Maximising the Potential Benefits of Maritime Heritage at the Coast

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Good morning. My name is Antony Firth. I'm a freelance marine archaeologist with my own company, Fjordr Ltd., based in south west England.

I'm very grateful for the opportunity to talk to you today about maximising the potential benefits of maritime heritage at the coast, and I would like to thank Steve Guilbert and Devon Maritime Forum for the invitation.

I'm also very pleased to be here in Plymouth, where I've been involved in a fair amount of maritime archaeology over the years. I was the project manager for extensive archaeological investigations in Stonehouse in connection with access works for the Royal William Yard[12]. I was also the lead author for a publication taking a maritime perspective on the archaeology of the Tamar Estuaries for the Tamar Estuaries Historic Environment Forum[3].

In recent years I've been looking in detail at marine spatial planning[4] and at the potential for social and economic benefits to arise from marine and maritime heritage. This work has been set out in a report for the Honor Frost Foundation[5] and more recently in a report for Historic England[6].

Much of the emphasis in archaeology – on land as well as at sea – is on the physical remains of the past as a component of the environment. We commonly use the term 'the historic environment' to refer to the totality of heritage assets, landscapes and other physical traces of past human activity. The historic environment is the term used in both marine and land-based planning, and environmental language is appropriate to describing the need to protect a fragile, finite and non-renewable resource.

However, this environmental language does not entirely capture the intent and appeal of archaeology. And archaeology is often overlooked or barely noticed in approaches to environmental protection. In some cases, definitions of the environment effectively exclude heritage. This is particularly true in the marine sphere, where the definition of Good Environmental Status – such an important driver – does not include the historic environment as an indicator.

Equally, other key concepts and approaches in marine management – such as ecosystem services and natural capital – are also ambiguous as to the historic, human dimension of the environment that is represented by archaeology.

Difficulties over archaeology in respect of the environmental pillar of sustainable development prompted me to look in more detail at the two other pillars, society and

economy. This has coincided with a significant increase in attention to social and economic benefits – for a variety of reasons – in other spheres. Two trends are particularly relevant:

- First, the growing recognition – supported by data and research – of the role of culture and heritage to the economy and well-being.
- Second, the equally growing interest in social and economic benefits in the marine sphere, as manifest in the term 'blue growth' and various initiatives.

Two further observations arise directly from this:

- First, considerations of the social and economic benefits of culture and heritage are predominantly 'sea-blind' – there is little or no reference to culture and heritage at the coast or in connection with the sea.

- Second, considerations of the social and economic benefits of the marine environment are predominantly 'heritage blind' – there is little or no reference to the contribution of coastal and marine heritage.

I find the blindness towards coastal heritage quite staggering. Admittedly, I am somewhat sensitised to the historic dimension to the coast, and to the way the sea infuses so much of our culture and heritage. But even without my background, bearing in mind the proximity of the sea and its role in UK history, I'm amazed at the degree to which it is omitted from our consideration of the social and economic benefits of culture, heritage, coast and sea.

Did I say omitted? Actually that is not the case. Coastal and maritime heritage are often included, but implicitly. In some case s there are specific details – such as visitor numbers to coastal heritage attractions – but these are not collated or drawn out as a specifically marine or coastal dimension. Most often there is no reference, but reports and web pages are replete with images of coastal and marine heritage. The impression is, therefore, that coastal and marine heritage is so deeply entrenched that there is no need to mention it.

Such evidence as there is suggests that coastal and marine heritage already has major social and economic benefits in the UK. However, this evidence has rarely been developed or collated to quantify or characterise these benefits explicitly. Equally, more generic research suggests that the contribution of coastal and marine heritage might be expected to be high – simply by drawing parallels from land-orientated work. In the marine sphere, again it might be assumed that heritage makes a significant contribution to the positive benefits of multifaceted assets such as 'landscape' or the generic references to well-being associated with the sea. There is just about sufficient information about the contribution of coastal and marine heritage to be able to advance this case, but little in the way of specific data or research upon which this case can be developed. There is, therefore, a pressing need for research, data gathering and re-working of existing data to identify the existing social and economic contribution of maritime heritage.

Why is this a pressing need? Two reasons spring to mind:

- Policy and decision making is based increasingly on quantification; no numbers equals no investment
- If we don't know what is happening at the moment in terms of quantity or character, it is difficult to know how we can grow this sector.

For although I think the current social and economic benefits of maritime heritage are very high, I am in no doubt that there is substantial potential for further growth.

I'd like to spend the remainder of my presentation in flagging some factors that I think we could be taking into account in maximising potential benefits.

I think it is helpful, from the start, to think across the full range of people's experience of coastal heritage. I've found it useful to refer to three different 'audiences': participants; visitors and inhabitants. In terms of participants – people directly engaged in heritage at the coast – we can think about employment and volunteering. In terms of visitors – people who have an intensive but intermittent experience of heritage – we can think about recreation, tourism and access. In terms of inhabitants, whose experience of heritage is incidental or almost subliminal, we can consider the role of coastal heritage in place-making, settings, character and identity. My point here is not to create bounded categories, but to encourage joined-up approaches that do not favour one set of experiences at the expense of others: tourists over locals; employment over place identity.

