

# PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT OF UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE (UCH) FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE PACIFIC



## POLLUTION AND DEBRIS

### KEY POINTS

- Pacific SIDS have a strong cultural connection to the sea which is manifested in tangible and intangible cultural heritage, including UCH.
- There are over 4,000 known underwater cultural heritage sites in the Pacific islands region, ranging from shipwrecks to traditional fishing technologies and more.
- UCH protection for sustainable development via small-scale [fisheries](#) at traditional fish weirs/ponds as well as safe and environmentally responsible [tourism](#) is a global issue addressed by the Convention for the Protection of UCH, adopted in 2001 by UNESCO to complement the provisions in UNCLOS for strengthening UCH protection.
- At present, no Pacific SIDS are parties to the UCH Convention, which can provide international cooperation mechanisms and information sharing networks.
- Pacific SIDS must strengthen their capacity to protect and manage UCH for sustainable development by developing a policy strategy with disaster risk reduction measures to manage risks including, *inter alia*, unexploded ordinance, [pollution](#) by oil spills from WW II-related UCH, and pressures including [deep sea mining](#), looting, and recreational diving that may impact environments, livelihoods, and the safety of communities and visitors.

### HOW ISSUE LINKS TO/IMPACTS SDGs BEYOND **SDG14 LIFE BELOW WATER**

- SDG8: decent work and economic growth is possible via a sustainable tourism industry
- SDG 4.7: all learners must acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development.
- SDG 11.4: efforts must be strengthened to protect the world's cultural and natural heritage.
- SDG 14.5 and SDG 14.7, including implementation of UNCLOS.

### BACKGROUND

1. **Marine and coastal sites hold cultural information.** Underwater cultural heritage (UCH), undisturbed in situ, is often better preserved than land-based cultural heritage, holding invaluable information for historians, archaeologists, and scientists to reconstruct past culture. The UNESCO Convention for the Protection of UCH aims to protect UCH from being commercially exploited for trade or speculation.
2. **Much UCH in the Pacific islands is still unknown or unstudied.** The Pacific UCH Programme was launched at the first Pacific UCH Workshop held in Solomon Islands in 2009. *UCH in Oceania*<sup>1</sup> presents an overview of UCH in the Pacific spanning the history from the Stone Age to the Atomic Era. Diverse UCH ranging from traditional fish weirs, ships of explorers, and WW II related wrecks showcase strong connection to culture and identity. UNESCO assists Pacific SIDS to build capacity through workshops and the UNESCO University Twinning and Networking (UNITWIN) programme for maritime archaeology.
3. **Cultural heritage sites are valuable for tourism**, provided the tourism is soundly managed from an environmental and heritage resource perspective. The Pacific ecotourism opportunities at UCH sites are underdeveloped.



4. **UCH is susceptible to natural disasters, and disturbance can create pollution from underwater wrecks.** In response to concerns caused by an oil spill due to the disturbance of a WW II wreck, the USS Mississinewa in FSM waters, the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environmental Programme (SPREP) in cooperation with the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) launched the Pacific Ocean Pollution Preventive Programme (PACPOL) in 1999 with the aims to maintain, protect, and enhance the quality of coastal and marine environments by minimising [ship-sourced pollution](#). PACPOL developed a comprehensive database of WW II-related UCH, containing information on 3,855 wrecks ([SPREP 1999](#)). At the request of the Solomon Islands, SOPAC conducted a risk assessment of WW II-related UCH in Iron Bottom Sound in Solomon Islands ([SOPAC 1999](#)). However, the risk is still present, without sufficient disaster response mechanisms.
5. **The UCH Convention establishes a protection regime for UCH** by maritime zones determined by UNCLOS and provides a comprehensive coverage of UCH regardless of its location, greatly extending the legal protection of UCH. The UCH Convention recognises the right of the coastal states to prohibit or permit activities directed to UCH in their EEZ and continental shelf. The UCH Convention does not regulate the ownership of UCH. Given the responsibility entrusted to coastal states, especially in the developing world, the Convention emphasises the importance of UCH-related capacity building, technology transfer and information sharing, as well as awareness raising of the significance of UCH.
6. By joining the UCH Convention, countries can (1) achieve UCH protection at the same level as for land-based cultural heritage, (2) protect UCH from looting and commercial exploitation, (3) ensure comprehensive protection of UCH through a state cooperation system. By joining the UCH Convention, Parties pledge to protect UCH against looting and commercial exploitation and to apply the provisions of the UCH Convention and the Rules in its Annex as internationally recognised guidelines for UCH protection.

For further details: [www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/underwater-cultural-heritage/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/underwater-cultural-heritage/)