The Sad Case of the ss Maori

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The impact of human agents on underwater cultural heritage is but one of a host of problems that beset the management of this fragile resource. In particular, the degradation of wrecks popular as good dive sites is an area of great concern to the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA), and is perhaps epitomised in South Africa by the case of the ss Maori.

The Maori was owned by the Shaw, Saville and Albion Company and was a typical cargo vessel of the early 1890’s. She was a steel screw steamer with a registered tonnage of 5,317 tons and was built during the latter part of 1893 by the firm C.S. Swan and Hunter at Wallsend-on-Tyne near Newcastle in the United Kingdom. She was a little over 402 feet long, 48 feet wide, and 29 feet deep, with two decks. Her triple expansion engine was built at the Central Marine Engineering Works in West Hartlepool and had a nominal 461 horsepower.

The vessel was originally square-rigged on her foremast — carrying working masts and rigging on a steamship was still found to be useful by some steamship owners in case of a breakdown of the engines — and as a result she had taller masts than were the norm on many other steamers of the period.

The Maori Today

Today the Maori is one of the most popular recreational dive sites on the Cape Peninsula. Its location on the western, Atlantic seaboard of the Cape Peninsula means that during the South African summer months diving conditions on the site are often optimal, with very cold, but very clean water. The sheltered nature of the bay in which the wreck lies means

Figure 1: A historical photo of the wreck of the Maori taken before the crew left aboard had been rescued. Note the figure on the foremast (Courtesy John Marsh Maritime Collection, IZIKO Maritime Museum)

The Loss of the Maori

At about one o’clock on the morning of Thursday 5 August 1909 the Maori went ashore in dense fog and sank near Duiker Point on the Cape Peninsula, about 20km south of central Cape Town.

She had left Table Bay shortly before midnight after recoaling, and sailed into drizzle and thickening fog as she headed south towards Cape Point. Forty minutes later, with her engines going at full speed, the Maori struck a rock, which according to those aboard, seemed to stand well out of the water. Shrouded in dense fog the vessel had come very close inshore and had unknowingly entered the bay north of Duiker Point. The first intimation of danger was the lookout’s warning cry, but by then the vessel was only about thirty yards from the rock, and although her master, Captain G Nichole, immediately ordered the wheel hard-a-port, the Maori ran up on to the rock (Fig 1).

Badly holed, the vessel started sinking by the bow, and the crew were ordered into the boats. It was assumed that the entire complement had boarded the three lifeboats, but it later became apparent that fifteen crewmen had been left behind. The lifeboat commanded by the Chief Officer and carrying fourteen others was the first to land at eight that morning and raise the alarm.

Ultimately 32 of the crew of 53 were lost, including Captain Nichole and all the navigating officers. The vessel was a complete loss.

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that it retains a remarkable degree of structural integrity, with large portions of the vessel surviving relatively intact. When Jaques Cousteau dived on the wreck of the Maori in the 1960s he declared that it was the best preserved wreck of its type that he had seen. An added attraction and one of the reasons for its currently degraded state is the fact that much of the Maori’s cargo remained substantially intact, packed in her holds until relatively recently.

On a violent coast, where most wrecks break up rapidly, the Maori is thus something of a rarity, both as an archaeological and diving site, and it is hardly surprising that with the growth in sport-diving during the last 40 years, the Maori has become a site favoured by divers.

Sadly, this popularity has not been without price. Although never salvaged on a commercial basis after her loss, the Maori has been the victim of years of souvenir hunting by thousands of divers, and is now a shadow of her former self. At one stage during the 1970s divers used dynamite on the wreck to blast their way into the hull in search of non-ferrous metal. Today her holds are virtually empty and her structure has been further damaged by scores of irresponsibly placed anchors.

