

# THE ICOMOS INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE ON THE UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE (ICUCH)

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The ICOMOS International Committee on the Underwater Cultural Heritage (ICUCH) was founded in Australia in 1991 by ICOMOS Australia. The founding president was Graeme Henderson, director of the Western Australia Maritime Museum at Fremantle.

The birth of the committee was in reaction to the pressing needs brought to light by the discovery and subsequent exploitation of the remains of the Titanic: it was now evident that technologies capable of working at great depth threatened both known and unknown wrecks that, up until recently, had been protected by their inaccessibility. The concept of the committee composed of international experts in underwater archaeology was thus born: this group of experts from eighteen countries had, as a goal, to assist ICOMOS International and UNESCO in promoting the protection and sound management of submerged cultural resources as an important part of humanity's heritage.

The ICUCH committee is made up of representatives from the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa. Its first mandate was to develop a charter, known as the ICOMOS Charter, to guide countries and interested parties throughout the world in the management and protection of submerged cultural resources. Furthermore, this charter could be incorporated or used in concert with the new international convention proposed by UNESCO for the protection of underwater heritage.

The writing of the charter required several years of work and, after several revisions, the final text was adopted by the ICOMOS General assembly at Sophia, Bulgaria, in October 1996. Although subject to some modifications and adaptations suggested by meetings of experts at UNESCO in Paris, the ICOMOS Charter has become a standard guide to the ethics and practices of underwater archaeology throughout the world.

Since underwater archaeology is a relatively new discipline, it is poorly understood in many countries and is often the object of false representations which particularly threaten the less well-to-do countries. These countries are often solicited by supposedly famous underwater archaeologists who exploit their lack of knowledge of the field. ICUCH's mission is to alleviate this lack of expertise throughout the world by acting as technical expert, by facilitating basic training in underwater archaeology and conservation of artifacts, and finally by putting pressure on countries or organizations that collaborate in the destruction of submerged heritage. The members of ICUCH are available to all: countries, organizations and individuals interested in the protection and sound management of cultural resources found underwater.

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