, several of these have carried out research on the Oranjemund shipwreck 16th century Copper ingots and African Ivories. MoU with Portugal to

cooperate on the Oranjemund shipwreck exists.

Work on the conservation of the Oranjemund shipwreck is ongoing and the country committed to conserve the historic shipwreck and display it in a museum at a later stage, underwater cultural remains from elsewhere is brought for conservation at this world class facility. AS a best practice many underwater cultural heritage will be conserved in-situ.



Large Anchors undergoing desalination at

Oranjemund Shipwreck Museum (photo Eliot Mowa 2017)

Namibia continues to honour its membership to the convention by regular attendance to meetings and training organised by UNSECO and other stake holder aimed towards the protection of underwater cultural heritage.

Challenges

Human capacity particularly in conservation is still a challenge the country is facing, so far one maritime archaeologist is overseeing all underwater cultural heritage research and project in the country however the country does not have a conservator of heritage objects. Little progress has been made in getting staff trained and more is needed to have professionals to handle recovered underwater cultural heritage objects that are stored in the museum.

I can't emphasise this enough, the 2001 UNESCO convention law will have to be adopted in the order fully protect the country's underwater cultural heritage.

Mowa Eliot

Maritime Archaeologist

Email:esmowa@gmail.com

Mobile/WhatsApp: +264812066372

Namibia.