This problem is not limited to the Maori and manifests itself on many other shipwreck sites along the South African coast. Although underwater heritage has enjoyed blanket legislative protection since 1986 (under the terms of the National Heritage Resources Act any wreck older than 60 years of age is protected) a long tradition of salvage dating back to the early 18th century left a widely held perception that the contents of shipwrecks are there for the taking. However, two decades of legislative protection and a huge amount of work done by the South African Heritage Resources Agency, the IZIKO Maritime Museum and others to publicise the protected status of shipwrecks has slowly borne fruit. There is now a general awareness and grudging acceptance, particularly within the diving community, of the protected status of shipwrecks.

But legislation cannot stand alone. Of equal importance to the protection of underwater cultural heritage is an understanding by those using the resource and the wider South African public of what underwater cultural heritage is, and why it is worth preserving. Without winning over hearts and minds legislation can never truly succeed.

For a few years SAHRA, in conjunction with the IZIKO Maritime Museum, has been developing a pilot Cape Peninsula Shipwreck Route. The route aims to introduce Capetonians and visitors to the city to the hundreds of wrecks that lie in the waters of the Peninsula and thereby increase general public awareness of the importance and fragility of our underwater heritage, while at the same time formalising access to a number of popular, threatened wreck sites.

Land-based information boards are planned for a number of sites on the route around the Cape Peninsula, and the first of these has been installed adjacent to the slipway at the popular harbour of Hout Bay, from which divers access the Maori (Fig 2). An accompanying pamphlet has been produced. In addition, underwater information plinths will be installed at the sites often visited by divers, such as the Maori. These plinths will not only provide information about the history of the particular wreck and layout of the site, but will also carry a strong conservation message, stressing the legal protection that such sites enjoy, and the responsibilities of divers when visiting them.

While this approach to managing threatened underwater sites is in some senses post hoc, if it proves successful in managing risk on a heavily utilised site such as the Maori, SAHRA envisages its useful extension to other threatened, or potentially threatened sites, in the future. It is hoped that an increased awareness amongst visitors of the archaeological potential of a well preserved wreck like the Maori, will ensure the long term survival of the site.
At about one o’clock on the morning of 5 August 1909, the Shaw Savill steamship, Maori, went aground and sank near Duiker Point south of Llandudno.

The Maori was a typical cargo vessel of the time. She was a 1915 ton steel screw steam 122 metres (400 feet) long, powered by a 480 horsepower triple expansion engine and was built in England in 1905. She traded between England and New Zealand and when she was wrecked was chartered for Port Chalmers in New Zealand with a cargo which included 1,200 tons of railway tracks, explosives, English hardware, and cases of mineral champagne.

The Maori put into Table Bay to take on beach coal and depart at daylight. On 5 August she steamed into Table Bay. Forty minutes later, travelling at full speed, she ran aground and came to a stop near the shore in what is today known as Blouberg.

The skipper and his crew got ashore on the line, but two others remained in the ship. They continued to hold on to their safety belts, but even these were torn by the impact. The remaining crew had to wait another twenty-four hours before a rescue boat arrived and got them on board, and they were taken to hospital.

THE WRECK

The Maori was preserved at the coast with her stern surrounded by green bougainvillea, and her bow facing out to sea, about 150 metres offshore. When depth on the wreck ranges from 7 metres on her stern to 22 metres on her bow.

Despite the Elephant Hill in the relative shelter of Blouberg, the site is remarkably well preserved, and is a structural site of regional importance. In the Cape, relatively rough coastal conditions and heavy weathering due to erosion, the preservation of a wreck in the coastal area is considered unusual.

Wreck Do’s and Don’ts

- Don’t damage the wreck in any way – a wreck is like a reef which can experience it damaged. Its finite and non-renewable asset and any damage is permanent.
- Don’t take souvenirs – removing anything from the wreck without a permit is not only illegal, it destroys the value of the site and those who will follow after you.
- Don’t sink on the wreck – drop your anchor away from the site to avoid damaging the wreck and its contents.
- Remember that although it is possible to swim under the hull and reef, this is certainly not recommended to the site of the wreck and its advanced state.