

## Foundations in Management of Maritime Cultural Heritage in the Cayman Islands

Margaret E. Leshikar-Denton  
*Cayman Islands National Museum*  
*Cayman Islands*

### Defining Heritage Value

Beyond images of sand and sun, the Caribbean Sea is a real place with an astounding cultural heritage. Pre-Columbian peoples lived here, followed by historical explorers who made discoveries, claimed territories and opened new avenues of commerce. Treasure-laden Spanish fleets attracted pirates, while European nations sanctioned the activities of their privateers. The sugar industry boomed, slavery abounded and nations fought battles in what became a proxy European theatre of war. Colonialism flourished, but as enslaved peoples achieved freedom, local industry and identity took root and developed into the world of today. Physical traces of this colourful past exist in a wide range of Caribbean maritime heritage sites such as anchorages, careening places, ports, harbours, coastal settlements, shipbuilding sites, shipwrecks, salvage camps, forts and lighthouses. These finite and non-renewable cultural sites are significant to world history.

Shipwrecks, popularized by the quest for Spanish gold, are among the most troubled Caribbean heritage sites. Treasure-hunters have lured Caribbean countries into non-beneficial salvage agreements, resulting in legal battles and the destruction or public loss of heritage resources. While treasure-hunting remains an active problem in the region, some countries are experimenting with the notion that there is more long-term value, profit, and public benefit in heritage protection, management and interpretation than in entering into compromising agreements with salvors. This is the course embarked upon in the Cayman Islands.

### Traditional and Creative Management Initiatives

The Cayman Islands are mountaintops that emerge abruptly from the Western Caribbean Sea as landmarks and navigational hazards. Archaeological surveys have failed to identify remains of indigenous populations, but the earliest explorers described diverse fauna. On 10 May 1503, Christopher Columbus sighted Cayman Brac and Little Cayman, identifying abundant sea turtles, while in April 1586 English navigator Sir Francis Drake came ashore on Grand Cayman where his hungry crew made meals of crocodiles and other beasts. Early Spanish, Dutch, French and English seafarers used the Islands as provisioning grounds, but after 1655 when the English occupied Jamaica, they also established seasonal fishing encampments in the Cayman Islands. As settlement became more permanent from the early 1700s, a unique maritime culture emerged based largely on the turtle-fishing industry. Influencing life and history, ships of at least fourteen nationalities have wrecked on the treacherous reefs of the three islands in the past 500 years.

### Legal Protection for Shipwrecks

In the Cayman Islands, shipwrecks that have remained on the seabed for more than 50 years are claimed under the Abandoned Wreck Law (5 of 1966, 1997 Revision), with ownership of artifacts “vested in Her Majesty in right of Her Government of the Islands.” While blanket protection for historical shipwrecks is admirable, the law is deficient in two areas: 1) it does not recognize shipwrecks as cultural property and 2) it was enacted to ensure that the government receives a percentage of the value of articles recovered from shipwrecks, and once the government enters into an agreement with a prospector, it must return to the prospector at least one half of



**Figure 1. The treacherous East End reefs of Grand Cayman, where more than 30 ships have wrecked (Dennis Denton)**



**Figure 2: Anchor on the Glamis site, planned as the first Cayman Islands Shipwreck Preserve (Alexander Mustard)**



**Figure 3: Maritime Heritage Trail sign (M. Leshikar-Denton)**

the value of the wreck. Fortunately, the Cayman Islands have not entered into agreements with treasure hunters and have determined that the Abandoned Wreck Law is inadequate to protect and manage Cayman's underwater cultural heritage. Initiatives towards achieving new legislation began in the early 1990s, but have been delayed. Thus, forthcoming legislation has the advantage of taking into account recent international initiatives such as the ICOMOS International Charter on the Protection and Management of Underwater Cultural Heritage (1996) and the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (2001).

## An Inventory

In 1979-80 the Institute of Nautical Archaeology, under the direction of Roger Smith with a field team including the author, conducted a survey for the Cayman Islands Government, recording 77 maritime sites within the territorial waters of the Cayman Islands. In more recent times, the database has been enlarged to include 140 shipwrecks and additional maritime sites, by the Cayman Islands National Museum, with assistance from the Department of Environment (DoE), National Archive, National Trust, visiting archaeologists and volunteers. This National Shipwreck Inventory, developed over the past 26 years, provides a sound basis for planning future

underwater and maritime heritage management strategies in the Cayman Islands. The premise is that knowledge inspires appreciation among the public for cultural heritage sites, and results in enlistment of allies in the guardianship of these irreplaceable resources. Toward this end, the Museum, DoE, Archive and Trust initiated a three-tiered approach to protect, manage and interpret the Islands' maritime heritage sites: 1) a land-based maritime heritage trail accessible to all 2) a series of interpreted shipwreck preserves for the adventurous aquatic public and 3) controlled management and research of rare and sensitive sites.