I've already noted that coastal heritage already creates social and economic benefits. There is a lot of heritage at the coast, whether it be specific maritime museums or the wharves and quays of old waterfronts. However, these multiple elements of the historic environment at the coast are rarely considered coherently, as part of a whole. There is a great deal of benefit to be obtained from presenting a more joined-up maritime offer to our different audiences. There are obvious practical benefits, but also the opportunity to tell bigger, more far-reaching stories. Maritime heritage is multifaceted, yet our approaches and institutions tend to split and divide between different sets of assets, disciplines and environments. These divisions are difficult to explain to professionals; never mind to the audiences we are seeking to engage.

I want to make a special plea that a new joined up offer on coastal and marine heritage encompasses heritage that lies offshore, underwater. Traditionally, submerged archaeology has been considered only in terms of those who can physically visit it, by diving. Although the social and economic benefits associated with diving on historic wrecks can be significant, divers are always going to present a relatively small audience. However, the restrictions on physical access need not limit different forms of access to much wider publics. Although it may seem out of sight, our coasts provide a great platform from which thousands of people can approach the plethora of stories that arise from marine archaeology. There are already lots of good examples from which to learn, but I would like to set this as a particular challenge: to enable the non-diving public to engage in history that lies offshore.

The capacity to engage non-divers in underwater archaeology is helped immensely by the technological revolutions that are occurring: in survey, in position-fixing, in imaging the seabed. These revolutions mean that underwater heritage is much more accessible to dry audiences.

Another important technological revolution is occurring with respect to archives and collections. Documents, maps and images that once lay buried in storerooms are now available with a few clicks; and it is clear that the trend is for ever increasing content to be made available. There is a great deal of amazing content relating to maritime heritage now online, where it can be drawn upon in old and new media. Digital links help to overcome traditional institutional boundaries, and also assist in providing the joined-up offer I mentioned previously. Online content is very much part of the maritime heritage that we should be developing.

A further point about digital access is that it changes our audiences. Maritime heritage is no longer something to be consumed by the public; it is something that members of the public

can create themselves. Active engagement, through which people are enabled to have a two-way relationship with heritage, has a wide range of benefits. Such engagement can of course be physical, through volunteering, but digital access has the potential to reach much wider audiences. The potential, for example, for people to contribute information about their family or community is likely to be more rewarding than reading a guidebook; and creates new avenues for people to explore.

Exploring is, in fact, a key concept to develop with respect to maritime heritage. The sense that there are still things to discover is a strong characteristic of archaeology and history. This is perhaps one of the reasons why there is such fascination amongst the public for archaeology – and especially marine archaeology – in the media. Whether it is inhabitants finding out something new about familiar places, or visitors following a trail, keeping open the sense of exploration and discovery is likely to be important in maximising benefits.

It is worth pointing out that the revolutions in imaging and connectivity, and the opportunities for creativity and exploration, mean that there need be much less pressure to enable engagement by recovering artefacts from the seabed. Dealing with artefacts from the sea generates all sorts of practical and ethical difficulties, and I quite accept that coastal heritage attractions such as museums may well face with trepidation the prospect of dealing with artefacts. My message is, therefore, not to assume that people on land can only relate to underwater heritage if objects are recovered.

I would like to touch on barriers to social and economic benefits in the sphere of marine heritage. I've argued that there is great potential to reach much wider audiences, but it does not follow that maritime heritage is immune from the kinds of barriers that have been identified elsewhere[7]. We might assume that these barriers are common to all forms of heritage, and steps that are proposed to overcome such barriers could be applied also to the coastal and marine environment. I think it is worth considering, however, if there are unique aspects of maritime heritage that make it more – or less – likely to encourage barriers that will impede access. Certainly, it is possible to develop narratives in marine archaeology that accord with traditional views of the past, all Nelson, gunfire and flags. However, maritime heritage also has great scope for developing more challenging perspectives, exploring the sea in terms of contact, connectivity, diversity and cultural richness.

My final call with respect to the potential to maximise benefits is for us to focus on authentic stories relating to distinct local histories. I've yet to find any place around the coast of the UK that does not have its own amazing stories to share; these are so much more engaging than generic stereotypes of smugglers and pirates. Rather than reaching for the clip art, find your own stories. These may also include tales of smuggling and pirates, but these will be so much more engaging if they can be tied to local places, stories and personalities. I would also add that authenticity requires veracity if it is to stand up to public scrutiny. Facts and expertise have taken a hammering recently, but I would like to underline the point that archaeology and heritage are not just storytelling; we have a responsibility to provide an objective, transparent and evidence-based account of the past.

To conclude:
- Heritage is about recognising the role of people in the marine environment in the past, and in the future.
- There is a great need to recognise the contribution that marine and maritime heritage already makes to the coast.
- We need to develop quantifications that provide a basis for action.

- It is very important to consider all our audiences: participants, visitors and inhabitants.

- There is huge potential to develop and enhance the contribution of heritage to economic growth and social well-being at the coast.

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[2] Firth, A., 1998, *Stonehouse Peninsula: an illustrated history*, Plymouth, Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, ISBN 1855226111.

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[7] e.g. Warwick Commission, 2016, *Enriching Britain: culture, creativity and growth*. Warwick: University of Warwick. http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/research/warwickcommission/futureculture/finalreport/warwick_commission_final_report.pdf.