Legacy Sunken Vessels Panel Discussion

There are over 8,500 potentially polluting legacy wrecks lying on the seafloor all over the world. The majority of these are from the First and Second World Wars and they are estimated to contain up to 20.4 million tonnes of oil. These wrecks often contain munitions and heavy metals, but the primary focus of most legacy wreck work has been the bunker and cargo oil they sank with. As the wrecks corrode and fall apart over time, the oil is released and so these wrecks pose a slow and persistent threat to marine life and coastal communities.

Many of these wrecks create an environmental justice issue, particularly in the Pacific Region. There are dozens of potentially polluting wrecks lying in lagoons across the Pacific from the Second World War. The Pacific Islanders were not fighting in that conflict, but they have been left with these wrecks slowly polluting the water where they fish, from which they feed their families. These are not rich countries, and they do not have the resources we have in Europe to remove the oil or respond to oil spills.

The term ‘slow violence’ was coined by Rob Nixon, Professor in Humanities and the Environment at Princeton University, to describe the chronic pollution that is allowed to continue in areas where the people who are impacted by the pollution lack the resources or power to stop it. This "slow violence" doesn’t make immediate headlines, but its long-term consequences can be devastating, often affecting local health and livelihoods. This term seems particularly fitting in the Pacific lagoons where legacy wrecks don’t just have the potential to pollute but are in fact continuously releasing oil into the waters from which local islanders source their food.

Many legacy wrecks, being from the first and second world wars, are around one hundred years old or more, and so increasingly falling apart, meaning the risk of them leaking oil may be increasing. But with so many wrecks out there, and the huge costs associated with wreck survey and intervention, where do you begin?

This Legacy Sunken Vessels session welcomed an exceptional group of panellists, each bringing a wealth of expertise and experience in the fields of wreck management, environmental protection, and maritime safety. Together we discussed how we can best address the challenges of legacy wrecks, mitigate their environmental impacts, and pave the way for future policies and practices.

Panellists

Ola Jordheim is a leading expert on maritime safety and wreck management with the Norwegian Coastal Administration. His extensive experience in managing Norway’s vast and often challenging coastal waters has provided invaluable insight into the practical aspects of dealing with wrecks in sensitive maritime environments. Ola shared insights into Norway’s approach to legacy wrecks and the lessons learned from decades of experience in this area.

Nicolas Tamic is a key figure at Cedre, the French national centre for the prevention of pollution and emergency response. With his in-depth knowledge of pollution response, Nicolas works on identifying, managing, and mitigating the environmental risks posed by marine wrecks and accidents. His expertise helped us understand how legacy wrecks are factored into pollution preparedness and response strategies.

Dr. Camilla Moore is the founder of wreck research and management consultancy *Wreckcetera* and a specialist in risk assessment for potentially polluting wrecks. Dr Moore was Receiver of Wreck at the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in the UK. She has also completed a PhD focusing on the environmental risks of maritime heritage and wreck management. Dr. Moore provided us with an academic perspective on risk assessment and how we can better evaluate the potential dangers of legacy wrecks and develop strategies to address them.

Dr. Mohammed Zullah from the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (or SPREP), brought valuable insights from the Pacific region, where legacy wrecks can pose unique environmental threats, especially to the region's diverse marine ecosystems. As a regional environmental expert, Dr. Zullah's work at SPREP focuses on the sustainable management of marine resources, and he discussed the particular challenges faced by the Pacific region in dealing with wrecks and their long-term impacts on the environment.

Stuart Leather is a marine surveyor at Waves Group and Chair of Project Tangaroa, a collaborative effort focused on addressing the legacy of wrecks in sensitive areas. His work in surveying and removal, combined with his leadership of Project Tangaroa, puts him at the forefront of practical solutions to legacy wreck challenges. Stuart shared the latest techniques and insights into the removal and management of wrecks, especially in areas that require careful attention due to environmental sensitivities