## The Maritime Heritage Trail

The Cayman Islands Maritime Heritage Trail, created by a partnership of the Museum, DoE, Archive and Trust, promotes the Islands' maritime legacy, combining heritage, education and recreational tourism. Launched in 2003, the Trail took inspiration from established and successful programmes in Florida and Australia, and benefited from collaboration with Della Scott-Ireton of the Florida Bureau of Archaeological Research. The Trail is a land-based driving tour around the three Cayman Islands with 36 stops marked by signs at historically significant maritime sites. Two colorful poster/brochures, one for the Sister Islands (Cayman Brac and Little Cayman) and one for Grand Cayman, interpret the Trail for explorers. Visitors learn in a fun and interactive way about a variety of maritime themes, activities, and industries unique to the Cayman Islands, such as maritime place names, lighthouses, maritime architecture, shipbuilding, hurricane caves, forts, turtle fishing, anchorages, early explorers, maritime activities, and shipwrecks.

The Partners developed a set of criteria for selecting sites appropriate for inclusion on the Trail. The Trail stops have historical significance, comprise multiple maritime themes, do not adversely impact sensitive sites, include all three Cayman Islands, provide a safe and entertaining activity, and highlight interesting visual features with safe and publicly accessible viewing areas. Designed to have multiple values, the Trail is uniquely Caymanian and encourages a sense of national pride in existing maritime heritage resources. It is a widely accessible, land-based attraction that encourages travel around the coastlines of all three islands, thereby enhancing the local economy. It encourages public visitation and appreciation of heritage sites, resulting in stewardship of these resources. As the first of its kind in the Caribbean region, the Cayman Islands Maritime Heritage Trail can serve as a model for the interpretation and protection of maritime cultural resources in other Caribbean nations.

## Shipwreck Preserves

The second initiative in Cayman's multi-phase program to promote and protect maritime cultural resources is establishment of a series of Shipwreck Preserves in the waters of all three islands. For inspiration and practical knowledge, the Maritime Partners again looked to models in Florida and Australia, as well as other states and the United States National Marine Sanctuaries. They formulated draft criteria

for sites in the Preserve system: a wreck must be located in Cayman's territorial seas or in the contiguous zone, be historically significant, have a reasonably verifiable identity and history, have recognizable features, be environmentally healthy and stable, be robust enough to withstand sustained visitation without compromising archaeological integrity, be accessible to the public, and have safe visitation conditions.

The first Cayman Islands Shipwreck Preserve is planned for the site of the iron-hulled barque *Glamis*, built in Dundee, Scotland, in 1876 and wrecked under Norwegian flag in 1913. The site, composed of large sections of iron hull fragments, anchors and multiple sailing-ship deck features and located in a shallow clear-water reef environment off the East End of Grand Cayman, has been mapped by the Museum in collaboration with students from the Anthropology Department of Florida State University, including graduate student Bert Ho, with logistical support from DoE and East End dive operators. Interpretive materials will comprise a bronze marker set in cement on the seabed, a laminated underwater guide for site visitors, and a topside brochure featuring the ship's history and dramatic wrecking event. Sites like *Glamis*, that are structurally stable, located in a healthy environment, and whose histories are known, are appropriate for *in situ* interpretation, where appropriate access is beneficial for the resource and the adventurous public. The Preserves, representing a variety of shipwrecks managed, interpreted and legally protected for the benefit of the public, will be thematically linked as the Cayman Islands Shipwreck Preserve Trail.

### Rare and Sensitive Sites

Once people interact with history through the Maritime Heritage Trail and Shipwreck Preserves, they will better appreciate and understand that some sites are sensitive and fragile, and might include information available nowhere else in the world. These rare sites deserve special protection, management and study. Research can result in publications, museum exhibitions and filmed documentaries, whereby people are invited to share knowledge that is extracted from these special sites by professional archaeologists. While *in situ* preservation should always be considered as a first option for shipwrecks, if intervention is planned for research purposes or mitigation, a whole range of responsibilities comes into play, among which are demands for funding, professional expertise and documentation, conservation, site stabilisation, collections management and curation, and dissemination of information to the public. Presently, no shipwrecks are under archaeological excavation in the Cayman Islands. There are, however, significant early heritage sites located in the Islands that deserve archaeological attention. For instance, in Grand Cayman *HMS Jamaica*, a British sloop on patrol for pirates, was lost in 1715. An unidentified 16th-17th century wreck of unknown nationality was found on the East End reef, and a mid-18th-century Spanish wreck characterized by a wide range of ceramic material has been discovered. The Duck Pond carenage, active for centuries, still survives in a relatively undisturbed state. The Wreck of the Ten Sail, comprising the frigate *HMS Convert* and nine

of her merchant convoy were lost together in 1794. Among sites worthy of specialized archaeological research in the Sister Islands are English vessels lost during a 1670 battle with privateer Manuel Rivero Pardal, a late-17th-century shipwreck of undetermined nationality, and the *San Miguel*, wrecked in 1730.

### Conclusion

Much has been accomplished to lay a foundation for protection and management of maritime heritage sites in the Cayman Islands over the past quarter century. Traditional and creative management strategies have been initiated, but need to be completed and/or maintained, including a new law for underwater cultural heritage, the shipwreck and maritime site inventory, the Maritime Heritage Trail, Shipwreck Preserves, and protection and research into rare and sensitive maritime sites. The Cayman Islands are in a perfect position to build upon their prior achievements, and to contribute to wider public knowledge, protection, management and appreciation of the maritime heritage of the Cayman Islands. It will be a service not only to the Cayman Islands, but to the Caribbean region and to world history.

Figure 4: Grand Cayman Maritime Heritage Trail poster/brochure front (Courtesy Cayman Islands Maritime Heritage Trail Partners)

